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# A-Level

# English Literature A

7712/C Independent Critical Study: Texts across time  
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 7712/1/2A/2B.

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.

## Introduction

This summer saw the first NEA submission for this specification, and the quality of the work suggested that centres had engaged very productively with this new component. One moderator reported that she found the moderating process ‘a genuinely stimulating intellectual experience’, and the excellence of the responses submitted by the best candidates is a source of considerable satisfaction. However, despite the general success of this year’s submission, there were some areas where improvement is clearly needed. These will be identified later in this report.

The title of this component is ‘Independent Critical Study: Texts across time’, and this implies that candidates should be encouraged to submit work which is the product of a genuinely individual study of the two texts. The most impressive submissions emerged when the candidates 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 candidates. Understandably, therefore, the marks of some centres required adjustment. The most usual reason for these adjustments was that candidates 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. Many moderators were unclear which centres had read and used the standardising materials during their own internal coursework standardising. That, of course, is one of their primary purposes, although such references need to be used judiciously. There were occasions where centres claimed that a particular piece was comparable in standard to a specified standardising folder without any convincing evidence to support that assertion.

There were also cases where the comments made by the centre on the candidates’ work bore little relation to the final mark awarded. The most valuable centre comments are those which offer an honest assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of the work. Supportive and exhortatory remarks directed to the candidate are in themselves of little use to the moderator.

## Historicism

AQA English Literature Specification A is interested in a historical approach, as signalled in this component by the title ‘texts across time’. This approach works from the belief that no text exists in isolation, but is the product of the time in which it was produced and the time in which it is received. Candidates are therefore encouraged to consider the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they are written, received and understood. The purpose of this consideration is to open up ways of exploring different readings of literary texts.

In this NEA component, candidates can demonstrate their understanding of this idea 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. When candidates understood that 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, then they produced effective work. What did not work was when they offered broad, generalised assertions about how people (all) lived ‘back then’ and how they (all) live now. Such perspectives often treated texts not as literary constructs but as historical documents whose main function was to deliver an account of life within a particular time period. It is also the case that in such responses, description tended to replace interpretation of the text. It is the text which is central, not the history.

### **The Assessment Objectives and English Literature A**

When choosing texts and setting tasks, it is important that centres and candidates consider whether their choices will allow them to address all the assessment objectives. Since AO4 and AO5 are seen as interconnected and the assessment objectives are equally weighted, this should be taken into account in task-setting and marking.

#### **AO5**

AQA Specifications see critical debate as a starting point for literary discussion. Where tasks were not clearly framed around AO5, candidates 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. Not all tasks clearly enabled candidates 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. Too often, 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.

An important distinction needs to be made when considering different interpretations of texts. Comparing the different ways in which two different texts deal with 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 texts.

Moderators reported that a popular task format was a quotation followed by a ‘compare and contrast’ formula. When there was a clear relationship between the two this worked well, but this was not always the case. Weaker students often ignored the quotation.

Several centres 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 assessment objectives, including the opportunity to debate meanings. A consideration of the significance of the operation of the law as presented in two novels by Dickens and Waugh, for instance, would enable both a treatment of different interpretations and an exploration of the ways in which the authors represent their fictional worlds.

**AO4**

Interpretations should be seen as naturally deriving from the connections established between the two selected texts.

There needs to be a sense that the chosen connections are productive in 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.

At times references to wider reading proved a distraction from the discussion of the two main texts selected for comparison.

**AO3**

Contextual material works best when it is clearly being used in service of the task and arising naturally from a consideration of the text. Weaker work this summer contained large sections of bolted-on material that got in the way of the candidates' treatment of the texts and the central argument of the essay. The opening paragraphs are often the worst places to insert such material. When references are made to historical periods, it is expected that they will be precise. Biographical material was often poorly used, particularly when a form of 'biographical fallacy' emerged whereby authors' intentions were over-confidently asserted, and the presumption was made that any aspect of a text can be confidently explained through making connections with the author's life.

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

**AO2**

The best responses to this assessment objective go beyond commenting on lexical items and demonstrate understanding of voice, form and structure. It was disappointing to see how often candidates 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.

Feature spotting at times replaced analysis. It is important for candidates 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 genre and the stories which are being told

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## AO1

AO1 is about how candidates demonstrate their knowledge and understanding, write accurately, and construct their arguments effectively. 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. Proof-reading had often been ineffective, and quotations had been arbitrarily inserted into essays which were themselves rambling and poorly directed. The construction of a 2500 word argument requires skill and care, and candidates at times seemed to have paid little attention to the necessary techniques involved.

## Texts

The appropriateness of any textual choice is dependent on the text to which it is connected and the accompanying task. Many centres clearly encouraged their candidates to select their own pairs of texts, and this approach often delivered fresh and lively responses that suggested a high degree of engagement on the part of the candidates. Some centres taught a core text and allowed their candidates 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 such texts proved so limited in the opportunities they offered that the second texts were very awkwardly manacled into a connection that did not allow them to receive equally effective treatment.

When centres appeared to have taught pairs of texts, even when the tasks were differently worded, the responses often struggled to convey any real sense of independence of thought. Although it is accepted that different centres operate under very different conditions, this is not an approach that is in the spirit of this component.

Some centres clearly have a particular interest in a specific area of literature. Gothic fiction was a very popular choice. This worked less well when candidates gave excessive space to general treatments of the genre and thus had less opportunity to discuss the individual qualities of their chosen texts. Less effective choices included texts such as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Although literary analysis of such texts is obviously possible, the evidence suggested that candidates found it difficult to use these works to successfully deliver work that meets the requirements of the assessment objectives. The same reservation applies to such novels as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where the responses at times suggested that aspects of GCSE study were being recycled. When candidates selected currently popular ‘best-selling’ novels, they at times struggled to deal with them in any other context than that of plot, character or theme. Wider literary considerations such as genre proved elusive.

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 A-level core set texts and chosen comparative set texts listed for study in either Love through the ages or in Texts in shared contexts cannot be used for non-exam assessment (see page 21 of the specification). This is a requirement regardless of whether students have studied the set text for examination purposes or not. None of the texts from the core set texts and chosen comparative set text list are acceptable for use in non-exam assessment.

The most popular pre-1900 texts were mostly taken from the ‘recommended texts’ list in the specification. It must be stressed that these are merely suggestions: centres must make their own decisions as to whether the texts will work with their own students or with other texts that could be paired with them. *The Doll’s House* was a very popular choice, often linked with *The Bell Jar*, and almost always explored through the lens of feminist criticism.

Moderators reported more use of *The Yellow Wallpaper* than any other text. Although there was some good work seen on this story, it often proved a rather ineffective choice. Almost all centres focused on the single short story rather than the similarly titled collection of which it forms a part. The comparative brevity of the short story may well have been a significant factor in the very narrow range of approaches which it engendered. Biographical studies were very popular, often submerging any treatment of the story as narrative fiction. The vast majority of candidates focused on either the oppression of women or attitudes to mental health. As one moderator observed, ‘the socio-economic implications of mental illness and women’s rights proved of far more compelling interest to the candidates than any aspect of literary presentation’. In many cases, the work of different candidates from the same centre tended to say very similar things about the text in very similar ways. The limitations of this short story, as seen in this summer’s submission, extended to its effect on the text with which it was paired – often being forced into a very uneasy association.

There were, however, some very interesting and effective pairings. Examples include:

*1984* and *Gulliver’s Travels*  
*Madame Bovary* and *Far from the Madding Crowd*  
*Brighton Rock* and *Paradise Lost*  
*Macbeth* and *Tender is the Night*  
*Lady Susan* and *Notes on a Scandal*  
*Great Expectations* and *The Beautiful and the Damned*  
*Huckleberry Finn* and *Small Island*  
*Far from the Madding Crowd* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*  
*The Mill on the Floss* and *The Constant Gardener*

## 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 candidates’ chances of success, but also reinforcing good practices that will benefit responses to the other two units in English Literature ‘A’.

The externally examined papers place considerable emphasis on the importance of candidates 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 candidates focus carefully on the precise requirements of the tasks. There were many instances where candidates seemed to pay only cursory attention to what the task required.

There were several types of task which failed to generate genuine debate:



- Tasks which essentially invited description, e.g. ‘How do Austen and Bronte present class differences?’ The use of ‘present’ does encourage response to AO2, but a better debate might be offered by also considering the different readings made possible by the authors’ treatment of class. ‘Describe how Austen and Bronte use love to create comedy’ could be re-shaped into a discussion of the degree to which love is presented as ridiculous within the chosen novels.
- Tasks which are really non-debates, e.g. ‘The themes of love and marriage are central to *Emma* and *Jane Eyre*. Discuss.’
- The ‘debate’ where it is almost impossible to disagree with the central proposition, e.g. ‘Is it possible to see *Frankenstein* and *The castle of Otranto* as an example of gothic literature?’
- The use of the inappropriate formula (very common), e.g. ‘To what extent are social divisions important in *Emma* and *Wuthering Heights*?’ Here ‘to what extent’ does not work; there is no way of estimating the degree of ‘importance’.
- The impossible judgement, e.g. ‘How successfully do Austen and Bronte describe the subordination of women?’ Understandably, students tend to say that they do it rather successfully and then describe what happens in the novels.
- The over-complex task (also very common), e.g. ‘Women in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Doll’s House* are presented as being downtrodden and the victims of a patriarchal society.’ Compare and contrast the different ways in which the authors present patriarchal societies and women and show the ways in which the different characters interact with their environments.

Tasks which asked candidates to ‘compare and contrast the presentation of x in texts y and z’, without any reference to a possible critical reading, tended to deliver description without debate. It is expected that debates involve a literary approach. A task which requires evaluation of the degree to which women are shown as overcoming the restrictions of their position within society is not a literary debate.

Tasks also need to be sufficiently focused to make possible a connection between the two texts that can be closely examined within the word limits. A task which invites general discussion of the workings of society in *Dombey and Son* and *A Handful of Dust* is difficult to adequately respond to in 2500 words. A focus on the significance of the relationships between fathers and sons within the worlds of those two texts might be more productive.

## 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 centres 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 centres 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 very closely towards this recommended 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 candidates. Credit cannot be given for a breadth of response to a task if that breadth has only been achieved by exceeding the word limits.

The majority of centres had no difficulty in submitting work within these limits and the candidates' work benefited as a result. There were, however, a number of assignments that were submitted this summer which were well over 3000 words in length. The upper mark bands of AO1 require well-structured argument, and this was not often in evidence in over-lengthy submissions.

## **Marking, Annotation and Administration**

### **Marking and Annotation**

Many moderators commented on the correlation between effective centre annotation and accurate application of the assessment criteria.

Annotation which assists the moderation process will:

- occur throughout the work
- include detailed summative comments
- address both strengths and weaknesses within the work. Too often candidates' work contained significant flaws that were nowhere acknowledged in the centre comment.
- 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. This is an unhelpful practice and distracting for the reader
- 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 mark of anything from 1 to 25.
- ensure that the summative comment makes sense in terms of the final mark awarded. In some cases this summer it was difficult to see the connection between the two
- understand that marking needs to be holistic. This specification sees the assessment objectives as working best together. It is not appropriate practice for subtotals to be given to each AO and then totalled to provide a final mark.

### **Administration**

The presentation of scripts matters, as does adherence to deadlines. There was much evidence this summer of admirable and efficient centre practice.

Moderators' work will be made much simpler if centres:

- secure scripts with treasury tags rather than paper clips or plastic wallets. Scripts often pass through many hands and 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. The inclusion

of bibliographies and careful teaching of the use of quotation and citation may help centres to reduce the incidence of plagiarism.

- 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 15<sup>th</sup> or the last working date before this. This is the deadline for centres, not for candidates.

Centres are reminded that if they have any questions relating to non-exam assessment, they can get in touch with their adviser.

### **Conclusion**

The evidence of this summer's submission is that centres have taken positive advantage of the breadth of opportunities offered in this component, and used the freedom of choice to deliver some very impressive evidence of independent study. Very few candidates failed to come to terms with the general requirements of the component, and the best work demonstrated a remarkably mature and insightful response to the chosen texts. While examination reports inevitably have to spend time identifying areas for possible improvement, it is equally important to acknowledge just how much has been achieved.

**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.