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AS

# English Literature A

Component 2: Love through the ages: Prose  
Report on the Examination

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7711  
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It was evident from the marking of both components that the historicist philosophy of the Specification using the shared context of love through the ages has been positively embraced for providing clarity and coherence. 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. The AS specification is an important precursor to the A-level specification because of the historicist approach and the holistic mark scheme that is common to all components. Therefore, as well as a retrospective document on this first series, this report will be useful to inform not just future AS but also A-level study.

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. At the same time, it is appreciated that teachers and markers need to understand how the assessment objectives function as discrete concepts within a holistically applied marking process. The five assessment objectives may be familiar skills from previous specifications but how they might be applied in the context of this specification is worth reiteration and clarification.

**In the new specification the way AOs 2-5 are assessed has changed and it is vital that these changes are understood:**

AO1 continues to underpin the success of any response. It requires clarity, accuracy, literary register and the selection of relevant evidence of knowledge and understanding.

Analysing the **ways** in which meanings are shaped requires students to look closely at the characteristic methods of that genre. AO2 can now be approached without considering the hierarchical aspects of ‘form, structure and language’; students now have the freedom to analyse which aspects of method they find most relevant.

The historicist philosophy of this specification means that time is a **context** of special importance. As such it is crucial to apply historical context accurately and in a way that avoids sweeping assertions, for example about how women in the seventeenth century behaved and were seen.

More confident students are able to integrate apt contextual points which do not lead them away from the text and help to establish a more informed understanding.

The legacy of wider reading from the previous specification perhaps accounts for a tendency to see **connections** only in terms of explicit links to other named texts. The danger is that such links often appear tenuous and are made out of obligation rather than in pursuit of genuinely interesting lines of enquiry. These other texts considered in detail lead away from the question set and into problems of time management. A consideration of typicality where connections are implicit is, for many, a safer and more effective strategy.

As far as exploring different **interpretations** is concerned, the evidence is that, on the whole, students took advantage of the flexibility that now exists in arguing for or against a given view. This meant that fewer answers involved needless contradiction. However, some students had been drilled to offer generalised feminist or Marxist views that largely undermine a more coherent reading of the text. ***It should be noted that AO5 is used as a primary focus for framing questions. Direct engagement with AO5 will ensure that the question is answered. The other AOs will inevitably be involved in doing so because they are either explicitly (in the case of AO2) or implicitly integrated into the wording of the question.***

In short, the aim is to produce responses where the language used by students and the attention to methods, contexts, connections and interpretations are all relevant to the question, clearly linked to the meaning of texts and authentic rather than artificial arguments.

Another important necessary adjustment is to the time constraints of both examinations. At AS students have 45 minutes to read, plan and write each question. Therefore it is crucial that students make effective use of that time to craft effective answers to questions.

There were many indicators of the success of both AS components. There were relatively:

- high numbers of candidates assessed in Bands 4 and 5 of the Mark Scheme
- very few assessed in Band 1
- very few unfinished responses.

These findings suggest that students were well prepared for the academic and practical demands of the papers and that the papers make reasonable expectations of candidates.

It should be noted that, above all, the two components are genre-specific. A student's choice of terminology, methods, contexts, connections and interpretations should reflect those genre differences.

**7711/2 Prose**

Examiners' feedback indicates that the first examination of 'Love through the ages: Prose' has been successful and enabling for the majority of students. The confident range of responses offered to the unseen extract also suggested that many students had benefited from thoughtful wider reading in prose fiction. The two sections of the paper were complementary as they offered opportunities for both close and comparative readings of prose texts from the literature of love. The open book nature of this paper also allowed students who had secure textual knowledge to be able to reference relevant detail in an informed wide-ranging way that demonstrated a confident overview of their set texts.

**Section A Unseen Prose**

The structure of this question enables students to integrate their work in all assessment objectives by developing an autonomous reading of an unseen prose extract within the frame of a critical debate. Although brief, the preface offers important prompts that will suggest the contexts that could be discussed in more informed readings. The key command word 'examine' clearly guides the student to examine the extract through debating the critical view embedded in the task. The key word 'presents' also prompts students to consider how characters are constructed in prose texts rather than discussing them as surrogate, real people. Importantly, the third stem of Question 1 reminds the student that their reading of the text should be supported and developed through a detailed discussion of the writer's methods.

The choice of an extract from Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn* proved to be both accessible and challenging as it gave students opportunities to explore distinctive authorial methods as well as considering the varied contexts of a 21<sup>st</sup> century text set in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The critical view of Tony as a 'selfish lover' also invited students to debate the extract by exploring the presentation of characters and relationship in differing ways.

The majority of students were able to work towards AO2 through their study of this extract and took advantage of an assessment objective that now asks for analysis of 'the ways in which meaning is shaped in literary texts'. Many considered relevant features rather than working through a checklist relating to form, structure and language. Many students were able to consider the narrative perspective of the text, as well as considering the significance of setting in a purposeful, relevant way. Although less successful students sometimes misinterpreted the authorial method

by claiming it was written in the first person, they largely recognised that it privileged Eilis's viewpoint.

More successful students clearly explored narrative perspective through engaging with the debate regarding Tony's presentation as a 'selfish lover'. Here the exploration of the text fruitfully focused on Eilis' perspective on Tony through considering the presentation of her thinking and exploring the significance of her 'vantage point' that enables her to observe Tony without being seen. More confident students were able to explore how far Tony is presented through the prism of Eilis' anxieties by discussing the significance of the 'shadow' that is linked to him. Although only a minority of students considered the full significance of the cultural backgrounds of both characters, more were conscious of the vulnerability of Eilis' position and some were able to explore the significance of her view that Tony is 'oddly vulnerable'.

The best discussion of context reflected the holistic approach of this specification by integrating points into a coherent reading of the extract. In these responses contextual reference was apt and focused, rather than laboured and generalised, allowing students to focus on debating the text rather 'bolting on' extraneous contextual points. More confident students, for example, were able to consider Eilis' anxieties about Tony through considering her experience as an immigrant as well as the choices that were presented to women in the mid-twentieth century. Here the discussion of context brought the student closer to the text rather than moving them away into the generalised assertions that typified weaker responses. In the weaker responses, contextual references were often longer, more assertive and failed to comment on the fact that the text was written in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Unfortunately this weaker work often muddled eras with reference to suffragettes and Irish famines in the 1950s, for example.

Again, it is important to emphasise that students who made explicit references to wider reading were not helped; these references distracted them from both text and task, hampering them in a question where they have 45 minutes to read, plan and write. Unfortunately some students referred to other genres by making reference to their Shakespeare and poetry texts in spite of the fact that they were tackling a paper entitled 'Love through the Ages: Prose'. Achievement in AO4 is often reflected holistically in other areas through a more thorough understanding of prose methods or through considering the typicality of a character's presentation, for instance; Many students took advantage of the more flexible approach to AO5 and examiners were largely impressed by the variety of responses to the critical view. It is important to note, however, that weaker students who supported the critical view tended to ignore or misread key aspects of the

text particularly towards the end of the extract. These less successful responses frequently overstated the 'abusive' nature of Tony's personality and behaviour. Such responses generally exaggerated rather than completely misread the subtleties of the extract. Weaker responses tended to be assertive, making unsubstantiated claims about the characters based on unfounded speculation, or repeating the same point several times.

More successful students were able to integrate their debate into more explorative work that considered both authorial methods and alternate readings. Work from these students developed more subtle responses that were able to assess the critical view through a closer consideration of the whole text through considering the ways in which both characters are constructed. Here the work was supported by deft analysis, rather than undermined by unsupported assertions. Planning and preparation is clearly a significant key to success in a question which has to be completed in 45 minutes. Students who planned well were clearly advantaged as they had a secure grasp of the critical debate and were able to select apt textual references that demonstrated an overview of the text. This could not be achieved through chronological, more narrative approaches.

More successful answers:

- had a clear overview of the whole extract
- demonstrated a clear, relevant grasp of authorial methods
- explored the unseen extract through a clear, relevant debate of the critical view
- integrated relevant and accurate contextual understanding into the examination of the prose text.

Less successful answers:

- often adopted a chronological approach to the unseen extract
- tended to offer distorted interpretations of the unseen extract in order to support over assertive debates
- were unable to consider key authorial methods such as narrative perspective
- considered characters as people rather than constructs
- considered context in an assertive, inaccurate way that led them away from a close examination of the unseen extract
- made explicit reference to other texts which undermined their reading of the unseen extract

**Section B Comparing prose texts**

The choice of two questions and the range of comparisons offered by exploring links from 12 possible set texts ensured that students were given the opportunity to develop strong, independent work. The diversity of the work and text choices impressed the examiners and suggested that students had been well supported by teaching that had clearly grasped the flexible opportunities offered by the specification. Texts such as *Wuthering Heights* and *The Great Gatsby* were clearly very popular text choices together with *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*. Fewer students chose to write about *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Rotters Club* and *The Awakening*.

Again, all assessment objectives are integrated into the task. Students are clearly asked to debate a critical view through developing a detailed comparison of two prose texts supported by explorative reading. Here the misuse of explicit wider reading links was, understandably, less evident. Unfortunately, however, a very small minority of students felt obliged to reference other texts and genres which largely undermined the focus and relevance of their work. Those students who offered generalised contextual points often moved away from their chosen texts, rather than using context in a more integrated way to develop more thoughtful analysis and comparison. As this is an open book examination, students who had detailed knowledge of their set texts were skilfully able to support their response through well-chosen textual detail. Those whose grasp of the texts was less secure inevitably used a narrow range of textual reference that was not always relevant to the task.

The critical views presented in the two questions prompted a wide range of responses. Those students who offered a well-integrated debate were often more successful as this allowed them to construct a more explorative comparison of their chosen texts. Less successful responses tended to consider the debate in a more generalised way which resulted in abrupt shifts of argument from supporting the critical view to disagreeing with it entirely. Again, this attempt at offering a 'balanced' argument ensured that often the textual comparisons became forced and assertive. A number of students chose to rely on previously written essays and attempted to 'shoehorn' in material on social class and the presentation of women. Students should be reminded that they need to answer the question; to move into Band 3 and above they need to demonstrate that their work is always *relevant*.

As in Section A, successful answers in Section B benefited from clear, effective planning. This was reflected in work that was sharply focused on the critical debate through clear, relevant

introductions and conclusions. Comparison between the texts was deftly integrated into a developing debate and was clearly highlighted through effective signposting.

More successful answers:

- thoughtfully considered all keywords in the critical view
- fully integrated the debate into the comparison of the two texts
- were well-planned and well-structured through thoughtful, relevant introductions and conclusions
- took advantage of an open book examination by selecting well chosen, relevant quotation
- integrated relevant and accurate contextual understanding into the comparison of their prose texts

Less successful answers:

- often failed to consider the critical view carefully enough and attempted to use material from previously written essays
- approached the debate in an assertive way by both supporting and disagreeing with the critical view and failing to produce a more coherent response
- did not move effectively between the two texts to produce fully developed comparisons
- adopted more narrative approaches and did not consider characters as constructs
- considered context in an assertive, inaccurate way that prevented a closer reading of the texts
- made explicit reference to other texts and genres which was mostly irrelevant

## **Question 2**

The critical view in the question prompted a range of responses from students. The most confident explored the debate by thoughtful consideration of all aspects of the statement. Successful answers set the agenda through considering differing types of love and 'hurt', as well as debating the extent to which they agreed with and the significance of 'always'. Again, autonomous answers which did not rely on past responses were most successful. Those students who explored 'love' and 'hurt' in a more explorative way were often better rewarded. Such answers were often perceptive and assured, offering, for example, original discussion of the pain of love through considering the presentation of the death of Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre*. Different forms of love were often relevantly explored through considering familial love and even love of money or power.

Less successful answers often offered a more narrative approach which largely focused on ‘hurt’ in a physical sense. This work tended to be less independent in approach and relied on past material. Many examiners noted that Tom Buchanan’s physical abuse of Myrtle was often referenced, but rarely developed other than through assertive discussion of the context of ‘male patriarchy’. In these less successful answers, students often ‘unloaded’ learnt contexts that inevitably led them away from the text.

### **Question 3**

This was the more popular question in the section and elicited a range of responses from students. Often the most confident students took advantage of the flexible approach to AO5 offered by the specification. The critical view was often debated in an assured way and those who had often chosen more modern texts argued the extent to which characters such as Daisy and Rebecca in fact dominated their male partners. Successful answers clearly considered ‘presented’ by considering the ways in which characters are constructed by writers. Often in the more successful answers well-chosen textual references integrated relevantly were far more effective than learned quotations.

Less successful answers were often generalised because of a more assertive approach to context that undermined closer, more detailed comparison of the chosen prose texts. In these responses it was assumed that before 1900 all men dominated women, whilst in the twentieth century women began to ‘assert’ themselves leading to more equal relationships in ‘post-modern’ texts. Sometimes learnt aspects of the gothic and references to ‘Byronic heroes’ tended to inhibit rather than encourage more genuine exploration of the texts.

### **Looking ahead to A-level**

Students going on to A-level should make a special note of the key messages that arise from this report. They should remember to:

- make a priority of answering the question, recognising the importance of looking closely at the given critical interpretation
- offer substantial closely-read analysis of extracts and texts under discussion
- explore writers’ methods relevant to meaning and the question (rather than working through a checklist of ‘form, structure and language’)
- integrate precise contextual observations so as to illuminate changing attitudes over time (rather than making sweeping generalisations and assertions)

- concentrate on implicit connections which highlight typical genre features and the shared contexts of the literature of Love through the ages and WW1 and its aftermath or Modern times: literature from 1945 to the present day
- explore interpretations of genuine interest (rather than feeling obliged to balance the debate or offer readings from different critical viewpoints)
- carefully co-ordinate the structure of text comparison questions
- read questions carefully and plan answers properly giving appropriate attention to command words.

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

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