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A-Level

# ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/1 Love through the ages  
Report on the Examination

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7712  
2017

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Version: 1.0

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## General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7712/2A/2B 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.

## Component 1 Love through the ages

There were many indicators of the success of this A level component. Students tended to do well when they:

- knew their set texts well in overview and in detail
- recognised that drama, poetry and prose texts are distinct genres each with their own methods and terminology
- appreciated each text as a construct of the author open to different interpretations
- understood that attitudes change over time and these changes are apparent from the texts themselves and from the ways in which they have been and continue to be interpreted
- saw connections between texts as aspects of typicality within a shared context of the literature of love
- spent appropriate time reading and planning, devoting adequate time to Section B on unseen poetry.

Also, students did well where they avoided the pitfalls of:

- ‘bolting on’ contextual knowledge rather than find relevant contextual references within the text
- balancing the given view with a counter-argument out of a sense of obligation rather than authentic conviction
- making explicit connections to other texts when not required by the question, out of a sense of obligation rather than to illuminate meaning
- asserting erroneous sweeping statements about historical context
- misreading the extract or texts reproduced on the examination paper.

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 candidate

In this first series of ‘Love through the ages’ examiners reported that the majority of students understood the challenges of ‘closed book’ conditions in Section A and ‘open book’ in Section C. In Sections A and B an extract (in A) and two poems (in B) are reproduced on the examination paper to encourage students to read closely in the light of a given critical view. Close reading is an obvious discriminator when assessing the Shakespeare extract in Section A and the poems 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 in each of the three sections reflecting thorough study of the chosen Shakespeare play; close reading and comparative skills with unseen poems; and comparison across prose and poetry. At 3 hours this is a long and demanding examination which resulted in some lengthy answers.

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## Section A Shakespeare

All four questions share a common approach and structure with students being presented with a given critical view followed by the instruction to discuss Shakespeare's presentation in the extract and the wider play in the light of the view. 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, students can tend to ascribe more significance to punctuation than can be justified. Punctuation might be a starting point or part of a larger discussion about methods as a means of conveying meaning rather than of primary focus in itself.

When referring to historical context, more accurate candidates 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. 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 be tempted into unhelpful sweeping statements. There is still a tendency for some students to make sweeping comments particularly 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 have suffered the same fate of menial, domestic servitude.

When it comes to the critical context it seems that there were two clear observations. Firstly, references to Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical criticism can sharpen a response if applied very specifically to one aspect of the play or question. However, when each of the stances is rehearsed by mechanical rote then the discussion can become generalised and be at the expense of looking closely at the extract and the wider play. Secondly, there was a noticeable increase in the use of named critics and this often proved to be helpful in shaping a response to the given view.

### Question 1 *Othello*

*Othello* is by far the most popular text and there was a good deal of engagement with the presentation of the Othello and Desdemona relationship. Students were able to concentrate on the extract as a section from a crucial turning point in the play. There was much to discuss in terms of Othello's conflicted feelings as a direct result of Iago's influence. Many also looked beyond Iago to explore the possible origins of the various fault lines and inequalities in the relationship between the two lovers, including their various respective backgrounds and insecurities. The following proved ready sources for closer analysis of methods: Othello's use of insulting terms and imagery; the lovers' use of religious vocabulary; the interplay of claims and counter-claims. Similar exchanges from this central section of the play and from the death scenes at the end provided ready points of similarity. For contrast, many referred to early scenes between Othello and Desdemona. Students were often keen to scrutinise Othello's language and verse form, his aggressive outbursts and his cynicism as part of an argument about his tragic demise. Critics such as Bradley and Leavis, who pointed to the flaws in Othello's personality, were often cited to good effect here. The best answers kept 'worship', 'despise' and 'middle ground' in focus. Where candidates chose to debate the given view, it was a common and perfectly valid argument to accept the interpretation for Othello but to question its applicability to Desdemona. Many mistakenly and awkwardly used 'despise' as a noun and some had a confused notion of what might represent 'middle ground'. Discussion of the play as tragedy and Othello as a tragic hero enabled typicality to be addressed. However, more successful responses avoided clumsy use of

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Greek terminology and treated 'hamartia', 'hubris', 'peripeteia', 'anagnorisis' and 'catharsis' as concepts rather than concrete nouns.

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

Students could address the ideas of power and control as aspects of Petruchio's presentation and as themes in the play. The best answers kept the focus on how Petruchio's expressions of power and control here and elsewhere in the play affect the audience's reading of him. Petruchio's use of exaggerated displays of apparent care and concern for Katherina to intimidate both her and his servants was well understood. His direction of both through commands, questions, proclamations and insults were explored as aspects of Shakespeare's methods, as were the stage directions to indicate the farcical, slapstick nature of the comedy at times in this extract. The best answers recognised the importance of the soliloquy at the end of the extract and the significance of the falcon imagery and the other rhetorical features of this speech. Most students addressed the central issue of the extent to which Petruchio appears foolish in the process, and came to a variety of conclusions as far as this extract is concerned and in terms of a final verdict on Petruchio at the end of the play. The notions of power/control and foolishness gave plenty of scope for cross-reference to other scenes in the play. Referring to his appearance before the wedding was common. There was a tendency to neglect the details of Petruchio's speeches in the second half of the extract. The role of the servants also tended to be neglected. Some concentrated on quoting and analysing the language of the stage directions and as a result did not properly engage with Shakespeare as the author at work. Discussion of the play as comedy and Petruchio as a comedic archetype enabled typicality to be addressed.

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

This question was an excellent opportunity to explore the interesting and complex issue of the presentation of women using the perspective of such a key scene. As first Mariana then Isabella plead to the newly 'returned' Duke for the life of their abuser, their suit helps determine the final outcomes of the drama. The best answers kept the key phrase 'selfless and compassionate' in focus throughout and there were arguments for and against the given view in terms of applying to this extract and to the play as a whole. As far as the latter is concerned some restricted themselves to Mariana and Isabella whereas others widened the topic to include the other female characters. It was common, when students chose to counter the given view, to look at Isabella's role in the fate of Claudio. Students often referred to Isabella's confrontation with Claudio as a point of cross reference. They also made use of Mariana's unveiling and the final betrothal scenes to compare and contrast with the extract. Perhaps more might have been made of Angelo and particularly the Duke, given his role in the extract, as points of contrast in terms of the presentation of men in the play. The Duke's use of the titular 'measure for measure' phrase here might have led to more discussion of the role of the women in achieving justice in the play. Students tended to analyse some aspects of the methodology such as Mariana's exchange with the Duke around the words 'mock' and 'crave, references to kneeling and physically imploring, etc., but there was more scope for closer reading and exploration in the extract. Discussion of the play as tragi-comedy and the role of women (and men) in the genre enabled typicality to be addressed.

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

This question performed well for those who opted for this text. Students often engaged enthusiastically with the extract and its focus, given the centrality of Paulina's role in this highly significant and climactic final scene. The extract lent itself readily to discussion of dramatic presentation and the interplay of agency and power between Paulina, Leontes and Hermione. The best answers kept the presentation of Paulina and her role in stage managing the resolution of the play in clear focus. Many students were able to look closely at Paulina's use of rhetoric: her allusions to religion and magic; her affection for members of the royal families; her poignant references to lost and found; and the ways in which other members of the court refer to her. Some speculated on her atypicality as a Jacobean woman and how Leontes' direction of her marriage to Camillo leaves the audience and their perception of her. Cross references were made to Paulina's role in the first part of the play and her reaction to Leontes' initial treatment of Hermione and Mamillius. Discussion of the play as a tragi-comedy and the role of women in the genre enabled typicality to be addressed.

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
- sustained focus on Shakespeare as a verse dramatist and his dramatic and poetic methods
- explored interpretation, i.e. agreed with, disagreed with **or** debated the given view
- scrutinised the key words of the given view and used them to shape their answer
- considered 'elsewhere in the play' by selecting relevant detailed references
- made considered and accurate use of contextual factors arising out of the text
- showed awareness and understanding of the typicality of the literature of love.

Less successful Shakespeare answers:

- made sparse use of the extract
- neglected the given critical interpretation
- wrote about the characters as though they were real people
- described the extract in narrative terms
- offered a 'translation' of the extract
- 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.

#### Section B Unseen Poetry

This compulsory question follows the typical frame of giving a critical view, here of both poems, before the main command stem of the question, which here instructs students to compare and contrast. Students are prepared by studying their set texts within the shared context of Love through the ages and particularly by the teaching of the chosen AQA poetry anthology. Clearly, this question is worth the same as the other two questions on taught texts so it is vitally important that students give this question adequate attention in terms of reading and planning. Poems are chosen to give a balance between accessibility and providing a rigorous challenge appropriate to A level.

The poems will give students sufficient subject matter and methods with which to engage and they will be sufficiently similar to enable comparison and contrast. It is of fundamental importance, then, that students select points and support them appropriately rather than attempting to deal with everything.

This question is a challenge in that these are untaught texts and minimal context is provided.

### Question 5

Dyer's and Dunn's poems are both sonnets in which the narrator directly addresses a dead spouse. Most students grasped this readily and were able to explore the presentation of grief in the individual poems and comparatively. The critical perspectives allowed students to shape their responses and the majority agreed with the given view although many also considered counter-arguments, usually identifying complexities in Dyer's poem and occasionally seeing both poems as simple evocations of grief and devotion. On the whole, Dyer's proved to be the more accessible poem with the narrator's situation and attitude made clear to most. Students were quick to refer to gender (both narrators make this explicit), the historical context and the epitaph genre. These aspects provided clues to the typicality/atypicality of the piece. Exactly what had happened and how the narrator felt in 'The Kaleidoscope' proved more elusive but students were able to fall back on explaining this away by referring to 'complexity', to the modern context and to the kaleidoscope itself as a metaphor of fragmentation. Some were intrigued by the cryptic nature of some of Dunn's phrasing and imagery, and sometimes unsure about the nature of a kaleidoscope. Comparing the use of religious references proved an interesting topic for discussion. Dyer's narrator finds the certainty of her faith a huge consolation and this adds an air almost of excitement and relish; Dunn's reference to prayer and to sacrificial/ritualistic imagery seems more an act of desperation than faith. Perhaps the caring role of Dunn's narrator with his tray and trips upstairs, presumably to nurse his sick wife, confused some into thinking the narrator is female, but this is contradicted by the reference to "husbands" in the text. Some less understandably became confused about the gender of Dyer's narrator.

The sonnet form encouraged most students to address typicality in love poetry. There were some excellent links made between methods and meaning when it came to discussing sonnet structure and the use of octaves, sestet, quatrains, couplets and caesurae to signal the argument and changes in mood and focus. Many used focus on the volta in each poem to be a useful point of focus. However, some identified these features without linking to meaning or the question so making such observations redundant. Some were distracted by different definitions of English, Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnets. Unconvincing claims were made about the significance of metre and rhyme. Rhyme schemes were often identified, again to no obvious purpose and often incorrectly. Many tried to claim that Dunn's sonnet had no rhyme scheme or that the rhyme was 'inconsistent', 'erratic' or even 'confused'. Dyer's final couplet was often identified as failing to rhyme or even an early example of half rhyme, not allowing for changes in pronunciation since the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It is recommended that students only engage closely with methods they feel confident about in terms of linking to meaning and making relevant to the question.

More successful poetry answers:

- looked in each case at the whole poems with the interpretation in mind
- supported relevant readings with specific textual details
- analysed the poets' methods by linking them to meaning, in a tentative fashion where necessary



- 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.

Less successful poetry answers:

- worked through the poems 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.

### **Section C Comparing Texts**

In this section students have a choice of question comparing a prose text and one of the AQA poetry anthologies with the restriction that one text is written pre-1900. The initial command of 'compare how' followed by a focus on an aspect of presentation encodes all the assessment objectives but without making a given view explicit. Students are challenged to compare a novel, sometimes of substantial length, with poems selected from a comparatively brief anthology. Whereas sufficient relevant coverage of both texts is required, it is acknowledged that responses may not be equally balanced between the two texts. Given that the questions must allow for various different text combinations, they are by their nature generic and require students to select relevant material across two diverse texts. The nature of the links established is crucial to the success of an answer. However enthusiastic students are to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the novel, they need to avoid too much exposition and narrative. Such an approach often takes the student away from the question and away from analysing the author at work.

Across the two questions some preferences emerged. More students study the pre-1900 than post-1900 poetry. By far the most studied novels are *The Great Gatsby* and *Wuthering Heights*, and a full range of work was seen on these texts. *Jane Eyre*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Rebecca* and *Atonement* also featured strongly with some particularly sophisticated work emerging on the three latter texts. *The Go-Between* and *Persuasion* are minority choices and only a little work was seen on *The Awakening* and *Room with a View*.

Both questions yielded some very long answers. However, examiners often reported that the best responses were succinct, selective and very closely and specifically focused on comparison rather than dealing with texts separately. Examiners also reported that students sometimes appeared to be answering another question or shaping to fit a previously written answer to one of the specimen questions from the Sample Assessment Materials.

### Question 6

The focus here was ‘aspects of desire’ and this proved to be a very popular question choice. Given that this paper is on love through the ages, the best answers looked at sexual and romantic desire and selected material accordingly, variously exploring the pleasures and pains of a specific aspect or limited aspects of desire. This approach worked much better than those who either tried to cover too many aspects, sometimes in a superficial way, or loosely interpreted desire as ‘wanting’ or ‘seeking’ anything from fame and prosperity to cars and houses. Where material was well chosen, responses were highly impressive. There were too many successful approaches to list here but some examples might give the flavour of successful responses. Some combined *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and Metaphysical and/or Cavalier poems to very good effect when discussing male attitudes to desire. *Atonement* was also combined well with such poetry. Jay Gatsby’s yearning for Daisy was effectively compared to *Who so list to hount I knowe where there is an hynde* and *Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae* focusing on unattainable desire.

### Question 7

The focus here was on ‘ideas about romantic commitment’. This was slightly less popular it seems but tended to produce more focused responses. Many chose to look at partnerships of various kinds- marriages, less formal liaisons, happy or otherwise. Some chose to look at unrequited commitment. Most saw it as something binding with a certain longevity rather than just a seduction. However, the set poems and particularly the set novels allowed for a whole range of different scenarios and possibilities. As always, it is how the argument is focused, presented and supported that matters most. Again, it might be helpful to give some examples of particularly successful approaches. *Wuthering Heights* was combined with poems such as *Á quoi bon dire*, *Vergissmeinnicht* and *Timer* to look at romantic commitment that transcends death. Novels such as *Persuasion* and *Rebecca* were used alongside poems such as *For My Lover*, *Returning to His Wife* and *Wild Oats* to discuss the dilemmas and difficulties of making a romantic commitment.

More successful comparative answers:

- selected material carefully
- sustained the focus on comparison
- kept precise focus on the question
- understood and explored the differences between poetic methods and prose methods
- wrote succinctly
- concentrated on shaping a coherent argument across the chosen texts

Less successful comparative answers:

- wrote about the chosen texts separately
- failed to distinguish between poetic methods and prose methods
- chose material unwisely then forced it to fit the question making tenuous points and connections
- fell back on narrative/descriptive approaches
- wrote overlong answers that lost precise focus on the question
- wrote with a previously answered question in mind.

Finally, there were some very long scripts on Paper 1, often significantly exceeding the use of a twelve page answer booklet. Sometimes this took into account planning and the best answers are always carefully planned. However, the best scripts were those that wrote selectively and succinctly.

**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.