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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 2A Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath  
Report on the Examination

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7712  
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## General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7711/1 and 7712/C, along with the mark schemes for those components.

It was evident from the marking of all three components that the historicist philosophy of the specification is positively embraced. 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 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. Students are encouraged to pursue clear, authentic arguments with conviction.

The levels-of-response mark scheme has been designed so that the genuine inter-relatedness of assessment objectives can be respected and rewarded. Holistic marking enables responses to be considered as organic whole texts in themselves. Our mark scheme aims to encourage independent responses which are relevant, well-argued and supported by appropriate textual evidence, not limited by formulaic constraints.

All questions are framed to address all the assessment objectives. The advice to students is to concentrate on answering the question set and let the assessment objectives look after themselves. Because the quality of written expression is crucial in enabling literary skills, students should however continue to be mindful of how they answer the question too, of course.

## Section A core set text questions

In this ‘open book’ examination thoughtful use of set texts through precise well selected references was often key to a successful response. Those students who really knew and understood their set texts were able to make thoughtful selections that were well integrated into confident arguments. Those who lacked confident textual knowledge sometimes resorted to ‘unloading’ learnt responses that often lacked relevance and sometimes seemed to be answering an entirely different question. In this type of response students often move too readily into offering generalised contextual knowledge and they fail to ‘make meaning’ through developing a literary argument about their chosen set text. When students answer the question in a genuine, purposeful way, they often make perceptive textual references and use contextual knowledge as a genuine literary tool rather than a digressive add on. These students were able to confidently engage with the ‘significance’ of a topic or view and could interpret and explore meaning in illuminating, perceptive ways.

Students did well when they:

- clearly focused on the question through thoughtful planning
- had the confidence to avoid unloading learnt material that might have marginal relevance to the focus of the question
- were able to fully engage in the debate set up in the question through purposeful use of its keywords in their responses

- used literary analysis as a tool rather than as an end in itself
- avoided bolt on contextual material that might interrupt the literary focus of the response
- integrated literary and historical context into their argument
- engaged in clear, authentic arguments which avoided mechanical counter arguments which sometimes diverged from the focus of the question.

### **Option 1 Section A: Poetry Set Text**

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

##### **Question 1**

The majority of students were able to engage with the debate about nobility in war. The best responses set an agenda about nobility that didn't just consider bravery, but also explored more precise discussion of qualities such as comradeship, self-sacrifice and stoicism. Stronger answers often considered Gardner's view in full and were able to explore the lack of nobility in war to develop the debate. Many students purposefully chose to compare early and late war poems; most popular choices were early poems such as 'England to Her Sons' or 'Peace' compared with 'Dulce et Decorum est' or 'Base Details'. Many students were able to choose appropriate poems to compare, but sometimes fell into an over-rehearsed debate about early war patriotism as opposed to the anger and cynicism of poems from later in the war.

The best responses were able discuss the significance of nobility through using appropriate literary and cultural contexts such as Georgian poetry and muscular Christianity. Sophisticated responses also considered the importance of Gardner as a 'curator' of the poems and the significance of their placement within the anthology to trace a journey from innocence to experience. One outstanding response challenged the integrity of Gardner's selection through arguing that several poems had been misplaced chronologically in order to support contemporary anti-war attitudes.

##### **Question 2**

The focus of the question on a single section from the anthology encouraged students to make thoughtful, precise text choices. The less successful responses sometimes pursued more generic approaches that only aimed to provide a 'balanced' debate comparing poems that focused on excitement and those in the section that expressed more sombre, fatalistic outlooks. Again, the more successful responses focused on the keywords more precisely and considered the differing forms of 'excitement' presented in these poems. "Tipperary Days" itself was predictably the most popular choice, but too many students assumed it was just a spirited call to arms and missed the growing irony, particularly in the way the song is increasingly subverted, making the early stanzas seem more ambiguous on a second reading. 'Into Battle' was also a popular choice and many answers were able to examine the more primal excitement of going to war through detailed discussion of nature imagery. There were some purposeful responses that also explored the ways in which the excitement of war is channelled into an almost religious sense of duty in poems such as 'Before Action' and Sorley's 'Untitled'.

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

##### **Question 3**

This was a popular question that elicited a range of responses. The critical view allowed students to explore the collection in a nuanced way through considering the key words of 'despair',

'endurance' and 'anger'. Many students thoughtfully considered poems of bereavement such as Marian Allen's 'The Wind on the Downs' and Vera Britain's 'Perhaps'; purposeful discussion of both 'despair' and 'endurance' informed some sensitive response to the process of bereavement. Students also offered thoughtful, detailed counter arguments that considered the anger expressed in poems such as Ruth Comfort Mitchell's 'He Went for a Soldier' and Winifred M Letts 'The Deserter'. Students were clearly able to develop the debate through considering anger at the suffering of soldiers as well as the home front attitudes towards the war. The strongest responses confidently focused on the effects that convey anger such as direct address to reader, repetition and religious imagery.

#### **Question 4**

This was an equally popular question and encouraged a wide range of responses. As well as considering the suffering of bereavement, many students explored the ways in which these poems chose to present the suffering of men through considering poems such as Margaret Postgate Cole's 'The Falling Leaves' and Ruth Comfort Mitchell's 'He Went for a Soldier'. Assured responses were able to develop more perceptive debates through considering a precise focus such as the suffering of mothers in Teresa Hooley's 'A War Film'. Attempts to offer counter arguments through considering poems that suggest that women profited from the war and did not suffer were sometimes a little more straightforward. In these responses contextual discussion often predominated and the literary focus of the significance of suffering became less explicit.

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

#### **Question 7**

Unfortunately *Oh What a Lovely War* remains a minority core set text choice and examiners only saw responses for question 7. The standard of responses was high and the majority of students engaged fully with the debate and made good use of the critical view. The stronger answers always kept the key words 'disturb' and 'educate' in view and were able to consider dramatic effects such as the role of the MC and the use of the news panels and slides in a focused way. The effect of comedy within the play was thoughtfully considered; many students were able to consider satire, and the extent to which comic effects were designed to alienate and disturb. Contextual understanding was used appropriately; in particular, students were able to use the literary context of Brecht and agitprop to inform and develop their responses.

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

#### **Question 9**

The best responses to this question didn't just describe social class, but entered into a full debate concerning its significance within the play. Although some students muddled class with military rank, more thorough contextual knowledge was often used effectively; examiners were impressed by students who could reflect on Sherriff's first failed attempt to become an officer because of his grammar school education and consider the significance of Trotter as a 'temporary gentleman'. More straightforward answers tended to just describe the presentation of class through accent and non-standard English; the best answers, however, evaluated class attitudes expressed within the play such as Stanhope's claim that Trotter had no 'imagination'. Strong responses also debated significance through considering the extent to which Trotter and Mason's class background relegates them to the role of minor comic characters. The very best answers were able to consider

the breaking down of class barriers at the end of play through considering the significance of Mason accompanying Hibbert to the front line trench or Trotter assuming Osborne's role.

### Question 10

This was the most popular question on *Journey's End* and examiners were genuinely impressed by the range and variety of responses it elicited. The better answers impressed because of their literary focus; the significance of waiting was often explored through the chronological structure of the play and the creation of tension and suspense. Less successful answers tended to use context as a 'crutch' and were sometimes diverted into discussing the experience of trench warfare rather than considering the significance of waiting within the play. The most assured responses considered the presentation of time through discussing the significance of Osborne's 'old fashioned watch' and the intensity of the single dug-out setting as opposed to the freer interpretation of the recent Saul Dibb's film. These answers impressed because of their focus on specific moments of 'waiting' such as Stanhope's threat to shoot Hibbert and the 'real time' that elapses as Osborne and Raleigh count down to the trench raid. Textual knowledge was impressive here and allowed students to explore less obvious avenues such as the significance of waiting in Stanhope's relationship with his fiancée.

### Option 3 Section A: Prose Set Text

#### *Regeneration* - Pat Barker

### Question 13

The two questions on *Regeneration* attracted equal attention. Examiners were impressed by the extent to which the majority of students attempting this question were clearly able to discuss Rivers as a construct of the writer; relatively few responses just offered a limited character study without considering the text as a whole. Many were able to discuss Rivers' significance in a variety of ways and there was thoughtful discussion on areas such as medical development, masculinity and duty. It was clear that many students had a broad understanding of over-arching themes within the novel. More straightforward answers used Rivers as a way of discussing these themes, but were often unable to support and develop their debate through enough close textual analysis. Stronger responses had a more thorough literary focus and were able to discuss Rivers' significance through considering narrative perspective and Barker's use of dialogue and free indirect speech.

### Question 14

Many examiners were impressed by the quality of responses to this question. The critical view was a useful prompt for many students who were able to explore the nuances of recovery and regeneration. More straightforward responses often relied too much on contextual knowledge, however, and were too quick to offer information on shell shock and changing social attitudes as a way of discussing the significance of regeneration. It is important for students to realise that contextual knowledge should not be unloaded, but used as a literary tool to develop a reading of the text. Stronger answers clearly integrated context into a stronger literary focus that considered the way regeneration is mirrored in the structure of the novel that begins and ends with the changing relationship between Rivers and Sassoon, for example, or considered the imagery used to represent the painful process of regeneration.

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

This was the more popular of the two questions set and examiners were impressed by the breadth and range of responses. Successful answers had a clear literary focus and considered how the differing time frames and the role of Elizabeth were significant within this debate. Strong responses didn't just give overview about narrative structure, but worked hard to examine its effect through detailed close reading which examined the close links between the two time periods. Such answers were able to compare, for example, the linked tunnelling experience of Jack Firebrace with Elizabeth's mundane impatience on an underground journey to show how the modern world is ignorant of the pain and sacrifices of the past. Thoughtful answers also broadened the debate through considering the ways in which veterans seek to bury and forget the past.

**Question 16**

Fewer students attempted this question. Many who did were able to fully engage with the significance of Jack Firebrace's role within the novel. More straightforward responses tended to resort to a narrative approach with generalised contextual discussion of tunnel warfare and social class. The strongest responses were built around close analysis of the text that allowed a more genuine discussion of Jack Firebrace as a construct. Such answers often explored Jack Firebrace as a counterpoint to Stephen Wraysford, allowing Faulks to widen the novel's perspective on faith and the significance of social class. Examiners noted that more confident students made good use of the text and could consider, for example, the significance of the 'wooden cross' that 'supports' Jack's back in the first tunnelling sequence when he is introduced to the reader.

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

The key to success here is a student's ability to make meaning from an unseen prose text informed by their reading in the shared literary context of WW1 and its aftermath. Successful responses always focused on the significance of the setting in the extract without making digressive detours to other texts and rehearsed context. Students who were successful in this question were clearly experienced readers within this shared context; they had read widely and could use this experience to develop confident, informed judgements on the extract. These students clearly read well within the examination and were able to form an overview of the extract as a whole rather than just focusing on disparate details. Successful students realised that literary analysis and contextual awareness were not ends in themselves, but tools to assess the significance of setting within the extract.

The extract proved to be accessible to the majority of students and examiners were impressed by the range and variety of responses offered. Most were able to engage with the landscape of war and could explore the significance of a setting that presents a natural world damaged by warfare. Straightforward responses largely focused on figurative language and syntactical effects such as triplets and repeated simple sentences. More developed responses were able to consider the significance of the similes and metaphors used by the writer and could engage with both the field of natural disaster and the effect of the biblical language employed. Rather than just noting the use of pathetic fallacy, more assured responses considered the psychological aspects of setting through discussing how the setting disorientates the new recruits who have arrived in 'a lifeless, soundless battlefield'. Assured students were able to comment on the use of direct speech to convey the disorientation of war through simple questions such as 'Is this what war is?' and 'What are we doing here?' Sophisticated responses considered the formal tenor of the direct speech and

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argued that the setting was significant because it presented an attack on the futility and purposeless of a war in which new recruits were poorly prepared and led.

More successful prose unseen answers:

- read the extract carefully
- kept the extract central to the discussion of the significance of setting
- made good use of planning to structure a response that offered an overview of the extract as well purposeful analysis of detail
- used literary analysis to develop a coherent discussion of the significance of 'setting'
- used context as a tool rather than as an end in itself.

Less successful prose unseen answers:

- lacked planning and suggested that the reading was rushed
- adopted a list-like structure built around feature spotting
- tended to go through the extract rather than establishing any overview
- resorted to avoiding the extract through lengthy discussion of generalised context
- digressed to other texts rather than keeping the focus on the extract.

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

This comparative task continues the debate into the significance of setting. The open nature of the task suited most students who had more freedom to set up an independent thesis about setting. Students who lack more precise knowledge and understanding of their texts sometimes lost the focus of 'setting' and moved too quickly into considering war time conditions and home front attitudes. Confident textual knowledge and thoughtful selection and comparison of textual detail was, therefore, key to success in this comparative task.

Successful responses were able to consider the form of their chosen genres when discussing the significance of setting rather than just focusing on thematic links. These responses were often characterised by thoughtful textual references that had a clear, purposeful focus on the significance of 'setting'. Students were often more confident when discussing setting in poetry and particularly drama; here there was some thoughtful discussion in the ways that settings can present psychological moods such as the dugout in *Journey's End* and Bateman's, the Kiplings' family home, in *My Boy Jack*. As Option 1 continues to be the less popular choice, poetry predominates in responses to this examination task and students largely made good text choices that allowed them to explore the settings of both the frontline and the home front. Less successful responses, however, tended to move away from 'setting' to more general discussions of propaganda and patriotism particularly when considering early war poems. Such discussions were more effective when they were more clearly rooted in the idealised pastoral presentation of England.

Many students seemed less confident when considering the significance of setting in their prose texts; some tended to unload the variety of settings that their prose text offered without making careful selections. The more successful responses set the agenda through establishing a clear thesis such as the way certain settings are used to present psychological 'traps' such as Craiglockhart in *Regeneration* and the tunnels in *Birdsong*. The most assured students were also able to consider the ways in war time settings can be superimposed onto the home front as a way of presenting the effects of shell shock or trauma.



'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 setting particularly when considering the interplay between the home front and the front line. Such answers benefited from strong textual knowledge that allowed students to consider the sequencing of scenes as well as considering the broad time frame of the play.

More successful comparative answers:

- demonstrated perception in the selection of apt textual references
- moved purposefully between the two texts making effective use of discourse markers
- had a clear focus on the significance of setting
- were able to take advantage of considering the differences between their chosen genres
- worked hard to establish and develop a clear thesis on the significance of setting
- wrote succinctly.

Less successful comparative answers:

- wrote about the texts separately and didn't compare
- were more concerned about similarities rather than differences
- made poor text selections that led to some assertive, misguided readings
- tended to paraphrase particularly when discussing prose texts
- used contextual discussion as an end in itself rather than integrating it into a more literary response.

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

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