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# English Literature A

7711/1 Love through the ages: Shakespeare and poetry  
Report on the Examination

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2017

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## General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the report on 7711/2. It was evident from the marking of Component 1 that the historicist philosophy of the specification, using the shared context of love through the ages, continues to be 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 independent work which is not constrained by some of the formulaic constraints that had evolved within the legacy specification.

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.

Compared to last year, students were less inclined to

- 'bolt on' contextual knowledge rather than find relevant contextual references within the text
- balance the given view with a counter-argument out of a sense of obligation rather than authentic conviction
- make explicit connections to other texts out of a sense of obligation rather than to illuminate meaning
- assert erroneous sweeping statements about historical context.

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.

## 7711/1 Shakespeare and poetry

In this second series of 'Love through the ages: Shakespeare and poetry' examiners reported that the majority of students understood the challenges of this closed book examination. In both sections an extract that is reproduced on the examination paper is considered closely in the light of a critical interpretation. Close reading is an obvious discriminator when assessing the Shakespeare extract in Section A and the poem 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 reflecting thorough study of the chosen Shakespeare play and the chosen poetry anthology. Last year, examiners reported a clear trend for Shakespeare answers to be stronger and this perhaps reflected the overall amount of teaching time devoted to Shakespeare. However, this year this discrepancy was not so apparent.

## Section A Shakespeare

Students have a choice here in terms of negotiating the two bullets that make up the question: looking at them separately or in an integrated fashion. The advantage of the former is that it lessens the danger of neglecting the generic first bullet about the presentation of love in favour of the critical interpretation that forms the basis of the second bullet. Integrated approaches were often seen working successfully, however, paying more or less equal attention to both bullets. The second bullet inevitably attracts much attention, and it is important that students focus on key words and distinctions in order to shape the selection of material and the structure of the argument or arguments put forward.

Some students overlooked the first bullet in favour of the second, but it is also the case that students often implicitly integrated matters to do with the first bullet into their focus on the second bullet. Examiners are encouraged to accept different approaches to the two bullets and to referencing the wider play, so long as the key command words of 'how' and 'examine' are given due attention. Students were often well prepared to reference 'elsewhere in the play' and such cross-references were often to relevant and well-chosen sections. At best this was done with precision, with a view to the structure of the play and with support from detailed reference and/or quotation despite the closed book conditions. There were a minority of responses that either ignored the extract or ignored 'elsewhere in the play'. In some answers the extract was not explored fully and analysis of Shakespeare's methods remained underdeveloped, when it could have helped answer the question.

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, some students ascribed more significance to punctuation than was justified. Punctuation might be a starting point or part of a larger discussion about methods as a means of conveying meaning, but it should not be a 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 being applied in unhelpful, sweeping statements. There is still a tendency for some students to make sweeping comments 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 approaches. Firstly, references to Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical criticism could sharpen a response if applied very specifically to one aspect of the play or question. However, when each of the stances was rehearsed by mechanical rote then the discussion became generalised and was 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, which often proved to be helpful in shaping a response to the given view.

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

- gave due weight to both bullets
- 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
- considered 'elsewhere in the play' by selecting relevant detailed references
- made considered and accurate use of context
- showed awareness of the typicality of the literature of love

Less successful Shakespeare answers:

- made sparse use of the extract
- neglected either the presentation of love or the critical interpretation
- wrote about the characters as though they were real people
- 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.

### **Question 1 *Othello***

*Othello* continues to be by far the most popular text and there was a good deal of engagement with the idea of 'confused judgements'. Students were able to concentrate on an important interaction from a crucial turning point in the play. There was much to discuss in terms of Othello's conflicted feelings when under the direct influence of Iago. 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 of confident statesmanship and love. Students were often keen to scrutinise Othello's language and verse form, his aggressive outbursts and his apparent relinquishment of responsibility to Iago as part of an argument about his tragic demise.

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

Students responded readily to the idea of Lucentio as a suitor and to the presentation of romantic ideas. Students explored the differences between the ways the more mercenary suitors are presented in the first half of the scene in contrast to Lucentio, Tranio and ideas of courtly love in the second half. Many picked up with confidence on the tropes of courtly love in Lucentio's poetry including the references to suffering and the classical allusions. Some explored the wider presentation of Lucentio, comparing the extract with some of the other comic courtship scenes where he features. Counter-arguments to the given view suggested that ultimately he fails as suitor because of his inability to tame Bianca, and he was compared unfavourably to Petruchio as the suitor the audience most enjoy and admire.

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

The first bullet led to some overstating the brotherly love apparent between Lucio and Claudio, but on the whole this question worked well and students appeared to welcome the opportunity to look

at Claudio and the idea of responsibility. There were good arguments on both sides of the given view. Some students could argue that Claudio's imagery and sentence structure suggested that he is able to accept responsibility for his fate. On the other hand, others were able to argue the opposite and cross-refer to scenes showing the extent of his reliance on Isabella to save him despite the enormous personal cost this would involve for her. Perhaps more students could have taken the opportunity to explore the extent of Claudio's dramatic function in the play and the full significance of this aspect of the plot. There were perhaps opportunities here to acknowledge the idea of responsibility in the play as a whole and how this theme affects our perceptions of the Duke, Angelo, Isabella and Mariana.

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

This question performed well. Students confidently engaged with the extract and its focus even though the central characters did not directly feature and despite the difficulty some readers and audiences might experience with the Bohemian section of the play. Students were able to focus on these young lovers as a point of contrast to the dysfunctions of the Leontes and Hermione relationship. This enabled a range of cross-references and many were able to put the extract in the context of the play's structure and final resolution, addressing the wider function of Florizel and Perdita. The natural imagery used by the two lovers was often used as a rich source of analysis, although Perdita's language with its references to sexuality and purity could have been examined further. The extract also enabled much discussion of dramatic irony with the ways the true identities of the lovers are obscured and the disguised comments of Polixenes and Camillo.

#### **Section B Poetry**

Students have a single poem to consider in this section and a single question stem. Again, in each question, the writer is named and 'presents' is used, and both should prompt candidates to look at texts as constructs. The methods prompted by 'examine' are, of course, poetic methods and it is important that named texts are treated as poems. More thoughtful responses looked closely at the narrative voice and did not simply accept the speaker as the poet writing autobiographically. Students are free to explore what methods they think are relevant so there is no obligation to analyse features such as metre and rhyme. However, if students choose to explore these methods, they are obliged to be accurate as well as to explain how these methods support meaning and are relevant to the question. In a large number of cases, there were inaccuracies such as insisting that 'The Ruined Maid' is iambic and/or a failure to make such observations relevant to the meaning of the poem and to the question.

More successful poetry answers:

- looked at the whole poem with the interpretation in mind
- supported relevant readings with specific textual details
- analysed the poet's methods by linking them to meaning, often in a tentative fashion
- 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 poem 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.

### **Question 5 AQA anthology of pre-1900 poetry ‘The Ruined Maid’**

This anthology was by far the more popular of the two and examiners reported that this question proved accessible and engaging. The question focused on the idea that rural life was inferior to town life and stronger responses kept this dichotomy and the phrase ‘love and leisure’ in clear focus. Students could easily engage with the narrative and conversational nature of the poem, making use of the poem’s structure around a series of changes apparent in ‘Melia’s life. Many knew something of Hardy and his times, and this enabled them to make links to context and typicality. The best answers recognised the irony of the poem and its use of ‘ruined’, and recognised that the poem is a social comedy with ‘Melia thoroughly enjoying her ‘ruin’ despite the condemnation of respectable Victorian society. Hardy is satirising these notions of respectability where society is apparently happy to accept the privations of the rural poor but cannot accept ‘Melia’s improvements at the expense of her reputation. The best answers recognised Hardy’s way with comedy and satire.

Some students did run into problems however. There were some who became confused about the two speakers and the nature of rural vs town life. The narrative nature of the poem led some to take a narrative approach in their own responses. Some made incorrect assertions about metre and left observations about methods without linking them to meaning. Above all, there was a strong tendency to assert that ‘Melia is a prostitute and although this reading works, it often led to the assumption that Hardy’s purpose is to present an abused and exploited woman in misery- an archetype of a huge social problem - which does not sit well with the poem’s comedy and lightness of touch. Many suggested that ‘Melia’s use of ‘ain’t’ in the last line is a reversion to her rural dialect and , therefore, some suggested indicative of her façade slipping or even her harbouring desires to return to her old life. This is a reading of ‘Melia’s language and was accepted as such, but it is perhaps just as likely that she uses the words as an aristocratic affectation.

### **Question 6 AQA anthology of post-1900 love poetry ‘Punishment’**

This anthology was less popular but still produced a wide variety of responses on which to report. Students who could demonstrate a secure grasp of Heaney’s subject matter in ‘Punishment’ often produced impressive responses. On the other hand, those who were less well prepared were

exposed by the complexities of the poem. The given view made students look closely at the narrator's attitude to the bog body and to more recent victims of tribal revenge and ritual sacrifice. The best answers kept these two time perspectives clearly in focus and traced the ways in which the narrator moves from ancient to more recent victims and then to a scrutiny of the narrator's own attitudes. The narrator's attitude to the bog body enabled students to discuss the influence of blazon style and hints of voyeurism. The modern Irish context gave an opportunity for students to demonstrate their relevant knowledge of the Troubles and practises such as tarring and feathering. Those who were aware of the religious aspect of the Troubles could examine Heaney's use of religious/Biblical vocabulary

Where students ran into difficulties it tended to be when there was confusion about the relationship between the narrator and the bog body. Some seemed unaware of the vast difference between the two time perspectives and assumed that the narrator had been in a relationship with the bog body when 'she' was alive, a misreading of several references the narrator makes to his empathy for the victim. Those who felt obliged to agree with the given view sometimes overstated the case and relied on a laboured examination of personal pronouns. Very few explored the verse form that Heaney adopts and sometimes his methods were underexplored.

### **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)
- read questions carefully and plan answers properly giving appropriate attention to command words.



**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.