

A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/2A: Texts in shared contexts: WW1 and its aftermath
Report on the Examination

7712
June 2019

Version: 1.0

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Introductory Comments

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7712/1, 7712/2B and NEA 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 for providing 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 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.

Such responses are best rewarded by 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 flexible mark scheme which aims to encourage more independent work not limited by formulaic constraints. 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.

Section A: Core set text questions

This ‘open book’ exam rewarded students who had secure knowledge of their set texts and could make well selected references to support their thinking. Students who really knew their set texts were able to make good choices and productively develop debates through well-chosen analysis. Those who had less secure knowledge of their set texts tended to resort to rehearsed responses that were not always attuned to the demands of the question and were sometimes influenced by work on questions from previous years. Students who clearly addressed all the key words of the question were able to develop relevant debates that prompted good text choices and perceptive use of context. These students impressed with engaged arguments that explored the texts in an independent way rather than relying on received, unassimilated ideas.

Students performed well when they:

- focused on all aspects of the question
- avoided using rehearsed material
- used literary analysis as a tool rather than as an end in itself
- used context as a way of developing analysis and interpretation
- developed confident, independent arguments which did not resort to mechanical, sometime irrelevant counter arguments.

Option 1 Section A: Poetry Set Text***Up the Line to Death*: ed Brian Gardner****Question 1**

This question elicited some illuminating responses from students who were prepared to explore all aspects of the debate through close consideration of the key words in the question. These responses clearly focused on the significance of ‘personal sacrifice’ and avoided more generalised discussion of the loss of life in war. Many responses confidently explored the spiritual nature of personal sacrifice in early war poems such as Brooke’s ‘Peace’ and were able to purposefully consider the imagery of personal sacrifice through considering poems such as McCrae’s ‘In Flanders Fields’. Successful responses were able to consider cultural and literary contexts such as muscular Christianity and Georgian Poetry to develop confident readings. Less effective responses tended to rely on rehearsed ideas that led to more generalised comparisons of early and late war poetry without exploring the ways in which personal sacrifice is signified. These responses failed to engage with ‘personal sacrifice’ in a detailed way and largely focused on the losses of the war.

Question 2

The most effective answers made good selections and were able to explore the presentation of the ‘hopelessness of war’ through informed, purposeful analysis. Owen’s ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ was a popular choice and allowed students to consider how ‘hopelessness’ is presented through imagery, form and voice. Less focused responses tended to consider presentations of the graphic horror of war and asserted that this reflected hopelessness. These responses tended to rely on a more fragmented approach to the poems chosen without demonstrating overview. There was a tendency for some responses to avoid considering the overall structure, meaning and voice of a poem and only focus on textual detail without any sense of overview.

Scars Upon My Heart*: ed Catherine Reilly*Question 3**

This was the less popular question choice, but elicited some thoughtful responses. Poems were well selected and allowed the view to be debated in varying ways. Many responses considered the significance of Christian imagery and recognised that many poems idealised men through presenting their death and suffering as a form of Christian sacrifice. Sharper responses also suggested that men are pitied rather than idealised in poems designed to show men as young and naïve such as Mitchell’s ‘He went for a Soldier’.

Question 4

This was by far the more popular question for this anthology and led to some interesting responses that adopted a range of approaches. Many responses pursued the ways in which remembrance is signified through poems, such as Brittain’s ‘Perhaps’ and Allen’s ‘The Wind on the Downs’ that explored personal loss. The most effective responses were able to explore the part that remembrance plays in the process of grief through considering poetic refrains and repetition. More effective responses also explored how remembrance is signified in poems such as Mew’s ‘The Cenotaph’ that explore more public acts of remembering.

Oh! What a Lovely War: Joan Littlewood**Question 7**

Oh! What a Lovely War still remains a minority core set choice and examiners only saw a very small range of responses. The few students who chose this question engaged with the debate in a confident varied way. Examiners were impressed with responses that considered the play's ability to 'challenge and subvert' through purposefully engaging with the theatrical context of the text. Such work explored the key words of the debate through detailed consideration of dramatic effects such as the ironic counterpoint of slides and news panels and the deliberate alienating effects of pierrot costume. Students clearly had secure contextual knowledge and were able to consider the significance of the play's inception in the 1960s. Less confident responses tended to 'unload' this contextual knowledge and led to some well-informed, yet generalised responses.

Question 8

This question allowed students to explore the significance of the historical figure of General Haig in the play. Many answers successfully considered Haig's significance through considering the representation of class in the military hierarchy and explored Haig's outsider status as a trigger for his inflexible strategies. All responses were able to explore how Haig's presentation within the play represents a powerful attack on the military hierarchy; the most effective answers were able to debate this through discussing specific dramatic effects such as parallel scenes and the parodying of religious language.

Journey's End: R.C. Sherriff**Question 9**

Students engaged in the debate on 'duty' in a variety of ways. Examiners were impressed by the textual knowledge and saw the majority of students making good choices in their responses. Students purposefully engaged with the nature of military duty and were able to debate this through the comparison of key characters. At times the discussion of the interplay between Hibbert and Stanhope was reductive; but the more confident answers explored how the confrontation between the two in Act II scene 2 signified duty as a collective act. The most effective answers were able to debate the differing types of duty explored in the text that moved beyond the military context and considered the personal duties reflected in the relationships between the officers.

Question 10

This was a popular question and allowed for a range of interesting responses. Textual choices were largely successful and there was some detailed work on Sherriff's presentation of the trench raid through considering the extent to which Osborne's death signifies futility. Responses to this question were wide ranging; the most effective were able to debate the extent to which the seeming 'futility' of war can be endured through humane qualities such as companionship and humour. Some examiners, however, noted that a number of responses seemed more focused on a question from the last series. Again, students should be reminded that 'answer the question' is a key message in this specification and that independent, relevant responses are always valued.

Option 3 Section A: Prose Set Text***Regeneration*: Pat Barker****Question 13**

Regeneration was the more popular prose set text and a majority of students attempted this question. Examiners were pleased with the ways in which most students engaged with the debate through focusing on the key words of the offered view. The majority of responses were able to explore Prior as a construct of the writer and there was some productive discussion of his role as a catalyst particularly in the presentation of his relationship with Rivers. Unfortunately, discussion of class was often more generalised and frequently led to some assertive discussion that moved away from a literary focus. Such responses used context as a digression rather than as a literary tool to develop more thorough understanding. There was a great deal of material available, so responses had to be selective. Some responses spent too long on class issues and missed out on other important ideas such as the importance of Prior's relationship with Sarah.

Question 14

The students who chose this question were all aware of the significance of Sassoon's declaration, but many were unable to explore how Barker uses this historical source material to investigate the nature of protest. More effective responses clearly considered Sassoon's declaration as a narrative frame for the whole text and purposefully explored how Barker uses his arrival and his departure at the end of the novel as an important structural device. The most successful responses discussed how Barker shows how Rivers comes to challenge his own assumptions about his duty, and therefore the conduct of the war. This question elicited some adventurous responses that explored and compared the 'physical' protest of mutism compared to Sassoon's 'voiced' protest.

Birdsong*: Sebastian Faulks*Question 15**

The two *Birdsong* questions were equally popular. This question allowed students to range widely through the text and examiners were impressed by the variety of responses offered. Many students focused on Stephen Wraysford and Weir and there was some excellent work on the isolating nature of war experience. Effective textual selection was a key to success in this question; less successful responses often resorted to a range of quotation only to illustrate a repeated point. The most effective responses were able to consider isolation as a way of presenting intense comradeship; there were some excellent discussions of how the isolation of the tunnels is used to highlight the significance of Stephen and Jack's relationship. A few also explored Elizabeth's sense of isolation from her ancestors and were able to reflect thoughtfully on the dual time frames of the text.

Question 16

This question again elicited a range of interesting responses, which rewarded students who were prepared to think independently and make adventurous textual choices. Most students were able to consider both physical and psychological survival, and the most effective responses developed the debate through exploring the survival of Stephen's memory and legacy at the end of the novel. Less successful responses asserted that survival was not a major concern and focused on an entirely different idea such as the horror of war. It is important to stress that the given view in a

question should be debated and not arbitrarily rejected and replaced by an unrelated theme or idea.

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

The extract taken from Nigel Farndale's *The Blasphemer* proved to be accessible to all and enabled the majority of students to explore the significance of courage in a variety of ways. The extract, focusing on troops about to 'go over the top', allowed students to engage confidently with a typical aspect of First World War literature. Successful responses avoided digressive approaches to rehearsed context and detailed references to other texts. Those who had read widely and had a secure grasp of the shared context of WW1 and its aftermath were clearly able to use this experience to their advantage. These students were able to establish an overview of the whole text and did not fall back on a narrative approach that only paraphrases the extract and 'feature spots'. Confident readers were able to use context as a literary tool and consider Andrew's naivety and the importance of his friendship with William as typical of the experience of men who were encouraged to join up together and form pals battalions.

Examiners were impressed by the range of differing interpretations of courage developed in the responses they marked. Confident responses often explored courage through considering masculine identity and were able to discuss Andrew's attempts to be 'Like a man. Like a soldier' in the context of early war attitudes. The most effective responses explored courage through thoughtfully examining the narrative perspective of the extract and examined the ways in which Andrew's thoughts, memories and actions are all typical of combat experience. Many responses confidently explored the typical reference to rats in the passage and considered how far they represented Andrew's own fears and insecurities. The majority of responses were able to discuss the significance of the final minor sentence 'Dogs responding to a whistle' in a detailed way and were able to consider courage in terms of military training that reduces men to animal responses.

More successful prose unseen responses:

- were built on careful, detailed reading of the extract
- were fully focused on the significance of courage
- set a clear overview on the significance of courage through considering the extract as a whole
- used context as a way of developing literary interpretation
- used literary analysis as a tool to consider the significance of courage

Less successful prose unseen responses:

- lacked planning
- considered only disparate textual details and rarely had a sense of the extract as a whole
- Resorted to feature-spotting
- Unloaded pre-planned sections on context and typicality that lacked relevance
- Considered other texts in a digressive way, rather than keeping the focus on the extract.

Section B: Questions 6, 12, 18

Students who produced successful responses to this question confidently engaged with the comparative nature of the task and did not just focus on similarities, but explored the differences of their chosen texts from different genres. Confident textual knowledge is key here and the students who were clearly well prepared were able to choose productive links and textual detail rather than

overloading their answers with thematic points that only served to illustrate rather than explore the nature of courage.

The most confident responses clearly considered the form and characteristics of the chosen texts rather than just the content and thematic links. Thoughtful consideration of poetic, narrative and dramatic methods allowed students to develop more precise points about the significance of courage. Many responses were also able to use context as a useful literary tool through considering the difference between early and late war attitudes to courage and combat experience. Some purposeful writing compared the home front conception of courage compared to the reality of the front line combat. Again, the most effective responses focused on literary methods and examiners were impressed by confident answers that considered the juxtaposition of scenes in *My Boy Jack*, for example. In less successful responses, the consideration of the home front drifted into more generalised contextual discussion of patriotism and propaganda that moved away from the chosen texts.

Astutely chosen textual references and a confident grasp of structure and form were key when discussing prose texts. Many examiners felt that too many responses resorted to selecting textual detail to illustrate examples of courage rather than explore its significance. Students who were able to make good textual choices and focused on both differences and similarities often produced more successful responses. Examiners were impressed by work that compared differing characterisations in prose and drama texts. Comparing Paisley from *A Long Long Way* and Stanhope from *Journey's End*, for example, allowed a number of responses to debate the significance of courage in some perceptive, detailed ways.

More successful comparative responses:

- focused on both similarities and differences between their chosen texts
- established well supported links between the two texts
- always focused on the significance of courage
- were always alert to the differences between genres
- developed a secure overarching thesis on the significance of courage
- wrote succinctly.

Less successful comparative responses:

- struggled to compare and largely focused on narrative similarities between texts
- developed misguided readings in an attempt to answer the question
- tended to paraphrase particularly when discussing prose texts
- unloaded pre-planned analyses that often lacked relevance
- failed to integrate contextual points into literary analysis
- wrote lengthy answers that tended to narrate and illustrate rather than debate and analyse.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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