

A-LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

7712/2B Texts in shared contexts: Modern times: Literature from 1945 to
the present day
Report on the Examination

7712
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Introductory Comments

This report should be read in conjunction with the other reports on 7712 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.

This summer's examination paper proved highly accessible to students. Only a very few rubric infringements were seen, and it was noted by many examiners that this year's responses seemed increasingly confident and enthusiastic. However, a tiny minority of responses made irrelevant comparative references to Shakespeare plays and other literature, presumably studied for 7712/1. These could not possibly shed any light on the post-1945 shared context examined here, but in general, it was evident that centres had prepared their students very well for the demands of the paper.

Section A - Option 1: Poetry Set Texts

The poetry set text questions gave rise to some vigorous and enjoyable writing, with most responses showing confidence in locating a productive debate. Where there was less good practice was in the crucial consideration of the key words of the question. In order for responses to be credited for demonstrating excellent knowledge and understanding they must answer the question set, rather than a preferred alternative.

Some responses commented mechanically and at length on learned elements of poetic method rather than analysing how these methods might aid the presentation of the task's central premise. The vast majority used two or three poems, and very few wrote about so many that their answers disintegrated into a list. Finally, it must be remembered that both the poetry set texts for this unit are collections, not anthologies. Some responses used these terms interchangeably, thus signalling a failure to understand that poets plan, design and structure their texts just as carefully as novelists and dramatists do. These collections are coherent bodies of work put together by the

poets themselves; anthologies are much broader selections put together by editors. The implications here are profound in terms of what students can say about the overall design and purpose of *Feminine Gospels* and *Skirrid Hill*.

***Feminine Gospels* by Carol Ann Duffy**

Question 1

The central premise of this question elicited some high quality responses that challenged the terms of the debate with gusto.

Many responses looked at poems that suggest Duffy indeed presents female empowerment as straightforwardly linear and wholly progressive. They also looked at those which present modern women as still suffering in contextually different, but nonetheless highly damaging ways, e.g. through consumerism or media representations of beauty. Particularly excellent work was seen on 'The Laughter of Stafford Girls' High', 'White Writing', 'Sub', 'History', 'Anon', 'The Diet', 'Beautiful' and 'The Woman Who Shopped'. Several other poems worked very well too.

In terms of methods, the most effective responses looked at broader issues of genre and structure and showed a conceptualised understanding of the collection as a whole. Less effective responses tended to 'go through' a checklist of minor lexical and even grammatical points that were unconvincingly linked to the actual question set. Generically assertive and bland claims about commas, lists and/or enjambment 'speeding up' or 'slowing down' the pace of a poem should be discouraged. A far more productive approach is to locate the heart of the given view and assess the extent to which it can be helpfully applied to the whole collection.

Question 2

This, the less popular Duffy question, also produced some very effective responses. Students engaged productively with the view that the poems in the final section are indeed more personal and autobiographical than those that come earlier. They argued that they are nevertheless in tune with the collection's overarching themes, reflecting the notion that the 'personal is political'. The poems about women writing ('A Dreaming Week', 'Gambler' and 'White Writing') were often seen as blending the personal and the political with their focus upon issues of gender, sexuality, identity and equality.

The poems about motherhood were neatly linked back to 'The Long Queen' in their matriarchal focus and fairy-tale imagery. 'White Writing', 'Wish' and 'The Cord' were seen to reflect the changing roles and responsibilities of women over time. Less successful responses tended to 'go through' poems that they didn't seem to know very well, and did not show a keen awareness of the design of the whole collection.

***Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers**

Question 3

The two Sheers questions were equally popular and they gave rise to some very high quality responses. This question's focus on the presentation of women in *Skirrid Hill* allowed students to write about how women of all ages and in several different contexts are portrayed undergoing various emotions, experiences, difficulties and challenges in poems such as 'Amazon' and 'L.A. Evening'.

Others analysed how aspects of male/female relationships are presented in 'Drinking With Hitler', 'Keyways', 'Marking Time', 'Joseph Jones', 'Night Windows', 'Show', 'Inheritance', 'Valentine', 'Stitch in Time' and 'Winter Swans'. Less successful responses tended to 'go through' poems that they did not have an in-depth understanding of. These responses were unable to distinguish between Sheers the poet and Sheers the man. While speculative and assertive admonishments of the writer as 'sexist' revealed a limited approach to text and task, on the whole many enjoyable responses were seen that worked well. These were impressively linked to an analysis of Sheers' possible concerns and poetic methods.

Examiners remarked upon the widespread inaccurate use of the possessive apostrophe, with the incorrect form *Sheer's* becoming increasingly common.

Question 4

This task resulted in some particularly interesting, perceptive and well-structured responses. Some poems were generally seen as character vignettes, e.g. 'Drinking With Hitler', 'Joseph Jones', 'L.A. Evening' and 'Amazon'. There were also some excellent responses that foregrounded Sheers' interest in characters within relationships as presented in 'On Going', 'Four Movements in the Scale of Two', 'Winter Swans' etc. Some of the most effective responses analysed poems suggesting that Sheers is equally interested in both character and place and consciously blends these themes in, for example, 'The Steelworks', 'Inheritance', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'Border Country' and 'Skirrid Hill'.

Section A - Option 2: Drama Set Texts

***A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams**

Question 7

Many responses showed an impressive understanding of the significance of the unseen characters of Allan Grey and Shep Huntleigh, although there was less clarity over the possible dramatic function of the latter. More effective responses noted that as Shep and Allan are present only in Blanche's memory and imagination, they strongly contrast with the real-life Stanley and Mitch. These responses asserted that characters may be seen to illustrate the changing society and values of the American South just after World War II.

Allan was confidently identified as a signifier for Blanche's haunted past (signalled by the onset of the Varsouviana polka tune), but very few responses acknowledged the symbolism of Shep's affiliation to the elite Alpha Tau Omega college fraternity which aimed to unify North and South after the Civil War, and his positioning as an old-school Southern 'beau'. Strong writing was seen about Williams' use of the unseen characters to create powerful dramatic and symbolic effects. Responses identified Allan as representing the primal sexual trauma that sent Blanche spiralling into despair. They saw Shep as representing what she sees as her last hope of escape from Elysian Fields, 'a cruise of the Caribbean on a yacht' with a Texas oil millionaire. Some high quality responses noted the possibility that Shep may be seen as a figment of Blanche's imagination.

Question 8

Some very successful responses were seen to this question that acknowledged the tragic conflict of loyalties facing Stella Kowalski at the end of the play. Many students wrote perceptively about Williams' presentation of Stella as trapped in an impossible situation. They then noted the

significance of Eunice reassuring Stella that she had no choice but to disbelieve Blanche's accusation of rape to stay with the father of her baby. Stella is trapped by her gender and broader socio-economic powerlessness, as much as by her passion for Stanley.

Less effective responses treated the characters almost as if they were real people, and took Blanche's attempts to turn Stella against Stanley as fully justifying Stella's 'betrayal'. More effective responses dealt subtly with the play's representation of Blanche as a faded Southern belle. They argued that this reflects Williams's commitment to dramatising the South, and how the uncomfortable truth of the charge of cultural decline Blanche levels at Stanley may suggest that Stella has changed for the worse through her exposure to life in the Quarter.

Some very good work was seen that reflected an astute awareness of Blanche's function as an emblem of the declining South. Responses at this level noted the subsequent positioning of Stella as having to make a forced choice between the past her sister represents and the new post-war future symbolised by Stanley.

Top Girls by Caryl Churchill

Question 9

Most students who wrote about *Top Girls* chose this question and tended to write very well about the play's implicit criticisms of Thatcher and Thatcherism.

Excellent work was seen that acknowledged Churchill's presentation of the difficulties women faced when the play was first performed. Students saw these difficulties as still very relevant today. Some students wrote with real insight about Marlene's admirable rise to the top of her chosen business in defiance of the odds stacked against her. They also discussed Churchill's implied criticisms of Margaret Thatcher and the capitalist model of powerful women as selfish loners or 'hollow' careerists.

Others wrote about the conversations Marlene has with potential employees about the problems of combining a career with marriage and children. They noted that when the play was first performed, and possibly to this day, a man would not have faced the same tough choices as Marlene about combining parenthood and a career.

Many effective responses analysed the experiences of the dinner party guests, tracing connections between the women from the past and those located within the 1980s context who also suffer mistreatment, disaster and disempowerment. The most effective responses, of course, never lost sight of the text as drama.

Question 10

This was very much a marginal question choice, but the responses seen tended to be very effective. More effective responses often discussed how Marlene and Joyce are used to symbolise the great political and cultural debate of the 1980s. They saw Marlene as espousing classically Thatcherite views about the primacy of the individual and Joyce taking a socialist perspective, defending the traditional working class. Strong writing was seen that unpicked the way in which Marlene is presented as believing in self-help and self-improvement, expressing contempt for the cultural values of the working class. Meanwhile, Joyce defaces Rolls Royces to express her hatred of the rich. Effective points were made about Churchill's dramatisation of the sisters' different feelings for their father. Marlene was seen as despising him as a violent drunken 'bastard' while

Joyce views his problems as stemming from his difficult and disadvantaged socio-economic background.

Section A Option 3: Prose Set Texts

***Waterland* by Graham Swift**

Question 13

Of the small number of responses seen to this text, the general level was impressive. More successful responses wrote effectively about the significance of Swift's presentation of the hidden (and often horrific, Gothic and surreal) world of the Fens and its inhabitants, complete with incest, inbreeding and domestic violence. They discussed how narrator Tom Crick sees the key events of his life as defined by his growing up in the isolated rural Fens in the 1940s.

As so often with this text, Swift's development of Crick's narrative voice, and the text's subtle interleaving of past and present, were analysed with insight and interest.

Question 14

This question, which attracted a small number of responses, invited students to write about the relationship between the streetwise 1980s teenager, Price, and his teacher, Tom Crick. Relevant aspects of the text included the role of Price and the rest of the history class and Crick as a dispeller of ignorance, and possibly innocence, in the young through his analysis of past events.

Students covered some areas effectively, such as the significance of the extra-curricular meeting between Price and Crick in the pub, and the teacher's explanation of his personal beliefs. In addition, Crick's ultimate abandonment of the mainstream history syllabus in favour of a more personal kind of history was also covered effectively. Once again, those who wrote about this text tended to analyse Swift's post-modern narrative with insight and flair.

The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood

Question 15

Many effective responses were seen to this very popular Atwood question, which focused on the writer's presentation of Moira. Less successful responses tended to 'go through' a rather listy and generic character study or digress into writing about Offred, but on the whole most responses were clear and well-focused.

Good work was seen on Atwood's presentation of Moira as an individualist rebel who is far more aware of what the regime is up to than the narrator, and her role in informing Offred of what is really going on both before and after the Gileadean coup. Many students saw Moira's lesbianism and feminism as significant in making her, by definition, a Gileadean 'Unwoman'. They also saw the humour and excitement in her resistance to the regime. Some very astute responses analysed how Atwood uses Janine to emphasise Moira's bravery, such as Janine's satisfaction in fulfilling her core mission as a Handmaid and becoming pregnant, set against Moira's conscious decision to become a Jezebel.

Question 16

While this Atwood task attracted fewer responses than Question 15, those who chose it tended to write very well about the function of the Historical Notes in this postmodern text. The way in which the Historical Notes confirm that Offred escaped the regime was analysed with skill and perception, as was the extent to which Pieixoto's research confirms or aligns with many of the elements contained within Offred's narrative. Atwood's analysis of the limitations of academic discourse, as Pieixoto undercuts the subjective 'truth' of Offred's 'herstory' in favour of male 'history', was written about extremely well. Likewise, the significance of the last line of the novel, addressed to the audience at the conference by Pieixoto, 'Are there any questions?' was discussed very effectively.

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

Essential to success in this question is for students to have undertaken sufficient practice in unseen critical analysis of prose texts. They must then avoid extraneous references to other texts when instructed to write about the significance of the given theme of cultural differences 'in this extract'.

More effective responses engaged enthusiastically and skilfully with this modern text and found plenty of illuminating things to say about Tyler's narrative methods. The most effective responses were distinguished effectively between Tyler's third person narrative stance and the manner in which the events were at times focalised through Maryam, Ziba and Sami Yazdan. The correct identification of Tyler's shifting narrative point of view was crucial to this task, especially the movement between Maryam's long stretches of dialogue and the description of the slightly distanced viewpoint of her daughter-in-law Ziba.

The minority of responses unable to recognise Tyler's narrative viewpoint were disadvantaged from the outset, since correctly ascertaining this opened up the overall balanced and sympathetic tone of the extract. It was always a problem to get back on track when this core aspect of the text was misunderstood.

Less successful responses with an insecure grasp of context and typicality tended to assert moral messages about Maryam's dilemma with regard to marrying Dave Donaldson. However, accusing a fictional character or the writer themselves of 'racism' or 'stereotyping', and offering well-meaning advice on how to be more 'open-minded', is a self-limiting approach to literary-critical analysis

Hazy assertions about Iran being 'a backward third world country' and digressive speculation about extra-textual aspects, such as Maryam's possible relationship with her deceased first husband, added little.

The most effective responses analysed in detail Tyler's presentation of two generations of a family discussing a life-changing decision, viewed very differently by the participants depending on their social and cultural perspectives. Sami and Ziba Yazdan were seen as sympathetic to Dave's attempts to honour Iranian culture, and Maryam was seen as resenting him as both suffocating and patronising. Perceptive points were made about how Tyler uses the typical dilemma about assimilation/integration at the personal level of Maryam's relationship with Dave. These points were used to tap into a much broader debate about cultural differences. Some sharp and astute comments were made about Tyler's subtle use of comedy to depict generational and cultural conflict.

Section B - Questions 6, 12, 18

To connect texts successfully within the framework of this question, students need to remember that they have been instructed to compare and contrast the presentation of the given theme - cultural differences - across two texts from different genres. Sometimes, students did not take full advantage of exploring these differences. The least effective responses almost always insisted that their comparative set texts dealt with the given theme in 'very similar' ways. Yet when comparing any two of the three genres of poetry, prose and drama, it is almost certainly more productive to acknowledge how different they are before going on to unpick and exploit those differences. The focus of the response should be on presentation, not content; the 'how' rather than the 'what'.

More successful responses worked through thoughtfully developed links in terms of cultural differences which focused on how the writers' poetic, narrative or dramatic methods worked. Less successful responses tended to offload preconceived ideas about context and typicality without successfully relating them to the given theme. A few defaulted to recycling essays they had presumably written in class about 'isolation' – the theme to be found in the SAMs materials for this unit – or 'insecurity' – which featured in the 2017 paper - or the 2018 theme of 'conflict'. Rehashing ideas cannot produce a strong and fresh answer that successfully addresses the new topic.

At times, bolted-on contextual detail swamped the chosen texts. Digressions into potted histories of various waves of feminism or the struggle for civil rights, for example, are firmly discouraged.

Moreover, students who wish to use linguistic terminology should ensure that they get the basics right. There were numerous confident identifications of a specific part of speech in which 'the adjective' was in fact a noun or adverb.

On the whole, however, many excellent comparative essays were seen that analysed how each text represented the theme of cultural differences in terms of attitudes, beliefs, values, norms and ethics. Truly original connections were traced across the chosen texts in relation to a wide variety of possible issues and areas that might give rise to cultural differences, including gender, class, race, sexuality, religion and nationality. Some responses compared how specific characters within their texts respond to cultural differences in various ways, and acknowledged how cultural differences may be viewed very differently over time.

As with this type of very open question in previous examination series, the most effective responses here were simply outstanding and illuminated the chosen comparative texts in innovative, complex and intelligent ways.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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