



A LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Paper 1 Love through the ages
Report on the Examination

7712
June 2018

Version 1.0

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General Remarks

This report should be read in conjunction with the reports on 7711/2A/2B 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.

Component 1 Love through the ages

There were many indicators of the success in this 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.

Students also did well where they avoided:

- ‘bolting on’ contextual knowledge, rather than finding 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 paper and that the paper made reasonable expectations of candidates.

In this second 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.

A properly assimilated historicist approach involves more than simply using a lot of historical context. Knowledge about historical context was best applied to make precise and specific observations that were relevant and that illuminated the question. With critical contexts, there were two clear observations. Firstly, references to Marxist, feminist and psychoanalytical criticism sharpened responses where it was applied very specifically to one aspect of a text 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 text. Secondly, where specific named critics were referenced, this could focus the argument in a helpful way. On the other hand, students who led with their own considered and informed critical opinions could also come across as impressively independent readers not afraid to take a clear stance on the question.

To engage with texts in detail involves analytical scrutiny of methods. However, examiners reported an unhelpful tendency to ascribe more significance than could be justified to punctuation and to literary tropes such as enjambement and the use of caesurae. Punctuation and such literary tropes might be part of a larger discussion about methods as a means of conveying meaning, but it was unhelpful where students saw these features as the primary focus and as ends in themselves. Whatever methods were under discussion, analysis worked best when students linked methods to meanings and explained the rationale, rather than relying on assertions about the possible effects of methods.

At 3 hours this is a long and demanding examination. Where responses were excessively long, sometimes over several answer booklets/additional pages, students would often have benefited from more careful reading, planning and taking due time to compose well-crafted responses, rather than hurrying to write longer answers. Examiners often reflected on how much the success of answers came down to showing careful and judicious choices, and appropriate time should be spent on this skill. The best scripts were those that wrote selectively and succinctly to answer the questions within the confines of twelve pages.

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 often proved illuminating where they were closely linked to the extract or some other aspect of the play relevant to the question. When referring to historical context, more accurate students 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. However, examiners recognise that Elizabethan values and social structures prevailed into the Jacobean period.

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 be treated in the same way and have a comparable quality of life. Similarly, it seems unlikely and perhaps simplistic to assume that an Elizabethan or Jacobean audience would be 'shocked' to see atypical representations, and yet this was a frequent conclusion.

Question 1 *Othello*

Othello was by far the most popular text and most students relished the opportunity to discuss the relationship between the genders. The best answers were scrupulous in keeping the focus on men's control of women rather than allowing the discussion to become a more diffuse debate about gender attitudes, power etc. The extract is from relatively early on in the tragic arc of the drama and this enabled students to look ahead to the deterioration of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona and also at Othello's fall. The scene has much dramatic impact with the very public display of affection from the lovers as the play's geographic setting suddenly shifts and politically things take a sudden turn with news of the Turkish fleet. Iago's and Roderigo's conversation is another shift - from public to private, poetry to prose, love to subterfuge.

Those who constructed counter-arguments were keen to argue that Othello is not controlling Desdemona in the extract; his eloquent praise of her is quite the contrary. On the other hand, those in support of the given view argued that even in Othello's fulsome praise of her, there are subtle and sometimes explicit hints that Othello is clearly complicit in a controlling patriarchy. Both approaches often paid close and careful attention to Othello's speeches beginning 'It gives me wonder...' and 'Come, let's to the castle...'. Likewise, students looked at the interplay of adjacency pairs and shared iambics between Othello and Desdemona. Thorough responses noted the two-part nature of this extract and considered Iago's contribution to the control debate. Some argued that it is the cynical misogyny in evidence here that corrupts not only Othello but all the men in the play. Close reading of Iago's ways of describing Othello and Desdemona and his use of imagery proved effective support for such a view. Further to this, many went to argue that men also seek to control of other men.

To access the wider play, students either referred back to Brabantio's conflicts with Desdemona and the lovers in the Senate or forward to reference the abuse and murders of Emilia and Desdemona. 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 Greek terminology and

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

Question 2 The Taming of the Shrew

This question focused on surreptitious ways in which women can assert themselves and on the character of Bianca, rather than Katherina. It was highly specific, in other words, and was approached with enthusiasm by students keen to discuss gender politics from the standpoints the question provided. The scene is rich in dramatic irony for the audience and a source of much visual and verbal comedy. Successful answers understood in detail the intricacies of what was going on and, in particular, Bianca's knowing roles in the two farcically conflated lessons. There were some excellent arguments put forward in support of the given view about her degree of control here, and particularly her use of imperatives. Some answers dealt impressively with Bianca's intellectual mastery of the situation as well as the force of personality which enables her to keep her tutor-suitors in their place.

Many referenced her transition from passive trophy-girlfriend early in the play to emerging as the real shrew of the piece - so the argument went - by the end of the play. Some responses contrasted Katherina's final speech with Bianca's to make this point. Counter-arguments tended to put forward the view that, comic flourishes aside, she is still dominated by the patriarchy throughout the extract and the rest of the play. Rather than set-piece speeches, a feature of the extract is the rapid interplay of turns and conversations that work on more than one level at once. More confident students were able to navigate successfully through these exchanges to reach Bianca's concluding verdict on her experience.

Question 3 Measure for Measure

There were fewer responses to this text but they were often engaged. The extract is from only one of two scenes dealing with this crucial strand of this subplot: Claudio presses Lucio to put his case to Isabella in Act One and this scene is the subsequent confrontation where the full complexities of the dilemma are explored. So, even though the scene involves just a conversation between two siblings, it is a matter of life and death to Claudio and a matter of faith and honour to Isabella. The best responses appreciated the highly-charged nature of the confrontation. Arguments in support of the given view stressed Isabella's intransigent language, particularly the way she turns on Claudio in the speech beginning 'O you beast!' and her final line: 'Tis best that thou diest quickly.' Students pointed out the irony of a Christian nun being apparently so lacking in mercy for her own brother. Such arguments also tended to put the sympathetic case for Claudio and concentrated on the extraordinary nature of his speech beginning 'Ay, but to die...' which conveys his fear of death so graphically. Other arguments put the case for Isabella and pointed out the way in which she offers to lay down 'but my life...as frankly as a pin', yet she cannot compromise on her virginity. Later in the play, of course, she is one of the architects of the bed-trick as a means of saving Claudio's life and not sacrificing her honour. As points of cross-reference, students tended to reference the earlier subplot scene, the denouement of the play and scenes where more or less sympathetic aspects of Isabella's character are in evidence.

Question 4 The Winter's Tale

There were fewer responses to this text but those were often of high quality. Students welcomed the opportunity to address the central issue of jealousy in relation to the presentation of Leontes'

character and how far this affects audience sympathy. The dramatic impact of this extract has much to do with how relatively quickly the harmony of Leontes' court has broken down. Furthermore, immediately prior to Leontes' entrance, the scene is one of domestic good humour with Mamillius invited to tell a story. These factors give the extract a considerable charge of tension. Mamillius is now used as an emotional football between warring husband and wife in a very public court scene. Leontes uses this forum to launch a venomous attack on his wife and, in response, Hermione gives a dignified defence. The best answers were aware of these undercurrents and used them to show an understanding of how the extract might be presented on stage. Those arguing in support of the given view made close use of Leontes' several turns here to exemplify the unpleasant nature of his attack. There are several earlier and later exchanges with Hermione, Polixenes and Paulina that students referenced in support of such arguments. Other arguments put the case for Leontes by pointing out how sympathy for him is perhaps earned over the full time-span of the play's action and by the redemptive process culminating in Act Five.

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, ie 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 or neglected a substantial section of it
- 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 inherent in the term 'significance' and a part of the main command stem of the question, and a specific question focus. Students can be 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 give students sufficient subject matter and methods with which to engage and they are sufficiently similar to enable comparison as well as contrast. It is of fundamental importance, then,

that students select points and support appropriately rather than attempting to deal with everything. This questions challenge is that these are untaught texts and minimal context is provided.

Question 5

The question focused on the significance of parting in two poems written from the point of view of soldiers going off to war. As used widely in the specification in general and in question setting in particular, 'significance' is meant in the semiotic sense of being invested with meaning. Just as with an explicit quotation, it encodes a critical view. In the context of this question, it proposes to students that parting has been invested with meanings by these two poets and invites students to consider what those meanings might be.

Many took the view that the parting was a more profound experience for the speaker of 'Goodbye' than it was for the speaker of 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars'. It was often successfully argued by students that the speaker in Lewis's poem thinks and feels deeply and addresses their farewell with tenderness and sincerity. The poem was seen as declaration of love whatever the future might hold. In support of this reading, students referred to the following aspects of Lewis's poem: the terms of endearment used; the sense of unity created by the use of 'we' and 'our'; the fact that the speaker quotes his lover directly allowing her to have her say; intimacies such as kissing and 'lying down together'; the shared memories; the 'nameless fears' of parting in stanza five; the savouring of every detail of this last evening; the evocation of spiritual love implied in stanzas six and seven; and the love tokens of the ring and the sewed-on patches in the final stanza. To support the complementary view that Lovelace's speaker has a very different attitude, students referred to the following aspects of the poem: the brevity of the poem; the speaker's apparent dismissal of Lucasta's protests; the apparently flippant and insensitive way in which war is presented to her as a rival 'mistress'; the speaker's confession that his new faith is 'stronger'; the speaker's preoccupation with himself, as exemplified by his use of first person singular; the bracketing of terms of endearment making them seem like patronising flattery; the apparent arrogance of the speaker's assertion that Lucasta 'shall adore' him for his 'inconstancy'; and the final paradox which seems designed for wit rather than sincerity.

Other arguments put the case for the speaker in Lovelace's poem by exploring the humour and Cavalier wit, by taking the speaker's terms of endearment and protestations of love at face value and by praising his commitment to honour and the fighting cause. Many tried to explore other possible contexts for 'Goodbye' but stronger answers read the contextual clues in the talk of separation, reference to battledress, the poet's dates and the juxtaposition with 'To Lucasta, Going to the Wars'. Some resisted the war context in Lovelace, however, and insisted that the war references in the poem are part of a conceit about infidelity. The latter approach did not help in making connections with 'Goodbye'.

More successful poetry answers:

- looked in each case at the whole poems with the interpretation/question focus 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 speakers as constructs
- 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 such as rhyme and metre 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 and/or literary methods to do with verse form.

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 incorporates 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 if 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. By far the most studied novel was *The Great Gatsby* and a full range of work was seen on this text. *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Rebecca* and *Atonement* also featured strongly with some particularly sophisticated work emerging on the three latter texts. More work was seen this year on *The Awakening*. *The Go-Between*, *Persuasion* and *Room with a View* remain minority choices.

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 the precise question. Such answers concentrated on sustained comparison rather than dealing with texts separately. Examiners also reported that students sometimes appeared to be answering another question (a question from last year's paper, the Sample Assessment Materials or a practice question set by the school) or shaping to fit a previously written answer.

The two questions were both popular but perhaps slightly more wrote about Question 7. Examiners reported that it was striking how much the success of an answer depended upon the choices made. Many made judicious choices and their arguments flowed smoothly. Perhaps the most crucial choice was which poems to include. Many students made their task harder by choosing poems that really did not lend themselves to the chosen question focus.

Question 6

The question focused on ‘ideas about enduring love’ and this wording lent itself to different interpretations and lines of enquiry. As expected, many chose to interpret ‘enduring’ as sustainable and achieving longevity. However, others chose to interpret it in the sense of causing suffering and requiring fortitude. Some considered both ideas together and offered a variety of ideas across the novel and the chosen poems.

Intelligible arguments were made to accommodate a variety of literary scenarios: happy or unhappy, requited or unrequited. A whole range of relationships were considered as enduring in one way or another, regardless of the ultimate outcome of the relationship. It was common to see Gatsby’s love for Daisy, for example, or the speaker’s love for Cynara in ‘Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae’ as enduring even though the protagonists are ultimately solitary figures struggling with their obsessions. Those who chose to argue that, for example, the speaker in ‘Who so list to hount I knowe where there is an hynde’ has enduring love because he sustains the ‘chase’ for some time may have posed themselves more of a challenge but such arguments were possible if the argument and the choice of supporting textual evidence was well handled. It was a common approach for students to choose poems that established an ideal of enduring love against which other relationships might be measured. Many used ‘Sonnet 116’ in this way and some used ‘Timer’ in a similar way. *Atonement* lent itself to discussing the presentation of Robbie and Cecilia’s in various ways. This novel is unique in allowing students to make the point that in Briony’s fiction their love prevails, but in McEwan’s fiction they never re-unite and their outcome is tragic. A similar argument was sometimes made about this text for Question 7. Those who tried to argue that some of the Metaphysical and Cavalier poems in the Pre-1900 anthology worked as examples of enduring love were often unsuccessful and these were, more often than not, unhelpful choices. Some drifted away from love to look at other kinds of endurance but, again, this was an unhelpful approach. The best responses sustained a coherent stance on ‘enduring love’, articulated the extent to which the phrase applied to the chosen texts and maintained this approach across the texts.

Question 7

The question focused on the ‘loss of love’ proved to be a very popular question. The best answers chose texts where love, in a defined way, is established but then lost, either temporarily or permanently. Many wrote effortlessly on this theme about their chosen novel and managed to give a meaningful overview of chosen relationships as well as exemplifying loss in detail. The best answers tended to identify the cause(s) for or the effect(s) of love as a way of linking texts about loss together. Some less successful answers strayed away from love into other kinds of loss. Other less successful responses chose inappropriate poems and tried to argue, for example, that Marvell’s speaker in ‘To His Coy Mistress’ or Donne’s speaker in ‘The Flea’ experience loss when even lust is not fulfilled, let alone love established and then lost. ‘She Walks in Beauty’ was often cited in answers but few could convincingly argue for its relevance. Many poems were well chosen and analysed relevantly. Poems that were made to work particularly well included: ‘For My Lover, Returning the His Wife’, ‘Vergissmeinnicht’, ‘One Flesh’, ‘Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae’ and ‘Ae Fond Kiss’.

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.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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