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# A-LEVEL ENGLISH LITERATURE B

7717/C Theory and Independence  
Report on the Examination

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7717  
2017

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This was the first submission for the non-exam assessment (NEA) and moderators saw lots of work that was lively, engaging and interesting. Many centres had fully embraced the requirements and spirit of the unit and encouraged their students to read critically and independently. All sections of the critical anthology proved to be popular, with many centres encouraging their students to choose which set of critical ideas they were most interested in. When the students had ownership of their work it was invariably fresh and original and showed evidence of real engagement.

Features of this summer's submission that merit praise are:

- the range of challenging texts that some students studied. Moderators reported seeing a diverse range of texts, including works by Kafka, T.S.Eliot, Donne, Pope, Lawrence and Dryden as well as more contemporary writers, such as Coetzee, Mantel, Carey and Swift
- the range of texts that was often seen across a centre's submission, clearly indicating that students had been encouraged to do independent, wider reading in preparation for this unit
- the way many students fully engaged with the critical anthology and used critical ideas to shape their reading of the literary text
- the level of independence shown by many students.

In addition the vast majority of the administration was very good and most teachers applied the mark scheme accurately, although there was a slight tendency on the part of some to put band 4 work (characterised by the word "thorough") into band 5 ("perceptive").

As this was the first submission for this unit there are invariably some areas which would benefit from further guidance and clarification.

### **Clarification on text choice**

#### **General Guidance**

The NEA folder must contain one piece of work on a prose text and one piece of work on a poetry text. All texts must be suitable for A level study. Students are not permitted to use any of the texts on this specification's A level papers for this unit, regardless of whether they themselves have studied that text. It is however acceptable to study a text by the same author, so *Sense and Sensibility* is permitted but not *Emma* (as it is on the Comedy paper).

Where a single poem appears on an exam paper but not the rest of the collection it comes from the collection can be used but students must not write about the poem that is on the exam paper. For example, *The World's Wife* is permitted but students cannot write about *Mrs Sisyphus* as it is on the Comedy paper. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* however is not permissible as the whole collection is on Paper 2B.

One of the AS only texts can be used for this unit if centres wish to do this - either *Wise Children* or *The Remains of the Day* or the Hardy poetry collection or the Betjeman collection.

### **Prose text**

Most candidates chose to study a novel for this part of the unit, although it is permissible to write about a single authored collection of short stories. Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* was a popular choice amongst those who chose to do short stories, although moderators also saw interesting work on other authors such as Poe, Conan Doyle and Hardy. If a student chooses to use short stories for the prose element of the unit they must study the whole collection and then write about at least two short stories in their work.

### **Poetry text**

Students may either study one longer poem or a collection of single authored poems for the poetry part of the unit. There is no absolute rule as to how long a poem has to be to make it long enough to study alone but as a general guide it should be a poem that is long enough to merit being published on its own, for example *The Rape of the Lock*, *The Waste Land* or a Canterbury Tale. If studying a collection of poems students should either study a named collection, such as *The World's Wife* or *The Whitsun Weddings*, or a substantial body of poetry that enables the students to gain a good understanding of the poet and their work. The poetry collections on the exam papers are a good guide as to how much poetry is required to be studied. If doing a conventional response to poetry students must write about at least two poems but if doing a re-creative piece it is possible to base that on one poem. It is worth noting however that many students this summer felt they needed to refer to more than two poems in order to fully address the task they had been set and to give them enough material to develop their line of argument.

### **Suitability for A level**

Advisers received many enquiries during the course of the year about whether a text was suitable for A level study. Some texts are very uncontroversial in this respect, being obviously canonical and 'worthy'. As a general rule we would not view texts that are commonly studied lower down the school curriculum to be suitably challenging for this unit but there may be circumstances where a teacher deems them to be the most appropriate choice for individual students. Teachers and students are often a bit more uncertain about contemporary texts. The decision as to whether a text is suitable ultimately lies with the teacher as they know their students and can judge what is an appropriate level of challenge for them. If the member of staff is happy that the student will be able to cover the AOs, meet the criteria, apply the critical ideas and produce a piece of work that allows them to fulfil their potential then that suggests the text has sufficient worth to be studied for this unit.

### **Use of the Critical Anthology**

During the course of producing their NEA assignments students must fully engage with two areas of the critical anthology. The vast majority of students did this by reading their prose text through one critical lens and their poetry text through another. It is permissible to use more than two sets of critical ideas in the folder if a student wishes to do so.

Each section of the anthology has a range of extracts, incorporating different ideas and providing different levels of challenge to students. It is not necessary to use all of the ideas in any given

section of the anthology, students can select those that most interest them and which are most applicable to the text and task they are working on.

## **Task Setting**

### **Conventional tasks**

The tasks that seemed to work best this summer were those that were based around AO5 (debate). Centres may find it useful to look at the questions on the exam papers when devising tasks for the NEA as these are all carefully constructed to address the assessment objectives. Teachers should take care that the debate or argument that is being asked for is a genuine one, ie that there is a point to be debated and a line of argument can be developed. Some students struggled to develop a line of argument in their work because they had either been asked to effectively describe an element of the text or were asked to what extent they agreed with a point that was fairly incontrovertible. This most often happened when students were asked to do a feminist reading of a feminist text or a Marxist reading of a Marxist text. There is more for the students to explore and engage with if they are asked to what extent an apparently feminist text does not manage to overturn negative stereotypes of women or if they apply feminist literary critical ideas to a text that does not claim to be overtly 'feminist'.

It can also be helpful to students to ask a direct question, but again, what they are being asked does need to enable them to debate, argue and reach a conclusion. For example, "Is *Trainspotting* great literature?" is potentially an interesting task that requires a student to explore ideas and it does not have a foregone conclusion.

### **Journalistic tasks**

These tasks count as conventional tasks within the folder. Moderators did not see many journalistic style pieces but when they were submitted it was invariably by students who were skilled writers and so the pieces of work were lively and engaging to read. If undertaking a journalistic task students do need to remember they must still cover all of the assessment objectives; there was a tendency in some pieces for the journalistic style to take precedence over the content.

### **Re-creative tasks**

The purpose of a re-creative task is to open up a new, alternative reading of the base text by creating a piece of work that explores an aspect of that base text through a critical lens. The key thing to remember is that the piece of work that the student produces must grow out of the base text, it is not a piece of entirely new creative writing in the style of a particular author. There is an example of a re-creative piece that explores a new reading of Orwell's *Burmese Days* in the 2016 TOLS folders and there will be another example included in the 2017 TOLS folders, available online from Autumn 2017.

When students had based their re-creative pieces on the text they had studied and used critical ideas to explore an aspect of that text which they then explained in their commentary they did well. Where work was less successful it was often because it was very difficult to see how critical ideas had shaped the reading and the text that was then created.

## **Independence**

This unit is called *Theory and Independence* and students must be encouraged to work independently and make their own choices at some point in the process. There are three areas where students could make independent choices:

- Choice of text
- Choice of critical ideas
- Choice of task

Some centres gave their students independent choice in all three areas, which was excellent to see, whereas some taught a text to a class then allowed the students to choose which critical lens they wanted to use to explore the text.

Even if a centre taught the same text and directed the students to the same section of the critical anthology moderators were still looking to see there had been some independent choice about which ideas each student used and what task they undertook.

## **Marking**

Marking was largely accurate this summer with teachers appearing to like the fact the mark scheme for the NEA has the same key descriptors as the mark schemes for the exam papers. Although there are notional mark allocations for each assessment objective given in the specification teachers should use the holistic mark scheme out of 25 marks when marking students' work as this is a far more accurate way to arrive at the correct mark for the candidates.

Teachers are reminded that all work should be annotated and have summative comments that weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of the work and explain to the moderator why a particular mark was judged to be most appropriate.

Overall the vast majority of work that was seen showed candidates thinking independently and creatively about a range of interesting texts and teachers and students are to be commended for the way they have undertaken the work required for this unit.



### **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.