



General Certificate of Education

English Literature
Specification A

LTA1B World War One Literature

Report on the Examination
2010 examination – January series

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EXAMINER'S REPORT LTA1B JANUARY 2010

Markers felt that this examination performed very well indeed. The Contextual Linking extract was both accessible and rigorous, whereas the Poetry questions provide clear yet testing debates with which to engage. It is a pleasure to read responses from candidates when the centre has constructed a carefully considered course and guided their students towards becoming informed, autonomous readers. To be most useful the report that follows should be read in conjunction with the equivalent reports from January 2009 and Summer 2009.

As will probably always be the case from now on, this January's LTA1B examination was taken by 1,323 candidates, a combination of Year 12 and Year 13 students. The Year 12s had at the very best between 4 and 6 months' reading and study on which to draw, whereas Year 13s had all of the AS course, their AS examination and subsequent reflection plus the A2 course from which to benefit. In other words centres should be aware that ideally this examination is intended for students who have reached the *end* of Year 12 and who have developed a breadth of knowledge about the literature of World War One through a course of wider reading. Only the most exceptional candidate is likely to have developed that necessary breadth of knowledge by early January. It is not just a case of students having time to read and absorb their set, coursework and wider reading texts. It is also about how maturity tends to improve confidence and expression. All the Assessment Objectives tend to be addressed more effectively if candidates have the chance to grow into all the skills we are hoping to foster. AO1, perhaps above all, underpins so much of what an answer can achieve and is in some ways the most noticeable discriminator between those doing the examination too soon and those who have had the chance to find their own voice.

Looking at a candidate's 'profile' of the two marks for this examination and assuming a holistic approach to an integrated and intensive course, one might expect a typical candidate to perform similarly in the two sections. Or one might assume, perhaps with less confident candidates that the familiarity of the Section B Poetry texts would lead to a better performance than on the 'unseen' text for Section A. However, it is interesting to see how many candidates fitted neither model and did significantly better on Section A. This is because they appeared not to understand what the poetry questions require. In some cases the gap was extreme and very worrying: well-briefed and widely-read candidates, who were able to explore an unseen text with some confidence, produced only simple accounts of the poems they had studied, ignoring the wording of the question and making no attempt to construct any sort of debate. Affected centres can recognise this problem by scrutinising the relevant performance data for their candidates: where such a discrepant pattern is identified, centres are strongly advised to re-consider the ways in which their chosen poetry text is taught. The problem is most apparent in the named poem questions where some candidates appeared to be responding to the poem for the first time and making assertive misreading in the process. Centres might also want to re-consider how they cover content on the one hand and the essentials skills on the other. That said, the majority of centres carefully construct an enabling course and get the balance right between over-teaching a narrow range of texts and allowing students to take their own approach without adequate guidance.

Beyond the obvious stress on AO4 in Section A and AO3 in Section B, the expression aspect of AO1 is often the key to a successful answer. Candidates who take the time and care to plan and then manage the writing time to allow for careful expression tend to do very well. Certainly, my invigilation experience tells me that most candidates begin writing in earnest far too soon. At least 10 to 15 minutes in every hour should be time for planning and 'composing' expression. Examiners are reassured to see plans followed by shaped answers where paragraphing is clear. Once this framework is established the line of argument can be embedded clearly through

the use of connectives and discourse markers. Candidates need to be encouraged through examination practice to strike the right balance between an approach that is logical and coherent on the one hand and individually expressive on the other.

Inevitably, some unsophisticated candidates used unacceptably informal expression in their responses: “gives out a positive vibe”, “puts a positive spin on” and “this Downing guy kind of gets carried away”, for example, should not be used for the purpose of literary analysis. Less mature candidates often referred to writers by their first names (here in Section A it was ‘George’ when it had been ‘Wilfred’ last summer and ‘Sylvia’ last January) which is not really appropriate for a formal AS English Literature examination.

The subsequent sections of this report deal with the responses to each of the questions in detail. This introductory section has been kept deliberately brief in order to avoid lengthy repetition of the advice offered in the introduction to last summer’s report. That detailed guidance, however, still holds good and centres are advised to refer to it as required. Other helpful sources of information are also available from AQA: the January 2009 mark scheme (“very clear and easy to apply”, as one examiner reported) will appear on the website in due course, featuring the relevant assessment grids supplemented by an Indicative Content section for each question. Future candidates may well wish to adopt the approaches and frameworks offered in these sections. The AQA-endorsed Nelson Thornes supporting textbook, *AQA English Literature A AS: Student Book: Literature of World War One* (ISBN 978-0-7487-8294-9), is also still available: a number of candidates made evident use of its advice and extracts to produce successful responses in this January’s examination.

Section A Contextual Linking

The extract from a letter by airman George Downing proved very successful in that it was accessible to all yet also provided challenge, particularly in terms of fitting the writer’s tone and attitudes into the context of time. In the words of one examiner: “The choice of this extract was inspired! While it allowed the less confident students to make some meaning, it was truly discriminating as it made even the most able puzzle over the juxtaposition between the jolly tone and the given date.”

Downing’s relish for battle and hatred for “the Hun” is, of course, atypical for post-Somme 1917. Candidates confident enough to confront this mismatch gave some highly-informed readings. Some of these candidates reasoned that it was perhaps due to Downing’s experience of aerial combat; he is obviously skilled but perhaps not experienced enough to have become sickened by the futility of war. Some considered that it was perhaps due to the industrial nature of aerial combat; each crew in their own aircraft with machine pitted against machine must have been a very different experience from physical trench combat. Some wondered about jingoistic attitudes fed by propaganda (not to mention background and personality type) and how they might have prevailed beyond perceived watersheds such as the Somme until relatively late in the war.

Successful candidates read and explored Downing’s choice of detail and language closely. His choices of phrases such as “little adventure”, “a day’s sport”, “another batch”, “parading peacefully” and “sunny little shells” provided the key to his apparent enthusiasm for the whole experience. Even his near injury and possible death is no more than “a nasty moment”. Candidates noted and counted his use of “Hun” as well as the other terms to describe the enemy (“bally German gunner glaring”, “his nerve was poor”, “beggars”, etc.). One candidate put it well when she said that Downing was “more ignorant than sadistic” in his attitude to the enemy, but many offered less sympathetic readings of the moment where he writes of his “tremendous satisfaction” at witnessing the death of one enemy and describes another killing as “our revenge”. The majority of candidates picked up on the rhetorical nature of the beginning

and ending, and what this adds to the tone and form of the extract. As one examiner put it, “the best candidates read what is in front of them and explore it in the light of what they already knew.”

Problems tended to stem from less confident readings based too heavily on the time context. A significant number asserted that Downing must be being “sarcastic” or “ironic” but could not sustain this reading or support it with convincing evidence beyond the date. Another relatively common issue was to try and argue that he was “putting on a brave face (positive spin?)” and over-exaggerating his successes to boast to his family or to make them proud. He’d made it all up, in other words; a speculation that is hard to support! Similarly some candidates tended to reason from other letters they had read that there was a desire to protect his family from the full horrors. Again, this is hard to support and where other letters were quoted in detail they were not really comparable.

Links were made to a whole variety of texts. Success here depends on how the link is made, of course and it will always be so much more successful to use a specific scene or detail to firmly bolt the two texts together before going on to reflect on similarities and/or differences. Skilful and informed candidates are quick to point out differences in form so that the reader is aware of the extent to which texts can be linked. Poetic parallels commonly included ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’ by W.B. Yeats, and this led to some fine noting of both similarity and difference. Downing’s references to sport provided a link with “Who’s for the Game?” by Jessie Pope. Despite what has been written in the previous two reports some candidates offered ‘Vital Lampada’ by Sir Henry Newbolt as a poem that uses the sport-warfare parallel. Indeed it does, but this is not a poem relevant to World War One in the context of the new Specification. Downing’s pre-Somme attitude led to some sensible with the naive early poetry of Brooke, Freeman, Grenfell, et al. Informed and realistic poetry from 1915 onwards was used largely for contrast and to show very different attitudes and experiences to those of Downing. Similarly prose fiction texts such as *Regeneration*, *A Long, Long Way*, *Strange Meeting*, ‘Tell England’ and ‘Birdsong’ along with non-fiction texts such as *Under Fire*, *Testament of Youth* and *Undertones of War* were used to evidence a level of realism largely absent from the extract. When it came to drama, many relied on comparing and contrasting Downing with Raleigh and sometimes Stanhope from *Journey’s End* and this tended to provide a rich source of discussion. *Black ‘Eil* and *The Accrington Pals* tended to be referenced but links were often not explored in detail. *Blackadder* and (sometimes *Oh, What a Lovely War!*) tended to be used to make general comments about a comic and satiric tone. George was Downing’s counterpart, whereas as the cynical, battle-shy Blackadder was Downing’s alter-ego. Given that Downing is, as one examiner put it, “the lovechild of Biggles and Captain Flashheart”, I was surprised that there were no references to the former and only one to the latter.

Some links were content-based or entirely narrative (a Band 2 feature, at best); others merely mentioned the titles of texts they had studied: these cannot be credited as actual links at all. A worrying number of candidates omitted a whole genre while writing about their wider reading; some even omitted two whole genres. Although not strictly speaking a rubric infringement, it is nevertheless an expectation that candidates will refer to each of the three genres at some point in their answer to Question 1: failure to do so will inevitably impact on their final mark for Section A. Successful candidates are resourceful enough to find alternative, less obvious, ways to establish relevant links between the passage and their wider reading – and the manner in which they do this is often a key feature in the determination of their final mark. Some candidates are perhaps over-anxious about finding similar texts; links to different texts are just as valid and, in this case, easier to find from the candidates’ wider reading.

More successful candidates:

- Wrote a substantial amount about the thoughts and feelings within the extract, dealing with the extract first and/or returning regularly to it so that it was adequately treated
- Considered the effect on tone of choices of form, structure and language in some detail
- Assessed the typicality of the extract with reference to the introductory material and evidence from the extract as well as wider reading
- Covered the three genres when it came to wider reading
- Made then explored and evaluated links of similarity and difference to support judgements about typicality

Less successful candidates:

- Gave a skimpy reading of the extract
- Failed to notice and deal with the date of the extract
- Insisted that Downing must be being sarcastic/ironic with no real evidence
- Speculated about Downing's desire to protect his family from the 'real' horrors
- Asserted unconvincing and/or random links to wider reading

Section B Poetry

The most popular text continues to be *Up the Line to Death* but both *Scars Upon My Heart* and *War Poetry* are now more popular than at first. All are yielding some excellent responses. Confident candidates are making their own informed choices both in the even-numbered questions and in the odd-numbered questions where the debate requires poems linked to the named one to be considered. AO2 remains a discriminator in that less successful candidates will 'train-spot' techniques for no clear reason, whereas more successful candidates can explain the significance of verse form, poetic structures and poetic language.

Up the Line to Death**Question 2**

This was by far the most popular question on the Gardner and candidates seemed to find the debate stimulating and accessible. Some candidates showed an informed sense of the anthology as a work of editorship; they could refer to the concepts behind Gardner's selection and arrangement and they were comfortable and confident with the different sections of the anthology. Given the chronological nature of the anthology many started by challenging the given view and went straight into the early naive poems and the variety of thoughts, feelings and attitudes that were not "bitterness and anger". This approach gave candidates immediate access to the debate and they tended to keep the debate central to their argument. It was equally sensible and logical to begin with "bitterness and anger" though and candidates could launch directly into their favourite poems by Owen, Sassoon, Rosenberg, et al. There were many confident treatments of 'Dulce et Decorum est', 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', 'The General', 'Base Details', 'Dead Man's Dump', etc. and the best kept "bitterness and anger" in focus to enable them to select effectively.

More successful candidates:

- Balanced the debate by looking beyond the given view
- Kept "bitterness and anger" in sharp focus and distinguished between the two as well as bracketing them together
- Engaged with 'voices' in the poems rather than just accepting them as the views of the poet
- Could make meaning from detailed observations about verse form, poetic structure and poetic language.

Less successful candidates:

- Did not balance the debate by looking beyond the given view
- Described the content rather than moving on to analyse form, structure and language
- Asserted “bitterness and anger”.

Question 3.

This was very much a minority option unfortunately. The best candidates got to grips with the time of the poem and the obvious structural devices that underpin the dual voices of the poem. The question proved tricky for those who did not spot “poems of reflection and remembrance”.

More successful candidates:

- Identified and kept in focus the debate about typicality in the context of other poems of reflection and remembrance
- Engaged with aspects of poetic form and the voices within the poem
- Read Sassoon’s tone carefully and linked meaningfully to related poems.

Less successful candidates:

- Described the content
- Asserted typicality without looking at other poems of reflection and remembrance
- Did not engage adequately with form, structure and language.
- Missed “poems of reflection and remembrance”.

Scars Upon My Heart

Question 4

This was a popular question. The key was to recognise the link between “cope effectively” and “admirable”. Some candidates were keen to write about the former but sometimes forgot the latter and, as a result, missed some of the irony in the poets’ presentations of character and situation. For example, it seems likely that the narrator of, say, ‘Munitions Wages’ is ‘coping effectively’, but ‘admirable’ is up for debate. The best candidates saw such discrepancies and it became their way of challenging the given view. The most common way of balancing here, however, was to look at the ways various women, poets and/or narrators, had given in to grief and loss.

More successful candidates:

- Saw the given view as describing a perhaps relatively rare combination of coping and in an admirable way
- Tended to find various ways of interpreting ‘admirable’ and ‘cope’
- Looked beyond the given view to consider women who had not achieved both states or responded to the war in a different way entirely.

Less successful candidates:

- Missed the dual quality of the given view
- Failed to balance the debate by daring to suggest that some women were not coping admirably or otherwise and that was the point of the poems or presentations.

Question 5.

This was also a very popular question for students of O'Reilly. It was striking and worrying how many misread the poem as about Edward Brittain's *death*. The notes on the page in fact state quite clearly the relevant facts and dates. Misreading seriously undermined many answers, particularly if repeated time and again. Given that this poem gives the anthology its title, it is amazing how few made the point and used it in the debate about central importance. Some candidates seemed uncertain how to go about balancing this kind of debate. One way is to re-consider the poem's application to other poets' and narrators' predicaments and/or suggest other poems better suited to the description "of central importance".

More successful candidates:

- Understood the context of the poem and the timeline and events that linked July 1st, 1916 with the date of the poem and then perhaps with Edward Brittain's death later in 1918
- Found a lot to say about the central importance of this brief, poignant poem
- Knew how to go about balancing a debate of this kind and did so confidently and decisively.

Less successful candidate:

- Persisted in assertive misreading about the circumstances and therefore the subject matter of the poem
- Did not explore form, structure and language
- Failed to look clearly beyond the given view.

War Poetry**Question 6**

This was a popular question and candidates found the debate both accessible and engaging. The best were unsurprised and already familiar with Stallworthy's idea. They did not simply read this as another version of Question 2 but instead kept their focus and their terms of reference clearly relevant to the concept of heroism. Given the anthology's chronological arrangement, many were able to begin by challenging the given view with reference to the earlier poems. Binyon, Asquith, Hardy, Sorley, Brooke provided the counter-argument here. There were all kinds of ways into the given view too, the most popular poets being Owen, Sassoon (The hero, of course), Rosenberg, Pound, Cummings, Eliot and Hughes.

Most successful candidates:

- Kept 'heroic' and "anti-heroic" clearly in focus throughout to illuminate and balance the debate
- Selected references appropriately and specifically so that the discussion did not 'seep' into other topics
- Confidently structured a robust and balanced debate.

Less successful candidates:

- Failed to look at the heroic too, or at least go beyond the given view
- Offered a general reading where "anti-heroic" meant a host of things such as bitterness, anger, futility, etc.
- Chose poems less carefully and then struggled to make them apply to the question.

Question 7

As with 'To My Brother', typical responses were marred by misreading. It is almost as if some candidates had not read or considered 'The Sentry' before the day of the examination. There were various strange interpretations of a poem that I did not expect to mystify candidates. Most considered the soldiers literally already dead and the poem therefore as describing a bizarre funeral procession with corpses whisked away by windowless railway carriages! The best

candidates, on other hand, spotted “the fate of ordinary soldiers” and kept this central. They read the tone of the poem and the ways in which Owen hints at sinister conspiracy. These candidates also gave due consideration to the ending of the poem and imagery such as “half-known roads” and “village wells”.

More successful candidates:

- Understood fully the circumstances described by Owen
- Explored the choices of form, structure and language and the ways in which the tone of the poem is controlled
- Engaged with “the fate or ordinary soldiers”.

Less successful candidates:

- Asserted sometimes bizarre misreadings and gave a detail-by-detail ‘translation’ of railway station terms (?) and/or perceived symbols within the poem
- Neglected the structure of the poem and the return of the few.
- Missed “the fate of ordinary soldiers”.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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