Version 1

General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012

English Literature A LTA1B

(Specification 2740)

Unit 1: Texts in Context
World War One Literature

Report on the Examination

Further copies of this Report on the Examination are available from: aqa.org.uk

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334).
Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

PRINCIPAL EXAMINER'S REPORT LTA1B JANUARY 2012

The entry was similar in size to the two previous January series and again examiners saw the full range of marks and approaches. Schools and colleges will find the January 2012 LTA1B mark scheme a very useful document to use alongside this report, as it contains the assessment grids and an indicative content section for each question, suggesting possible approaches which successful students might adopt in their responses. Examiners are encouraged to allow students to make their own choices of links and connections. In addition to these documents, schools and colleges will also find it useful to refer to subsequent reports going back to January 2009.

Schools and colleges should remember that although Assessment Objective 4 is tested in Section A but not in Section B, it is a still a crucial factor in the teaching of all aspects of a well-designed course in this option because this unit is so bound up with one historical event. Key historical and biographical facts are fundamental to a proper understanding of changing attitudes and contexts within World War One. Students find the whole course more engaging and satisfying if they can understand the importance of central events in World War One and the circumstances in which it was fought. It is also a good idea to consider how and why attitudes to World War One have changed and developed so as to shape how we view the war and read its literature today in the twenty-first century.

To look at the achievement of students question by question:

Question 1

Schools and colleges will now be very familiar with some slight alterations to the format of this question since the specimen paper was published over three years ago. The wording of the generic question was adjusted slightly: examiners on the predecessor LTA6 paper (in many ways the model for this question and this option) expressed their concern that students sometimes became bogged down while trying to address the idea of 'typicality', so students on the new specification are directed simply to compare the extract with relevant aspects of their wider reading. Of course, in answering this question, students will still be considering what is typical of the Literature of World War One, but they will be doing so through the more direct means of exploring the similarities and differences between the extract and the most relevant parts of their wider reading.

The best way to prepare students for Question 1 is by providing them with non-fiction extracts from the Literature of World War One as part of their wider reading. Although schools and colleges have already identified three wider reading texts (one from each literary genre) it is vital that students' wider reading extends beyond this minimum required by the QCDA regulations governing every A-Level English Literature specification. This point is emphasised on page 7 of the Specification: "These three texts may be supplemented with a collection of relevant extracts and shorter pieces of writing." Students whose wider reading only stretches as far as their school's three nominated texts may well find themselves at a disadvantage in the examination if their opportunities to establish relevant links to the extract are limited by the narrowness of their reading. Students are, of course, able to refer to their prose and drama coursework texts too, as well as to their set poetry

examination text; indeed, as these texts are liable to be very well-known to them, they are likely to be able to refer to these in some depth and detail. To maximise their students' chances of success in answering Question 1,schools and colleges are advised to develop a programme of wider reading. Schools and colleges are reminded that there is further guidance on how to prepare students for Question 1 in the 'Contextual Linking' advice which was issued in the summer of 2008.

It is also worth remembering that the extracts used in Question 1 will relate to at least one of the six key areas identified to help schools and colleges focus their studies in the rich area of the Literature of World War One. These areas are:

- The realities of war
- 'Man's inhumanity to man'
- Patriotism
- Politics
- Physical/mental/spiritual consequences
- The role of women and the Home Front

The wording of the question will usually include some of the key words or phrases from these topics, offering further guidance to students as they consider which of their wider reading texts will be of most relevance to the extract. Schools and colleges should use these topics when planning their course of wider reading; they may also refer to the wider reading list on pages 18 – 20 of the Specification, although the list is not exhaustive: the best schools and colleges will introduce their students to material from beyond this list. Schools and colleges should ensure that students' wider reading covers all three literary genres in equal measure: students are required to refer to **at least one example of their wider reading in each genre when answering Question 1** and omitting a genre is bound to have a limiting effect on the mark awarded. It is not advisable to use a very narrow range of schools and colleges chosen texts and extracts (or, indeed, **readings** of those texts and extracts). It is not helpful for students if all those entered by a school or college restrict themselves to exactly the same texts and extracts and exactly the same points and interpretations. Instead students should be encouraged to develop their own repertoire of wider reading and *readings* so that (a) their responses are individual and (b) they can choose the most meaningful links relevant to the given extract.

In attempting Question 1, students are advised to split their time evenly between the two parts of the question. It is perfectly acceptable for students to focus on the extract for thirty minutes, then spend the next thirty minutes writing about their relevant wider reading; however, more confident and sophisticated students may be able to produce integrated responses in which the extract and the wider reading comparisons are interwoven throughout the answer. Contrasts will also be an important part of successful responses, but their inclusion should be coherent: arbitrary, bolted-on texts with no obvious connection to the extract will not help students reach the higher bands of the mark scheme. However, this is most likely to occur in the responses of students whose entire wider reading, it would seem, has been limited to three texts: it should not be a problem for those students who are able to draw on a truly wide experience of the Literature of World War One.

The extract

The extract, '"Never Say Die" or How the Home Mail Affects Us', provided an accessible and engaging basis for contextual linking. There were plenty of thoughts and feelings to explore, considerable scope for scrutinising the ways in which the writer expresses himself and there were numerous possibilities when it came to linking in wider reading. These factors characterise a well-chosen extract for this question and examiners report on this question as one that manifestly 'worked'. It is important to remember that the first part of the question directs students to look closely at thoughts and feelings. This means looking at the extract in its own right and resisting the temptation to use the extract simply as a way in to wider reading. Many successful students saw a range of different thoughts and feelings at different stages in the short extract and sometimes co-existing with one another: boredom with the routine of war; melodramatic disillusionment with the awful conditions; excitement at the prospect of the mail; exasperation at apparently not receiving a letter; ambiguous and confused feelings about his loved one in the face of disappointment; delighted surprise when the mistake is discovered. A list approach is not recommended; it is important to engage with and be specific about thoughts and feelings and the ways in which they are expressed. The most significant factor in discussing thoughts and feelings is often the tone and mood of the piece and this is very much the case here. One senior examiner puts it very well: "I found humour the most discriminating aspect of the piece. Too many students wrote solemnly about suicide and breakdowns without paying attention to the self-mockery evident in the hyperbole here. The most astute reflected on this breezy style as a mask assumed to entertain an audience of fellow soldiers, who would share his feelings, and to reassure them that, with the support of loved ones, even the worst conditions could be shrugged off as merely 'beastly' or 'boring'". It was an important part of reading thoughts and feelings that this tone was grasped so as to avoid taking the writer too literally. Another senior examiner points out: "The main challenge students found was capturing the tone of humour (sarcasm, irony or whatever) with a high number convinced the soldier genuinely wanted to kill himself! Weaker students also believed he was **actually** looking forward to the bully beef!"

Schools and colleges should note, as in previous reports, that it is fruitful to concentrate students' attention on tone and mood so as to help them to foster effective close reading. It is also worth reiterating from previous reports that there is still a tendency to try and impose a pro- or anti-war viewpoint on the extract, and indeed other wider reading texts referenced. This over-simplification perhaps stems from a desire to make comparison straightforward, but the approach is deeply flawed and closes down rather than opens up possibilities for analytical exploration

Context

Given the AO weighting on context schools and colleges should remind themselves what 'context' might mean. A contextual approach should be informed by historical knowledge without extensive offloading of facts and figures. Contextual observations arise from consideration of the extract and the wider reading texts chosen, rather than arbitrarily imposed on the question. The most useful observations tend to focus on time, gender and genre. In this extract, time is significant because it is early in 1916 and therefore pre-Somme and yet, from their wider reading, students would know that there was a growing sense of realism and disillusionment. The question is how far these 1916 attitudes are prevalent in this relatively 'light' media piece. Gender is significant in that the piece is by a serving soldier with other soldiers as his

primary audience, and he is describing his loved one in idealised terms as the absent, Home Front 'other'. Students could have asked themselves how far this was typical of gender attitudes and the presentation of women in particular. Genre is crucial too in the sense that this anecdotal story is artfully constructed to set a particular mood and convey, perhaps, a 'tongue-in-cheek' moral about perseverance and morale. The use of features such as the headline and sub-headline can be set against the knowing, self-conscious humour; aspects of atypicality for students to explore. On the other hand, there were some interesting references to *The Hydra*, familiar to students of *Regeneration*, by students who were keen to point out that they were aware of smaller publications by informed, literate combatants. Few students picked up on the reference to the single star as a reference of lower rank (Second Lieutenant). For many this proved too obscure but the allusion no doubt adds to the narrator's disillusionment (see the sarcastic reference to 'worthies' and word choices such as 'branded').

Main features explored and used to make links and connections

The writer's focus on letters gave students the opportunity to discuss other letters they knew such as: the correspondence between Owen and his mother, Susan; Raleigh's letter from *Journey's End;* the correspondence of Vera Brittain and her circle; and the role of letters in fiction such as *Birdsong* and *Strange Meeting*.

Students warmed to the idea of the importance of the Home Front and loved ones, and this led to a whole range of discussions about attitudes with reference to: plays such as *The Accrington Pals, Journey's End* and *Black 'ell;* novels such as *Regeneration, Birdsong,* and *Strange Meeting*; and poems such as 'The Glory of Women' and the works of Jessie Pope.

Students also relished the fact that the writer details the nature of trench conditions. Many picked upon the features of trench living and trench warfare and used these to make links and connections with a whole range of poems such as 'The Dug-Out', 'The Sentry' and 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. Similarly references to scenes and details of realism in *Journey's End*, *Regeneration*, *A Long, Long Way* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Effective use was made of texts that also juxtapose the mundane aspects of everyday routine with the risk of death such as the poem 'Breakfast'.

Many were quick (perhaps too quick given the tone and mood) to make links with voices of protest, such as Sassoon in his 'Declaration', Kingsley in *The First Casualty* and Bertrand Russell in his autobiography.

Those students who grasped the sarcastic humour of the piece were quick to make links with *Blackadder Goes Forth*. The quieter humour of moments in *Journey's End* were considered too. The writer's reference to bully beef led to links with the preoccupations with service rations in *Journey's End* and *Blackadder Goes Forth.*

Perhaps special mention should be made of the number of students who 'seized' on the reference to the empty rum jar to assert various assumptions all based on 'over-reading' this detail to a greater or lesser degree. It led to claims that all were, like Stanhope in *Journey's End*, 'doped' in an attempt to counteract the stress of battle. Links based on this 'over-reading' tended to be overstated and not fully convincing.

Some attempts to read closely were hampered by this tendency to 'over-read'. As a senior examiner put it: "Some students, desperate to elevate the piece to the realms of 'serious literature', spent time exploring the similarity of the neck of the rum jar to headless victims; some explored the 'Mess' as a symbol of wartime devastation." Similarly, many students wanted to see the captain "tangled up in a mass of letters and parcels" as symbolic of the mess of war. These readings did sometimes lead to thoughtful explorations that could be credited, but for many it meant that they had missed the point and, in particular, missed the mood of the extract.

Form, structure and language

Meaning, of course, is primary and indicated by 'thoughts and feelings' in the first stem of the question. AO2 or FSL or 'the ways', as in 'the ways writers construct meaning' is secondary but still a crucial part of the analytical process. Confident and convincing comment on AO2 is an essential feature of writing in Bands 3 and 4. The most successful students understand that it must be linked to meaning to have any real validity. Therefore, feature spotting fails to put technique in the context of meaning and hence is unhelpful and arbitrary.

When it came to looking at AO2 aspects of the extract, the most successful students related aspects of form, structure and language to meaning. Aspects of FSL that were made good use of included:

- initial use of first person declaratives to convey the narrator's frame of mind
- the ways the writer assembles a list of dreary features in the first three paragraphs
- the exclamatory sentence "The mail had come!" to announce a change of tone
- the short topic sentence of paragraph four to emphasise this change of mood
- the ways in which syntax and punctuation details his initial disappointment in the fourth paragraph (with questions, dashes, exclamations and ellipses)
- the use of alliteration, repetition and anaphora in the same paragraph
- the extended noun phrase "my own smelly, dingy little dug-out" to summarise setting and mood
- the use of direct address to the reader by use of the second person
- the orchestration of the denouement in a series of short sentences.

.

In subsequent examinations successful students will:

- explore the ways the writer's thoughts and feelings about aspects of World War One are presented in the extract
- develop their own thoughtful and considered readings of the extract
- establish a range of substantial and meaningful links between the extract and their own wider reading
- develop a repertoire of wider reading texts in addition to coursework texts that are known and understood in detail
- refer to all three literary genres when writing about their wider reading, commenting on the writers' choices of form, structure and language, as well as subject matter.

One examiner offered this further advice to schools and colleges:

- Students need to consider ***genre*** in Q1. They must prepare by analysing a range of non-fiction pieces in relation to their wider reading so that they can point out the differences in the ways in which choice of genre will shape the writing.

- It is most likely that looking for **differences from** as opposed to **similarities to** wider reading will lead to genuine exploration of how writers work. While it is right to point out thematic links, it is essential to be able to show how differently authors treat these themes.

- Listing literary devices is not analysis. Pointing out that other authors use the same devices is not analysis and can lead to some strained, unconvincing links.

- Beware of lazy assertions about context (*All women at the Home front were ignorant; all politicians were corrupt; all generals were incompetent*.) Beware of unloading context only loosely linked to the given passage.

Questions 2 -7

The expectations of AS students in this section are three-fold. Students should: ***select*** and then ***analyse*** appropriate poems in detail; closely ***explore*** the key words of the question; and ***co-ordinate*** a balanced response to the debate. A blend of these priorities ensures success, but the debate remains primary.

In this series, Gardner followed by Stallworthy proved to be the most popular choices; only a few schools and colleges did Reilly. There were many engaged and enthusiastic answers with most prepared to address poetic effects created by writers' choices of form, structure and language. As one examiner repeated, "The vast majority of students had been taught well on how to address the debate and it was **rarely** ignored totally". Where problems occurred, they tended to be to do with:

Balancing the debate

This key skill is a crucial discriminator when answering the poetry section. To balance the debate students need to identify the argument or given view as distinct from possible counter-arguments and then look substantially at both sides. Some able students who demonstrated high Band 3/Band 4 descriptors in other ways were prevented from fulfilling their potential by not balancing the debate. Students should remember to spend time identifying what they see as the debate inherent in the question before proceeding to the planning stage. 'Balancing the debate' means seeing beyond the given view; it may or may not involve a polarised debate. If they can see another way of looking at the poems, then they are balancing the debate. It may be that they spend more time on the given view or the counter argument, but they should at least spend a substantial amount of time and thought on both sides. Some confident students begin with the counter-argument which immediately implies that the debate will be balanced. Those students who do not mention a counter-argument until the very end tend not to be as successful in addressing and balancing the all-important debate.

Selecting appropriate material

There was a good deal of engaged and intelligent analysis that was not clearly relevant to the question or to the student's line of argument. Care should be taken to select appropriate poems and to select from those poems only the most relevant aspects, rather than offloading all they know about a particular poem or poems. One of the answers to this issue is planning; time spent planning is crucial. Many students begin writing too soon (and the same can be said of responses to Section A). Once students are writing, they should make frequent reference to the key words of the question and the central debate so as to ensure that the answer remains on track. Some students perhaps try to cover too many poems for their own good. They should remember that there are two perfectly acceptable choices: ranging more widely, or choosing to concentrate on two or three poems in more detail. If they choose the latter they must be careful to cover depth and closeness of reading. If they choose the latter, then 'two or three' means just that; covering two poems is fine and can still enable students to gain the highest marks.

Exploring poetic effects created by writers' choices of form, structure and language.

This remains a difficult area for many students. Exploring aspects of form, in particular, such as rhyme, metre and stanza form can lead students into empty feature-spotting with little relevance and/or asserted and unconvincing links to meaning. Such features, it is claimed, are chosen by writers to "make them stand out" (?) or to create vague effects such as "flow" and "pace". For examiners the key questions when faced with these assertions are "How?" and "Why?" Students should also ask these questions themselves and use them to shape their responses when it comes to AO2.

The odd numbered questions naming a poem need just as much attention to the debate, to choice of material and poems and to planning. One examiner offers the following comment which applies to this examination: "Students must avoid merely 'going through' a given poem or a list of chosen poems without linking them to each other within the framework of a clearly developing argument. This seems to have been more evident in the answers to the second question on each poetry text".

One senior examiner from January made a point that invariably applies to this section: "It is worth reiterating that the most difficult answers to assess in Section B are the ones that **don't engage with/refer to/ acknowledge/touch on** the debate in the opening paragraph. In these answers the debate is effectively ignored, often completely, until a token gesture in the concluding paragraph."

Question 2

This question was the most popular in this section. Horror was clearly an appealingly broad concept for students. The word 'dominated' provided the basis for debate in addition to the standard formula: 'To what extent…' These terms were made use of by those who addressed the debate closely. Some less focused responses tended to just go through some poems highlighting aspects of horror in the commentary.

Question 3

A relatively small proportion of students who tackled this question did so confidently and thoroughly. A successful answer focused on the poem in detail and considered its succinct but powerful rhetoric and imagery. Beyond the poem itself, students needed to examine and debate the given view of "best summarises".

Question 4

Some less confident students struggled with Sassoon's view as the starting point. As one senior examiner put it: "This one was tricky for weaker students! I had one school where most of the students simply could not understand what Sassoon meant and floundered rather hopelessly in defence of women being liberated by the war (which made them proud of themselves and not the soldiers). Of course, it was a treat for able and well-prepared students and I saw a wide range of possible ways to achieve full marks in some really individual responses".

Question 5

The same examiner pointed out that the students who attempted this question were quick to claim that this poem is *not* of central importance. There is a reminder here that, in order to present a balanced approach, **both** sides of the debate, the given view ***and*** the counter-argument, should be developed appropriately.

Question 6

This was the second most popular question after Question 2 and many of the comments made about that question, above, apply here. Again, as well as the familiar invitation to consider 'How far…', there is also an additional 'trigger' word, 'preoccupied', to help students to construct a debate. The most successful answers sustained precise focus on 'brutality' throughout.

Question 7

This proved an interesting challenge for students who attempted it. The question insisted that both Hardy poems were considered as part of the debate, even though most students were much more familiar with 'Men Who March Away'. Students often had some contextual knowledge about Hardy's involvement with propaganda. Sometimes this led to a tendency to miss some of the subtleties of 'Men Who March Away' and/or the assumption that 'In Time of *The Breaking of Nations*' was a recruitment poem in a similar vein. The most successful students distinguished between the two poems in terms of subject matter and mood, as well as form, structure and language.

In future, successful students will:

- create a balanced debate in response to the critical opinion given in the question
- select appropriate poems to support their argument and counter-argument
- explore the poetic effects created by the writer's choices of form, structure and language in detail
- remember that the debate is just as important in the odd numbered questions.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the Results statistics page of the AQA Website.

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.