



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2011**

English Literature A

LITA3

(Specification 2740)

Unit 3: Reading for Meaning

Report on the Examination

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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General

The Question Paper was received favourably by the examiners who felt it was both accessible and had the potential to ‘stretch and challenge’ the most able. Unlike June’s paper, on which it was felt that Question 2 was the more challenging, the examiners believed that each question offered a similar level of challenge.

The full range of achievement was seen, although a smaller proportion of candidates achieved marks in high band three or in Band 4 than on the June 2010 paper. This is perhaps unsurprising, since the number of candidates was considerably smaller (there were fewer than 900 candidates) and that many would have either been retaking the paper or would have been taking it for the first time nearly two terms before the end of the A-level course. It is to be noted that LITA3 is a synoptic examination: it tests the skills and understanding gained throughout the entire two-year A-level course and, under normal circumstances, it is not recommended that candidates take this examination early.

The features of high achievement were similar to those displayed in June 2010. The best candidates spent a significant proportion of their time reading, thinking and planning. (AQA advises that candidates spend around thirty minutes per question reading, thinking and planning; those with extra time concessions should increase the amount accordingly.) A feature of high-performing candidates’ answers was that they were focused sharply on the question and often developed their ideas confidently by means of comparison and contrast. The areas of contrast or comparison were often aspects of form, structure or language, rather than simply subject matter. The skilful selection of material was another feature that candidates who planned well demonstrated. The best answers displayed a strong overview of the texts, but they did not attempt to cover all aspects of every text; rather, they selected the most relevant aspects to the question. While many played to their strengths by selecting material that they were comfortable analysing and comparing, some of the best candidates were able to comment on areas that they found more challenging, often expressing ideas tentatively and offering alternative readings.

Wider reading was a useful discriminator. It is inevitable that in a two-year course candidates will have come across a variety of texts that could be useful in this examination. We recommend that candidates choose their references with care and suggest that the best links usually come from texts that have been studied thoroughly and which offer candidates flexibility in the ways in which they are used. They should avoid coming to the examination with the intention of making certain wider reading texts fit, whatever the unseen items. The unseen texts should be allowed to speak for themselves and should not have strained wider reading links or, as one examiner put it, ‘prepared agendas’ thrust upon them. Wider reading references from works studied scantily, or only in extract form, frequently lead to superficial responses. The appropriateness of the selections is crucial. That having been said, some examiners reported seeing less ‘off-loading’ of inappropriate wider reading than they had done in previous series. Writing of the achievement at the lower end, a senior examiner noted that ‘in too many cases wider-reading was not up to it and candidates struggled to make links which were inept’. While examiners do aim to reward references to wider reading texts, if these contain gross misquotations or factual inaccuracies it is difficult to reward them as being ‘relevant’, ‘detailed’ or those that ‘enhance’ the candidate’s response to the item, or items, under discussion. Consequently, such references help to support marks in Band 2 or lower. As ever, the best wider reading references kept at least one of the unseen items in view. Rarely did helpful references arise from a wider reading reference; such ‘wider reading to wider reading’ references were often digressive.

The use of contexts sometimes proved problematic. Unless a candidate knows *specific* details of a historical, literary, or cultural context, he or she might be better to concentrate on other areas. Too often vague notions of ‘life in the Renaissance’, ‘the contraceptive pill in the 1960s’, ‘other Victorian writing’ or ‘the Elizabethan period’ (on Items A, B, C and D respectively) served not to illuminate the unseen texts but to obscure their meaning. Larkin’s ‘Wild Oats’ was published in 1964, but that in itself does not make it ‘a postmodern poem’; *The Age of Innocence* was published in 1920, but that in itself does not mean that it is ‘therefore a modernist text’. Of course, it might have been helpful to explore some of the similarities and differences between the style of writing and the thoughts displayed by Wharton in Item C and those of others who were writing around that time, but to simply categorise Wharton a ‘modernist’ and carry on, or indeed go on to list modernist features without reference to the text on the question paper, gained little credit.

Categorising texts by topic also proved unhelpful, and several candidates produced pedestrian comments by using pre-conceived ideas such as ‘unrequited love’, ‘young love’ or ‘forbidden love’. One senior examiner noted: “Forbidden” was loosely and inaccurately used. It was hard to agree, for example, that Larkin wrote of it or that Lovelace did. Fornication may offend some people’s religious and moral sensibilities, but it is rather extreme to call it “forbidden” and then launch into comparative work featuring the incestuous love in *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*. It was equally hard to agree that the love in C and D was forbidden. Better candidates did discuss the social barriers to divorce and broken engagements in C and so went on to see the love as “forbidden”.

In the main, literary contexts proved more useful than historical ones, with some candidates casting light on texts, by, for example, comparing the attitude of Lovelace’s speaker to attitudes that had been encountered in their readings of metaphysical poetry, or by others applying their understanding of tragedy to extract from *Antony and Cleopatra*. Sometimes critical approaches proved useful. As one examiner commented, ‘Feminist and Marxist readings are possible and sometimes such readings were informed and informing. Too often, however, they were merely dumped on the text and did nothing to make meaning’.

Examiners noted a wide range of achievement on AO1. Centres who have taught candidates to write clearly and logically in an academic register are to be congratulated, as are those whose candidates pay attention to details such as the use of the forward slash (or virgule) to indicate a line ending when quoting verse and the need to introduce quotations smoothly. Some weaker candidates wrote in an informal register and were overly dependant on words that often lead to generalisation, such as ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ and words that lend an assertive tone to arguments, such as ‘hugely’ and ‘clearly’. As one senior examiner put it: ‘It is a candidate’s job to make things clear by support and analysis - not just assert the clarity.’

It is important that the candidates have practice in responding to and comparing unseen texts. The texts in question should suggest areas of focus, and taught formulae should be avoided. This January the examiners saw a range of recurring openings. As one put it: ‘taught comparative openings abounded, the favourite being ‘Despite the fact that’, or ‘Even though the Items were written three hundred years apart...’ Another strategy to avoid is misusing the introductory matter from the question paper. Of course, it is useful for candidates to be informed by these introductions, but to simply paraphrase or copy parts out will gain candidates little credit.

A minority of candidates failed to adhere to the rubric and included prose or poetry wider reading on Question 1, or did not include either drama or prose wider reading on Question 2. A smaller number included no wider reading on a question.

Question 1

This question tests the candidates' ability to compare two unseen items from the same genre and to make relevant wider reading references to texts within that genre, in this case, poetry. It was surprising that many candidates found the older poem, Lovelace's 'The Scrutiny', more accessible than Larkin's 'Wild Oats', although one examiner did remark on many candidates' lack of recognition of the term 'cavalier', noting that many of such candidates went on to 'plunge into cavalier assertions (!)' There were numerous candidates who confused or conflated the women in Larkin's poem, and many found much to explore in Larkin's term 'bosomy English rose' – often finding the 'rose' richer ground for commentary than 'bosomy' and sometimes digressing on meanings by loose association, thus writing at great length on the 'thorns' that every rose has, or comparing 'Larkin's use of natural imagery' to 'similar' uses by Romantic poets.

Many candidates showed sound understanding of the relationship between Larkin's speaker and his addressee, although the one who read 'loved his round' as indicating that the speaker would only return when he had treated his friends to drinks at the pub gained little from this observation. Many explored the significance of the titles well, with 'Scrutiny' attracting the more convincing responses. Few candidates were familiar with the idiom 'wild oats' and fewer still with 'the whole shooting-match'; the latter provoked much speculation about guns and warfare, some of which gained credit as convincing personal response, most of which led to digression. Some more able candidates commented impressively on the dramatic qualities of the verse in Item A, noting, for example, that 'the opening question highlights surprise that an accusation that a broken a promise has been made, linking back to the title. . .'. Many candidates found fertile critical ground in the imagery of the third stanza, with several arguing convincingly that the search 'for treasure in unplowed-up ground' was a euphemism for the speaker's lust for sex with virgins. Some uncovered cruder imagery, digging deeper into the significance of such ploughing, and a few commented that the references to the 'thy brown' and 'the black and fair' hair of the women could be read as references to pubic, rather than cranial, hair.

There were numerous convincingly made comparisons between the two poems, with many candidates commenting on the ways in which they presented, for example, time, courtship and the attitudes of the speakers. One Band 4 candidate developed a valuable personal response by arguing that 'hindsight in Item B made it harder for the reader to connect with the speaker emotionally . . .' and went on to comment on his passivity in comparison to Lovelace's more active persona. Another useful and popular area for comparison was the poems' depiction of women. Some candidates commented ably on the relative absence of women's voices in the poems, and one high Band 4 candidate remarked of the 'friend in specs' from 'Wild Oats', saying there was a 'conspicuous lack of dialogue, description or any direct description of her feelings on the future of their love.' Others applied feminist approaches to the texts more overtly, although such approaches sometimes led to them being simplified, rather than elucidated. As one senior examiner commented: 'Perhaps the fornicating cavalier and the shy, insecure man are both presented in a sexist way – but there is far more to it than that!'

Examiners are always impressed when candidates make fitting use of literary terminology and concepts, but they are unable to give much credit to mere 'feature spotting'. There was much empty identification of poetic devices on answers to this question, with several simply naming rhyme schemes or counting lines. Even here there were errors, with some claiming that Lovelace wrote in quatrains or even the sonnet form; in addition, some erred by labelling the rhyme scheme wrongly. Better responses avoided comments such as 'I believe this poem is kept afloat by its AB rhyme scheme' or 'the poem sounds like a nursery rhyme' in favour of lines of argument beginning with comments such as 'Lovelace uses iambic

tetrameter, occasionally interrupted by trimeter’ or attempted to make meaning by making such comments as the ‘regular rhyme scheme with a couplet at the end of each stanza appears to mimic the reasoning of his argument’ or by commenting on rhyme and rhythm then saying that such features helped to make the speaker to ‘sound measured, almost calculated.’ It was disappointing that a significant number felt that ‘Wild Oats’ to be a ‘free verse’ poem, or that its ‘random’ rhythm and rhyme scheme reflected its ‘random ideas about love and sex’. Indeed the poem was much less ‘random’ than most candidates realised, having a regular stanzaic pattern and a regular rhyme scheme, which, admittedly, makes greater use of half-rhyme than full rhyme.

Wider reading ranged from the strained and predictable to the apt and impressive. Candidates should realise that examiners feel it better for them to know some wider reading poems in detail rather than many superficially. There was also a wide range of achievement when candidates used poems that are relatively well-known. For example, there were much fewer marks for those who viewed Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 as a simple case of ‘well, she was quite an ugly and unhygienic woman, but she had a good personality and he loved her anyway’ or who failed to recognise details such as that in Shakespeare’s day ‘reeks’ was a neutral, not a pejorative, term; those who commented ably on the mocking use of the blazon, or who read the poem’s intertextual qualities, seeing it as being as much about satirising the excesses of conventional sonneteers as one that seeks to praise a normal – and attractive – woman, were rewarded richly. Some interesting comparisons made good use of work by Behn, Broadstreet, Browning, Donne, Herrick, Hughes, Kipling, Marvell and Rochester.

Several candidates made good use of other poems by Larkin including ‘An Arundel Tomb’, although some who had studied the poem superficially read it as a simple paean to true love, seeing only the final line without noticing that its seemingly hopeful concluding statement about love being ‘what will survive of us’ is qualified by the penultimate line — and the notion that this sentiment is only ‘our **almost** instinct’ and it is only ‘**almost** true’ (my emphasis). Had this been recognised it might have enabled more detailed and interesting comparisons to ‘Wild Oats’.

Question 2

This question tests the candidates’ ability to compare two unseen extracts of the remaining genres and invites them to make relevant wider reading references, which may be drawn from any genre. There is also a focus for comparison; in this case it was ‘the pains of love’. Despite there being much material worthy of literary analysis, many candidates chose to concentrate their efforts on the subject matter, of the items, which usually produced answers that achieved Band 2 marks at best. It is not necessary to comment on everything, but it is practically impossible to reach Band 3 or higher without attending to aspects of the Items’ form, structure and language in some detail. Several candidates wasted time by copying out, or paraphrasing, chunks of the introductory matter. The aim of such introductions is to help candidates understand the extracts by providing further details about the source texts: often this includes information about the time in which a text was written and further relevant details about broader aspects such as characters and plot. Candidates are to be discouraged from analysing the language of the introductory material or from depending heavily on it for evidence for their points. There is a wealth of material in the Items; they should draw on this. Some candidates, however, did well when they *applied* details from the introduction to the Items. One senior examiner noted that he ‘saw some very good work by candidates who explored the fact that Wharton wrote in the more liberated 20s but set her scene 50 years earlier’ thus enabling her to both explore Victorian hypocrisy and to use this to criticise aspects of her own times. This sensible approach enabled such candidates to

make fitting, often illuminating, comparisons to their wider reading, such as to *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and resulted in 'some very apt literary and context-driven comparisons.'

There was some competent literary analysis of Item C, with many candidates exploring aspects such as the imagery of light and darkness and the point of view, including many who noted that the text was written in the third person, but placed Archer as the focal character. There was also some useful comment on the dialogue, the drama that it created and what was going on in the subtext. The relationship between Archer and Olenska attracted much comment, with the better candidates commenting on the subtleties of Wharton's presentation of this relationship and how, perhaps, she exposes Archer's weakness and naïveté while showing, subtly, that Olenska is the more attractive and intriguing character to the reader as well as being the one in control of the relationship.

Item D also produced engaged literary responses. Close attention to Shakespeare's dramatic verse resulted in much relevant analytical comment. Many commented on the halting qualities of the emotional speeches from Antony and from Cleopatra. The best were able to analyse with concision and style. For example, one candidate noted that 'although Antony and Cleopatra both speak in eloquent verse filled with imagery, this style of speech deteriorates into grief-stricken repetition ("O Antony, / Antony, Antony!"). This contrast between eloquence and incoherence only heightens the emotion of the scene, showing the extent to which the usually intelligent and well-spoken characters have been hurt by the pains of love.'

It was also impressive when candidates commented relevantly on aspects of genre and staging. For example, one high Band 4 candidate began by considering the play as a tragedy featuring 'nobles destroyed by a single character flaw' and went on to observe that 'Antony is "heave[d] aloft to Cleopatra" in full view of the attendants to Cleopatra's presumably regal monument. This setting would have a strong influence on the audience's perception of love as something devastating and monumental, and the imagery of Antony being raised to Cleopatra suggests that the nobility of their love elevates this death from mere sadness to a great tragedy.' The candidate then went on to compare this public presentation of love to the love depicted by Wharton 'who, in contrast, presents love and the pain it causes with a sensitivity, intimacy and attention to detail that suggests that the greatest pain of love takes place on a personal level.'

Other useful areas of comparison included the use of light and darkness imagery in both texts, the use of kissing, the presentation of dominant female characters and loves that are to some degree impeded by social or political barriers.

There were a great many useful wider reading references, for example to Zoe Heller's *Notes on a Scandal* and EM Forster's *A Room with a View*. Some texts produced links of varying quality. Many candidates, for example, used *The Great Gatsby*, but made only strained comparisons to *The Age of Innocence*, others, more usefully, saw the seeds of 1920s decadence in Wharton's portrayal of the 1870s and used appropriate close references from both texts to explore both similarities and differences. Another text that produced references of varying quality was Auden's elegy beginning 'Stop all the clocks'. As one senior examiner remarked, when this poem was used 'too few saw fit to relate it to Cleopatra's speeches after Antony has died. They preferred to focus on the (then) "forbidden homosexual love". Surely it does not matter whether Auden is writing of a man or of a pet Labrador: it is the passion and the imagery that bear comparison. Opportunities for sound AO2 analysis and AO3 comparison were just not seized.'

Note

Although the main purpose of this report is to summarise the ways in which candidates responded to the demands of the LITA3 paper, it also offers advice on how centres can prepare candidates effectively for future examinations. Centres should use it in conjunction with the January 2011 Mark Scheme, which contains not only the relevant assessment grids but also Indicative Content for each question. While not intended to be prescriptive, teachers and students might find this useful when considering potential approaches to the unseen items, as well as ways in which comparisons and wider reading references might be made.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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