



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
January 2012**

English Literature A

LITA3

(Specification 2740)

Unit 3: Reading for Meaning

Report on the Examination

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General

The examiners were pleased with the performance of the question paper. It was judged to be both accessible to the full range of the candidature as well as to offer sufficient challenge to those of the highest ability. Students related well to the items on the paper: the vast majority understood the subject matter and were able to write engaged responses as well as select relevant links to their wider reading. While the older items on the paper might at first have appeared difficult, the examiners noted that, in practice, these actually enabled student performance by offering a variety of interpretive opportunities to the full range of the candidature. It was interesting, for example, that the more recent and seemingly more accessible 'One Flesh' by Elizabeth Jennings, was often analysed less well than 'The Anniversary' by John Donne.

Before moving on to some of the specific features of student responses, it might be worth reminding schools and colleges that LITA3 is designed as a synoptic paper to be taken at the end of the two-year course, and that, therefore, it is not normally recommended for students to take it in the January directly after their AS year. In addition, re-sit students should be aware that, if they are to maximise their potential for an improved mark, they will need not only to read and revise, but also to practise analysing and comparing unseen texts. Teachers could remind those who are re-sitting after having left school that the AQA website provides links to many valuable resources such as question papers and mark schemes from previous examination series.

January 2012 saw a range of achievement by students. The features of strong answers were similar to those in previous series. Such responses reflected not just good teaching as well as appropriate reading and hard work during the course, but also good technique during the examination. It was clear that high-achieving students had taken significant time to read the items carefully and to plan their responses. In addition, they did not waste time on lengthy or generalised introductions; as one senior examiner put it: 'a "straight in" approach is much more effective than nearly a page of general off-loading of context or statements of intent'. Many high-performing students began with a brief opening paragraph that addressed both items, offering some sense of overview and comparison as well as showing an appreciation of their main meaning or purpose. In addition, strong students selected their material wisely. Obviously, under the time constraints of the examinations, there is insufficient time to write about everything that might be said about the items, or to make every possible wider reading link; strong students realised this and chose to write about the things they believed to be the most important and the things they knew they could write about best. While it is a sign of strength to grapple with ambiguities and to offer interpretive alternatives, it is a sign of weakness to take on a difficult part of a passage and only guesswork. Lower-performing students in particular, might be advised to focus on the areas that they understand most. Students could take heed of the words of the wise teacher who once warned his class: 'Don't parade your ignorance.'

Regarding wider reading, though, the reverse is not always true: students should only parade their knowledge when it is relevant. As in previous series, there were examples of impressively integrated contextual understanding, but there was also the work of some students who were determined to parade pre-conceived ideas. Some of the same quotations recurred, including Cathy's 'I am Heathcliff' and various depictions of sex and genitalia from *The Canterbury Tales*. While there may be times

when such references have relevance, it is usually more impressive when a reference gives the impression of having been chosen as the best particular example to cast light on an aspect of the item in question. Students who did well with *Wuthering Heights* sometimes did cite the well-known quotation above, but were also able to develop the wider reading link in detail by discussing elements of Item C and making reference to apposite quotations from elsewhere in the text, referring, for example, to moments from the novel such as the sickbed scene with Cathy and Heathcliff's anguished reaction to her death.

As ever, the best links came from thorough understanding. If a student knows a text in its entirety, there is much more likelihood of that student being able to select a useful link. If, however, a student knows only a single extract, this can result in the student trying to work their knowledge of this particular extract into an answer regardless of relevance. A similar observation may be made regarding the use of prose and drama items from previous question papers as wider reading. While students may have studied such material usefully in the context of examination practice, it is inadvisable for them to refer to a drama or prose extract that has been set previously and try to pass this off as their own selection. Of course, it is possible that a novel such as *The Age of Innocence* might have been read in its entirety, but, when students make obvious errors of fact and are drawn to the same key moment that was set on a previous question paper, it is rarely easy for examiners to credit such references as being relevant, detailed or enhancing.

Historical contexts were sometimes used unhelpfully, and, just as is the case with wider reading, the best references came from contexts that had been learned in detail when students had been taught a particular literary text. For example, those students who had studied Victorian literature and who could comment on specific aspects of marriage and society (often linking this to other literary texts) were sometimes able to illuminate their readings of Item C; but those who offered general comment on the 1960s when writing about Item B usually failed to be able to make more than basic remarks. Sometimes students tried to use contexts that they do not appear to fully understand. A significant number, for example, appeared to simply attach the term postmodernism to any text written after the Second World War, which rarely leads to any light being cast on an item from the question paper. It is perhaps unhelpful for students to think of postmodernism as a distinct period in the same way as, for example, they might think of the Victorian era or the First World War. Indeed, if they decide to use it at all, they might find it more productive to consider postmodernism from the perspective of style. This is notoriously tricky to define, but might in writing be thought of as being marked by such features as a playful mixture of elements of 'high' and 'low' culture (and sometimes genres), a marked sense of allusiveness, self-reflexivity and intertextuality and a lack of certainty over meaning and authority, which is sometimes evident in the use of such devices as unreliable narrators and inconclusive or multiple endings. Postmodernism is not a helpful term for every text written after 1945 and it is difficult to apply meaningfully to texts that are more conventional in terms of their form, structure and conception. Admittedly, it might be an enriching context in some cases, such as perhaps when exploring a text such as John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), which is a highly allusive and self-referential text, which offers three endings and even features a character named John Fowles.

The example above, we hope, demonstrates that at the heart of any successful contextual link – be it from another wider reading text or from a social, political,

literary, cultural or theoretical background – is the study of a literary text. There is no compulsion for any student to have studied any particular context and it is unhelpful to do so discreetly; students should remember that while they may choose to adopt various approaches to the items on the question paper, they are not obliged to do so. Indeed it is possible to gain full marks by using the only the items and sophisticated wider reading links.

Question 1

This question tests the students' 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.

On the whole, students wrote with understanding and personal engagement on the poems, with the best spending sufficient time reading and thinking about the poems and choosing productive points of comparison before beginning to answer. Some lower-performing students misread aspects of the poems through commenting on isolated words and phrases, rather than reading whole clauses and sentences in their context. Similarly, a few students picked up on the words and phrases of 'The Anniversary' and responded to the semantic field of death, but deduced that the couple in the poem were actually dead. On both items some weaker responses offered bland comments of the type already familiar to examiners, such as 'the rhyme allows the poem to flow smoothly'.

There were some impressive comments on the structure of the poems. Some students explored how the Donne poem moved from considering life, then death and finally the afterlife; one commented that the poem moves from 'persistent sets of rhyming couplets . . . to a climactic and triumphant conclusion complete with a building triadic "years and years unto years" and two sets of rhyming couplets in the last four lines culminating in "reign" to give this idea of power, eternity and optimism'. Sometimes students made sensible comments on the length of lines in the poem, commenting, for example on how the shortest line of the first stanza, the seventh, was an iambic tetrameter and how its length – and even its look on the page – made it stand out and helped to reinforce its meaning which was expressed in a simple statement and which summed up the main idea in the stanza: 'Only our love hath no decay'. Other students' comments were more speculative, such as 'the lines are of unequal length and that suggests we are going on a journey'. Writing about the Jennings poem, some noted the subtle movement from a distant perspective that observes the couple at the beginning to the more emotionally involved viewpoint, when the speaker asks a rhetorical question about her parents. Several students also commented on the shift in stanzaic form in Jennings' poem, with one suggesting that the lack of a couplet in the final stanza creates 'the impression that the relationship is fully over as it gives the last line a more ominous feel and separates it from the line before, just as the parents are apart in their beds.'

Students who read the poems closely were able to develop sophisticated arguments. Those who noted that the poem suggested that it was 'passion' had died in the relationship rather than love benefitted from this observation. Noticing small details in the context of the whole also helped: the man's book was not holding his interest but was 'unread', and the destination that was facing the couple was not death, but 'Chastity'. Close attention to the poems' titles was another useful strategy. Many commented usefully on the celebratory connotations of the word 'anniversary' and

some noted the marital resonances of 'One Flesh', which sometimes enabled students to comment on the Biblical diction in the poem.

Less helpful approaches were when students used the poems as springboards to comment on other issues. Even strong students sometimes lapsed when using generalised historical information, such as the comment that 'you can be alone and isolated from your partner. Whilst this is widely accepted as the norm nowadays, Donne's idealised and romanticised view would be seen as unrealistic'. Such generalised comments rarely cast any light on the poem in question and often led students to digress (as those who wrote at length about kingship in Tudor England and left 'The Anniversary' behind did). In addition, it was an unhelpful strategy to recycle contextual material from previous examination series. As one examiner noted: 'why begin by saying the metaphysicals were interested in science and so on when it is not relevant to *this* poem.'

As ever, students should be dissuaded from a feature-spotting approach. Some wasted time writing out the rhyme schemes of poems, and many of those who did, did so inaccurately. Better responses to rhyme included the student who suggested that in 'The Anniversary' 'the use of rhyming couplets also keeps the poem somewhat upbeat – which fits the use of hyperbole and the over-exaggerated references to the "decay" of "All Kings" and "their favourites"'. In addition, some examiners noted the prolixity of some students who insisted on using jargon-heavy expressions such as 'the lexical choice of', 'the pragmatics of the poem' and 'the grammatical construct of the bracket'. By contrast, the highest-performing students did name literary features, but also explored effects and commented on how they shape meaning; they also used literary terms, but as a means to enable them to comment more fully and precisely on aspects of the texts, not as an end in themselves.

The wider reading used was of varied quality, although there appeared to be more of a focus on selection than in some previous series: fewer students wrote about too many wider reading links and most at least attempted to relate them to the items. While a caveat about using wider reading from prose and drama has been made in the first section of this report, it is worth mentioning that some students did use poems from previous examinations to good effect. For example, there were some helpful comparisons and contrasts made between the presentation of time in Items A and B and in 'Meeting Point'. These came when students appeared to have studied the MacNeice poem thoroughly, rather than having remembered parts of it from examination practice; such students knew about the poem's form and overall ideas and were able to make useful selections, which helped to cast light on the items under comparison.

Many students were able to make sensible links between 'The Anniversary' and other Donne poems, or other metaphysical poetry. Those who had studied a metaphysical poetry in some detail often made illuminating comments. It is this sort of literary or historical context – which is predicated on the study of literary texts, rather than the kind of literary theory or history that is learned discreetly and at second hand – that is proving to be the most useful type of context. Some used what they knew of Donne's biography to good effect, with one or two students making interesting references to his great friend, John King, and arguing that the poem's love need not be seen as a sexual love, but might celebrate the love between two friends. Those who were able

to contrast the lack of sexual imagery and content in the poem to other metaphysical poems were often able to come to similar conclusions.

It is always impressive when students know poems thoroughly, and those who did were able to develop their links in detail and with much greater sophistication than those who had only learned a few words here and there. For example, one student was able to compare both items to Spenser's sonnet beginning 'One day I wrote her name upon the strand' and select brief quotations from several parts of this sonnet as well as quote skilfully from the items to develop a sophisticated and analytical link. By contrast, students limit the quality of their responses when they know few poems in any depth. The examiners are used to reading many links from the same poems – for example, Shakespeare's sonnets 18, 116 and 130 – and it is obvious when students misquote or make errors of fact. In addition, it is worth getting the names of poems and their authors right; of course, the examiners do not give undue weight to the odd slip, but it does not inspire confidence when a student names the poem that begins 'Busy old fool' as 'The Rising Sun' or credits a sonnet called 'Remember' to Charlotte Bronte.

Question 2

This question tests the students' 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, but which, in this case, must include references to prose and drama. There is also a focus for comparison; in this case it was 'the ways in which unfaithfulness is presented'.

On the whole students seemed to enjoy writing about the items, which were understood by the vast majority and which afforded many points of comparison and contrast as well as opportunities for making links to wider reading. A small minority of students appeared to have spent too much of their time on the first question so that when they attempted to answer the second they had insufficient time to write a full response. It is important that students pace themselves and spend *at least* half the time available on their answer to Question 2; given that they need to make at least two relevant wider reading links, they will probably want to write more in response to this question than they did for Question 1. Schools and colleges are reminded that it would be advantageous for students to have the opportunity to practise writing an entire question paper under timed conditions so that they are aware of the demands of the examination in practice as well as in theory.

Most students made good use of the introductions printed in the question paper, although a few need to be reminded that these have been written primarily to help them to understand the context of the items and that there are no marks for copying out, paraphrasing or passing off parts of this material as their own. Students' attention should be focused sharply on the items.

Strong candidates commented with insight on Hardy's portrayal of his characters in the extract from *The Woodlanders*, noting the complexities of the situation and analysing his use of figurative language. Many, for example, commented on the tender image of Grace stroking the dead Giles's eyelashes 'as if she were stroking a bird'. Others explored the dialogue at the opening of the extract with varying degrees

of effectiveness. There was some basic work, which tended to focus more on punctuation – such as the use of dashes (usually referred to erroneously as hyphens) exclamation marks and question marks – than on meaning. It is preferable for students to concentrate on the meaning and tone of a whole sentence that forms a question or an exclamation, rather than simply the punctuation mark that signal its function. When students did, however, focus on meaning and the complexities of Hardy's writing they often produced sophisticated analysis. For example, one wrote that 'Fitzpiers's infidelity is criticised and despised by Fitzpiers himself who refers to himself as a "vagabond – a brute – not worthy to possess the smallest fragments of you [Grace]". This monstrous imagery, with its unexpected and brutal honesty, is so self-deprecating that one cannot help but to feel pity for Fitzpiers despite his "sins".' This student went on to select detail from later in the passage to develop her personal response and explore the complexities further: 'Hardy portrays him as so utterly pathetic and hopeless, commenting that 'although his infidelity is so demonised, Fitzpiers is so pitiful and hopeless that one does not know whether this makes him more despicable or all the more forgivable.'

High-performing students were able to develop sophisticated readings by commenting on subtle shifts of mood. After having analysed the dialogue between Grace and Fitzpiers some explored the more sombre mood at the end of the passage when several suggested that Grace is presented as being utterly alone, often commenting on the aural as well as the visual imagery created when 'the only perceptible sounds' were 'the crackling of the dead leaves'. Others contended that the reader's feelings towards Fitzpiers might have changed by the close of the extract when we see though Grace's eyes and notice that 'the intellectual look that had always been in his face was wrought to a finer phase by thinness; and a careworn dignity had been superadded' and that the character whom they might have considered a villain was now gaining their sympathies.

Many students also explored the ambiguities of the passage from *Troilus and Cressida*, finding several useful points of comparison and contrast. Some compared the mixed feelings that Cressida displays as she gives then takes back Troilus' sleeve from Diomedes with the presentation of Grace when 'she half-repented' after her lie to Fitzpiers. Most interpreted Cressida's behaviour as being sincere, although some did make a credible case for her being seen as more calculating. There were interesting possibilities for further exploration of ambiguity. Students commented on Thersites and his cynicism, and some picked up on the potential for comedy in the couplet: 'A proof of strength she could not publish more,/ Unless she said, "My mind is now turned whore". While few chose to comment on this character in any way, those who did often made sophisticated observations such as 'Thersites gives an insight into the plot for the audience, similar to the Fool in *King Lear*'.

As with the other items, many of the weakest responses on Item D came from students reading words and fragments, rather than whole clauses and sentences in context. For example, many weaker responses concentrated on the word 'devil' when Troilus says 'Wert thou the devil, and wor'st it on thy horn,/ It should be challenged' but ignored Troilus' fury to write about how Diomedes was being called the devil and often digressed into the connotations of such diabolical language at great length. Some students also paid little attention to stage directions, or even which speeches were attributed to whom; this led to a minority mistakenly thinking that the comment about turning whore came from Troilus, which often led them further down an interpretive cul-de-sac.

Those who used the stage directions to help them comment on the action on stage as well as the potential audience response usually performed very well, with the points when Cressida and Diomedes tussle over the sleeve and when Diomedes begins to leave but being persuaded to stay being popular moments for analysis. Some also compared the different feelings created in the audience and reader by the different items. The best of these explored such matters fully, linking them to specific details in the texts and exploring meaning; the worst digressed, making general observations about the genres that were not related to the items on the question paper.

Other areas to avoid included the use of generalised contextual information and the bogus application of critical approaches. Some claimed ‘Shakespeare lived in the Elizabethan era where infidelity was seen as a horrendous sin and an audience witnessing this would have been shocked at its content and plot’, while others contended the opposite with equal ineffectiveness: ‘infidelity was accepted more light-heartedly in the Elizabethan era’. Students would be on safer ground if they used real examples from texts they knew, or precise aspects of historical information that they learned while studying these texts. While some discerning candidates were capable of adopting a feminist approach to an item, by, for example, commenting on Grace’s strength of character as a Victorian heroine and comparing and contrasting her with other Victorian heroines, it was a disadvantage to come to the items with an approach already in mind. As one examiner noted: ‘imported feminist agendas rarely helped. They must *select* from their knowledge what is *relevant* to the item set’. Similarly, some of the historical and critical theory has been picked up appears to have been unassimilated by the students. This sometimes manifested itself when students who, with modest powers of expression demonstrated a basic grasp of the items but managed to drop in phrases such as ‘social hegemony’. Ideas that are not understood or are partially understood do nothing to help students gain marks. As one examiner commented: ‘More focus on reading and understanding whole books and less attention to extracts and second hand theory would do much to improve the students’ grades’.

There were a great many useful wider reading links. Often popular texts such as *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Wuthering Heights* were used to good effect, with the most impressive links being those that the student selected specifically for the items under comparison. By contrast sometimes these very same novels led to the least helpful links, which often occurred when students selected the same key moments, which sometimes gave the impression that these were the only parts of the novels in question that the students had actually read. There was some very good uses of *A Doll’s House* as well as *Othello* and *Paradise Lost*. As in previous series some students seemed determined to use wider reading that they had prepared, which resulted in some forced links and usually supported marks no higher than in Band 2. As with the earlier comments on poetry, it is wise for students to know quotations accurately and to get authors’ and characters’ names, as well as the titles of books, correct.

Finally, teachers and their students are also to be congratulated that there was much evidence of good writing and appropriate preparation. In general, the standard of written expression and the quality of understanding was relatively high and there were fewer infringements of the rules regarding wider reading. Indeed in the vast

majority of cases, it seems that students had followed well-constructed courses that involved the study of whole texts and an appropriately broad range of reading.

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 schools and colleges can prepare students effectively for future examinations. It should be used in conjunction with the June 2012 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 document 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.

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

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.