



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

English Literature A

LTA1C

(Specification 2740)

Unit 1: Texts in Context

The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature

Report on the Examination

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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LTA1C The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature

The entry was around 1300 students, compared to nearer 7000 last summer, with the large majority of students choosing to answer on Duffy's *The World's Wife* and very few responses seen in general to Angelou's *And Still I Rise* in Section B. Schools and colleges will find the January 2012 LTA1C mark scheme a very useful document here, as it contains not only the assessment grids which will be familiar from the previous series but also an Indicative Content section for each question, suggesting possible approaches which successful students might adopt in their responses. In addition, schools and colleges will also find it useful to refer to subsequent reports going back to January 2009.

As a preamble schools and colleges should remember that although Assessment Objective 4 is tested in Section A but not in Section B, they would do well to advise their students to note the specific contexts of the extract set in Section A and to adapt their comments accordingly. Students will make better sense of the course, finding it more satisfying if they can understand the importance of central events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in respect of the Struggle for Identity. It is also a good idea to consider how attitudes to ethnicity, gender and sexuality in particular for this January's paper, vary in different parts of the world and to avoid using terminology that is inappropriate to different cultures, eras and situations, for example 'apartheid' and 'segregation', 'the women's suffrage movement' and 'the women's liberation movement' or, for example, in suggesting that homophobia might be rampant and pernicious in the USA, without some understanding of global attitudes when homosexuality is still punishable by death in some countries. This January's passage for contextual linking was set against a backdrop of late 1970s' events in a part of the USA, for example, so it would be pertinent for students to acknowledge these specifics before seeking to compare and contrast contextual detail.

As this January saw the seventh outing of this paper it would be hoped that schools and colleges and students alike, were well used to the format and requirements of the Specification and examination procedures. There remain a few areas of concern where inappropriate texts are cited in the Wider Reading. The paper tests understanding of The Struggle for Identity in **Modern Literature** so Shakespearean drama should not be referenced.

The paper functioned very well with the Section A speech extract proving highly accessible, spurring students on to make informed links to their wider reading, not only by exploration of issues pertaining to sexuality but also by exploration of technique, matters of autonomy, political struggle, personal choice and collective inspiration. It was evident that some schools and colleges had entered students early and this was reflected in the comparative immaturity and underdevelopment of their wider reading links in the contextual linking. It is always the case that the January paper should be seen as an opportunity for re-sitting, rather than a 'mock' because candidates' understanding and confident control of their material invariably mature in the months up to May and the time spent on modules in the January examination 'window' heavily erodes valuable teaching time. It would be exceptional students as opposed to the norm who could perform to their best after only four months of study. Students re-sitting the paper should also have revisited their texts since the previous summer and taken the opportunity to review their wider reading and contextual understanding.

As ever, the best way to prepare students for Question 1 is by providing them with non-fiction extracts from Modern Literature that deal with a full range of identity issues. Although schools and colleges have already identified three wider reading texts (one from each literary genre) and submitted details of these to their consortium advisors, it is vital that students' wider reading extends beyond this minimum required by the 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 these 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; 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 students' facility in answering Question 1, schools and colleges are advised to develop a programme of wider reading. The title of the unit also reminds students that the focus of their reading should be texts of the modern era, loosely defined for these purposes as twentieth and twenty-first century texts. Schools and colleges are reminded that there is further guidance on how to prepare candidates for Question 1 in the 'Contextual Linking' advice which was issued in the summer of 2008. Wherever possible, whole texts should be studied to avoid misunderstanding of contexts and reductive comments that can blight an otherwise sound response. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning to some extent and in choosing some of their additional texts they will develop their own tastes as well as deepening their understanding of the breadth of the struggle for identity. It is extremely obvious to any examiner when students have been 'blanket taught' to offer almost identical responses to a minimum number of texts. Interestingly, this is most noticeable in the approach to poetry where students cite a collection but can often make reference to only one poem and sometimes in such little detail that the genre qualities are deemed irrelevant. Whilst accepting that time is a factor, wider reading should be exactly that. The keeping of reading logs and seminar discussions led by the students themselves could be the way forward in helping to support originality and fuller, informed participation in this course.

As ever, the extracts used in Question 1 will relate to at least one of these key areas of the Struggle for Identity:

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Sexual Orientation
- Religion
- Cultural Diversity
- Class
- Discrimination
- Alienation and Dislocation
- Issues of Inequality caused by all or any of the above

The wording of the question will provide a 'steer' towards one of these areas, 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 consider

coverage of all these areas 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 establishments will introduce their students to material from beyond this list. Naturally, students' wider reading should cover all three literary genres in more-or-less 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 worth noting that even though reliance upon Section B poetry is not strictly an infringement of rubric to do so does show, inevitably, narrowness that is at odds with the spirit of the course. Students should not restrict themselves to exactly the same texts and extracts and exactly the same points and interpretations chosen by any one teacher. Instead candidates should be encouraged to develop their own repertoire of wider reading and *readings* so that their responses are individual and so that 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, those who are more confident and sophisticated 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 candidates reach the higher bands of the mark scheme. Neither will very general references to discrimination and prejudiced attitudes that show understanding of sociological factors but very little relevance to how writers explore these attitudes through their themes and craft. These approaches are most likely to occur in the responses of students whose wider reading has been limited to three texts: it should not be a problem for those who are able to draw on a truly wide experience of texts about identity struggle.

Section A: Contextual Linking

Question 1

This January's piece for contextual linking was the concluding part of a speech given by Harvey Milk in 1978. Milk, an openly gay man, had recently been elected to public office in California when he gave this address to gay members of the Democratic Caucus. A detail not included in the preamble but alluded to by a few students, was that Harvey Milk was shot dead by a political opponent, in his office, some months after giving this speech. That detail formed proof, if any were needed, of the hostility faced by homosexuals in public office in a part of the USA more commonly associated with liberal attitudes and inclusion. However, such wider knowledge and specific understanding of context was not prerequisite as the passages set must be abundantly accessible to students as a hitherto 'unseen' text. Milk spoke passionately but with attention to structure and control, about the need for gay people to have role models and the sense of isolation experienced by so many, especially the young, facing the decision to 'come out' and declare their sexuality. The speech, albeit the concluding part, resonated with rhetorical features and was clear in its purpose of inspiration. Most students had no problems in identifying the key areas of

the struggle, the gay movement's, young people's in general and Milk's own, although it was also evident that Milk had, to a degree, succeeded in his struggle but was intent upon publicising and motivating the collective one as opposed to the individual.

The content of the speech proved eminently accessible to students although it was surprising how some ignored the contextual steer offered in the preamble whilst others spent excessive time repeating it almost verbatim. However, a great variation in the depth of their reading was evident. Where too little time had been spent on reading for meaning, students tended to remain shallow in their appraisal of Milk's message as well as generalised in their exploration of technique. It is always a challenge for students to expend a fair balance of time between the unpacking of the extract and the linking to their wider reading, but it is never advisable to skim the surface of an extract that has been chosen for its depths and subtleties. Superficial approaches invariably lead to poor understanding and shallow linking. Those links need to be carefully discerned, illustrated and developed if they are to demonstrate Band 4 skills. Students who merely paraphrased the speech were not exploring language, form and structure. Those who described features and techniques without explaining what this did to enhance the issues raised or show how they deepened or developed the links to the wider reading, were probably not going to escape Band 2 in general. Some students showed little interest in the contexts or SFI issues of the extract, looking instead to set up or engineer links to their wider reading with attendant skewing of content or distortion. Others were a little reticent in offering different readings of Milk's choices of language, for example, 'friend' that could have been used to mean 'straight', sympathetic or even, if irony were part of Milk's tone, secretly hostile to the gay cause. Opening up the extract to interpretation should be high on a student's agenda as should offering a clear, personal reading or interpretation. When moving on to link to the wider reading, students would be well advised to accentuate the differences between the stance, views or issues of the passage and those of their chosen texts for in discerning contrasts and shades of difference they show themselves to be sensitive and truly capable of 'thinking on their feet' rather than being intent on shoe-horning rehearsed material into their response whether it truly fits or not.

Most students appreciated Milk's skill in using different pronouns to explore his personal viewpoint, his desire to be inclusive and his determination to exhort each and every listener in his sympathetic original audience to do something to make a difference to the gay cause. Detailed explorations were offered of Milk's invective as well as his note-worthy structure and syntax that led to a crystal clear conclusion. Better responses were often those where the overarching structure of the extract was noted meaningfully as this showed students had an overview of Milk's purpose as well as his techniques. Those who were able to appreciate Milk's interesting lexis and analyse its impact on the first as well as subsequent audiences, were able to show AO2 accomplishment. Naturally, those who used the sophisticated terminology of analysis appropriately were likely to score most highly but those who scored highest were able to use those observations to reinforce their intrinsic understanding of Milk's **thoughts and feelings**, key words of the question and therefore guaranteed to maintain focus and relevance. There were many metaphorical uses of language to explore that linked to the struggle for identity across all areas, such as the concept of social 'invisibility', the commerciality of 'wheeling and dealing' (particularly pertinent to the political backdrop) and the challenge to remain 'unbought' or refusing to accept

‘pabulum’, the explanation and implications of ‘coming out’, the impetus and momentum created by a ‘green light’, the social stigma and specific context of being made to ‘sit in the back of the bus’ and the soaring rhetoric of ‘hope’. Students who were clear in their minds that the extract was but the concluding part of a speech, the nature of the occasion at which it was delivered, as well as the guaranteed friendly reception of the original audience compared with other audiences since its initial delivery, were able to make best evaluation of all it had to offer.

Highly prized and rewarded was the ability to make thoughtful, informed comments on the context of the piece, late 1970’s USA, where the face of the majority (a concept Milk strenuously seeks to avoid describing as such in the same way he eschews description of gays, blacks, seniors, and the handicapped as minorities) might be that of the former beauty queen and homophobe, Anita Bryant. Rare were the students who picked up and developed with any real credence, these points from the text that were clear for all to access. Rarer still were those who were able to explore and compare social, political, historical and cultural contexts across their wider reading texts when attempting to show similarities and differences. Some students routinely assumed British contexts when their comparative literature was set in different parts of the world and others assumed Milk was describing wholesale, world-wide attitudes towards sexual orientation when his was a specifically USA-based experience. If students are almost rote-taught ‘contexts’ they often off-load them in awkwardly generalised ways. This could perhaps be avoided by insisting that students do more of the work in exploring contexts of any texts used in the course, for themselves, whilst the teachers provide the opportunity for them to feed back to their peers in the visual and auditory ways in which they are so technologically confident.

As ever, the quality of the response in Question 1 depended largely on the quality of the links made to the wider reading texts (AO3) and on the candidates’ abilities to develop AO2 and AO4 detail. The extract should have afforded ample opportunity to craft such links and, in the main, these were apparent. It is a little worrying however to still see *Othello* or *Hamlet* being offered here and a continued reliance on some 19th century texts. Examiners do not routinely discount late nineteenth century textual allusions, where some valid element of struggle may be discerned, but there is so much twentieth and twenty-first century material that there is no excuse for such reliance. Whilst, in general, better references to the genre features of texts were seen, especially in the drama choices, poetry was once again often given a very cursory treatment with little exploration of form, structure or language but a heavy reliance on similarity of theme. It is also notable that the more successful students often refer to more than one poem from a cited collection thus showing an admirable overview of themes and ideas, selecting deftly and appropriately to develop their comparisons. Alarming, some schools and colleges still have not prepared their students to use any poetry other than their Section B material. Whilst not technically a rubric infringement, it is against the spirit of wider reading that is at the core of this specification.

It may be helpful to repeat the advice one examiner offered 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 if not downright silly links.
- Beware of lazy assertions about context. Beware of unloading context only loosely linked to the given passage.

Successful students:

- Explored the extract with confidence and insight showing they could discern the struggles for identity of all relevant individuals as well as fully focusing on the thoughts and feelings of the writer
- Made effective links between the extract and their wider reading and were able to explore across poetry, drama and prose of the Modern era
- Paid attention to form, structure and language of the extract as well as those of their wider reading.

Less successful students:

- Wrote general paraphrases of the content of the speech, wrote very short responses or responses that paid too little attention to the extract, especially its structure and conclusions
- Made few or 'forced' links to their wider reading, sometimes ignoring the breadth of genres and often inadequately developing that link
- Struggled to engage with form, structure and language choice in the extract or in their wider reading examples; made inadequate reference to the different contexts of the extract and their wider reading; generalised about context in an inappropriately narrow way.

Section B: Poetry

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.

To some extent, the effectiveness of the poetry questions in differentiating between students is intensified by the simple fact that some have a secure understanding of the relevant Assessment Objectives and the best ways to meet them, whereas others seem to think it will be sufficient to write simple accounts of the few poems they happen to have covered, possibly just a short while before sitting the examination. Assessment Objective 3 is dominant here: the questions invite students

to construct a balanced debate in response to a given opinion, supporting their arguments by detailed analysis of relevant poems. Those who do this are rewarded with appropriately high marks. Those who neglect this often spend much of the poetry question's allocated hour going through one or two poems line by line but paying scant regard to the opinion up for debate; others write whole paragraphs about the importance of individual words or the poet's choice of punctuation but fail to show any understanding of the whole poems from which the words and punctuation points have been extracted. Less confident students can waste precious minutes explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases rather than analysing the effects produced by their use; others make little or no reference whatever to the writer's craft. Schools and colleges would do well to remember that it is those students who are prepared to explore the poetry and respond to it in an informed personal manner that this Specification seeks to reward. Clearly, those who do best are those who maintain a clear focus on the specific remit of the question **throughout** their response, coming to a clearly substantiated conclusion rather than a repetitive recapitulation of most of the ideas that went before.

***And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou**

Very few responses were seen to Questions 1 and 2 on this occasion. Strong responses scored on students' abilities to balance their arguments and to maintain excellent focus on the key words of the question. Pleasingly, most students managed to avoid the unnecessary biographical information available on Maya Angelou's long and colourful life with the result that they could find and focus on the poetry much more effectively than seen in some previous years.

Question 2

Strong answers here were those that showed the close dichotomy of tears and laughter in some of Angelou's poems. Stronger still were those that not only showed the dichotomy but related this back to the idea of 'making life bearable' that was raised in the opening part of the question. In addition, responses that showed students' personal reflections and sensitive, engaged comments scored highly. Weaker candidates struggled to get a grip on the need to show that Angelou **balanced** emotions or found it hard to work between the two extremes in a satisfactory way, preferring to take a linear approach to list one emotion and then another which inevitably made it harder to balance the debate. Weakest of all were those who merely provided a few examples of sad and happy moments or thoughts from Angelou's poems. The question invited some exploration of suitable poems to support and refute the asserted view with freedom to choose whether to interpret "haunted" negatively, positively or both. Critical to success in the balancing of the debate was a prudent selection of poems with support coming mainly from 'Phenomenal Woman', 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me', 'Refusal', 'The Lesson', 'My Arkansas' and 'Ain't That Bad?' As ever, 'Still I Rise' remained a popular choice for demonstrating the indomitability of the spirit crucial to survival and some well-executed analysis of its features was helpful to balancing these debates. Some interesting variations to the debate showed Angelou's ability to develop focus on determination and mood by reference to poems such as 'Kin', 'Willie' and 'My Arkansas'. Counter-arguments were offered based on poems where there was no explicit reference to laughter or tears such as 'Remembrance', 'Men', 'Lady Luncheon Club' and 'In Retrospect'. Candidates who tried to re-hash responses to

previous papers' questions or who offered only superficial readings of any of their choices, damaged their chances of scoring highly in AO2 and those who offered little reference to the breadth of Ms Angelou's repertoire neglected AO3.

Successful students:

- Chose appropriate poems for the exploration of Angelou's ideas about laughter and tears being balanced in her poems
- Analysed Angelou's use of form, structure and language in a meaningful way that avoided 'feature-spotting' and integrated focus on style with her success as a poet
- Carefully integrated only strictly relevant contextual material while maintaining good focus on the key words of the question and key features of their chosen material.

Less successful students:

- Wrote narrow biographical responses, very short, underdeveloped responses or failed to construct a convincing debate especially where they were unable to focus on balance and the idea of making life bearable
- Remained only at the surface of their chosen poems or selected inappropriate poems on which to base their arguments
- Paid little attention to Angelou's use of form, structure and language and/or the key words of the question.

Question 3

Few responses were seen to this question but there was quite a pleasing range of approaches, some showing very confident ability to range appropriately across the selection. Naturally, students who barely mentioned the name of the poem disadvantaged themselves as an element of appraisal and evaluation of 'Thank You Lord' was helpful to providing a framework for any exploration of the themes and ideas that are contained in the selection. The poem provides an expression of the speaker's contentment and gratitude for life and gratitude to God as well as a clear sense of belonging to church and black communities. One examiner commented that whilst students were happy to explore elements of cultural background "they remained strangely coy and reluctant to discuss racial matters". It would be a great shame to think that any reluctance might be a conditioned response to political correctness that makes any discussion of race almost a taboo subject these days. Contextually, any exploration of Angelou's poems in this selection, would benefit from some focus on ethnic pride and the dispelling of racial stereotypes although never to the exclusion or the skewing of a clear focus on AO2 and AO3, i.e. close reading and analysis of poetic technique and the ability to make strong links between the poems to form the basis for clear argument and debate. Some ability to show the range of experiences that have made life interesting was necessary and the strongest responses did this by careful linking of the named poem to ones that evidenced variety in tone, colour and detail such as 'Just Like Job', 'On Ageing', 'Where We Belong, A Duet' and even 'The Singer Will Not Sing'. A strong case could be made for the richness of life lived to the full and the appropriateness of the named poem as acknowledgement of this. Students needed to be careful to make the links back to

the concluding poem and make them explicit. Counter-arguments were possible along the lines of finding and exploring aspects of poems where Angelou perhaps showed the edgier, more ironic tone not present in 'Thank You Lord'. Evidence in support of this line could be found in 'Junkie Monkey Reel' or still more defiant and darker tones unearthed in poems like 'To Beat the Child was Bad Enough', 'The Memory' or 'In Retrospect'. Curiously, some interpretations insisted on the predominance of Angelou's negativity of tone and cynicism; claims that are very hard to validate in the collection in general and in 'Thank You Lord' in particular and which reveal a weakness in understanding the nuance of language and more subtle shades in Angelou's tone.

Successful students:

- Entered into the debate which considered the idea that 'Thank You Lord' formed an appropriate conclusion to *And Still I Rise* coming to convincing well-evidenced conclusions. Alternatively, they suggested, with recourse to well-chosen detail, alternative poems that might have been more suited to the task
- Linked 'Thank You Lord' to a range of other relevant poems in order to develop the debate.
- Explored Angelou's choices of form, structure and language with confidence, integrating such features into smooth, seamless lines of argument.

Less successful students:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Thank You Lord' provided an appropriate conclusion and could be of much interest when exploring Angelou's themes and ideas in the collection or simply agreed with the given view.
- Wrote basic accounts of the poem or alternatives with little reference to form, structure and language.
- Were unable to engage with ideas expressed in the named poem and in others that broadened the debate about Angelou's expression of a journey or pathways through life towards understanding and acceptance.

***The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy**

This text continues to attract the majority of all the Section B responses and shows that Duffy maintains her popularity and the decision to retain her as a strong presence on the specification from 2013, albeit with a different text, *The Feminine Gospels*, will be a welcome one. Fortunately, in most cases, students managed to refrain from extraneous biographical references but a characteristic of weak answers continued to be an inability to differentiate between the voice of the speaker of the monologue and Duffy's own voice or views. Weaker responses also showed much more reliance on references to poems that had been at the centre of the previous years' questions, in particular, 'Little Red Cap' which, along with 'Anne Hathaway, usually manage to feature in responses but not always in appropriate or relevant ways. Some students relied on copious analysis of form, structure and language to show off their appreciation of poetic technique but in such a way as to reveal little focus on the question so that the detail offered was

redundant or appeared ‘bolted-on’, getting in the way of coherent argument in the worst instances. Much more in evidence this January was an increased facility to debate in a more balanced way although weaker students still managed to overlook this requirement or thought that a quick counter-argument squeezed into their penultimate paragraph would suffice. Students also need to be reminded that there is a distinct difference between describing themes as opposed to showing how themes are used. The former will never be rewarded beyond a Band 2 mark and the latter could take them all the way to the top. Schools and colleges should also be advised that literary critiques and even the words of the poet herself, whether expressed on BBC Radio 4 or anywhere else, do not automatically confer relevance or scholarship unless used appropriately. Most literary criticism can be a blunt instrument when wielded by a student whose basic understanding of the poetry is weak.

Question 4

This was by far the more popular of the Duffy questions. Unfortunately, students who attempted it were, in general, less successful in their lines of argument than those who attempted question 5, possibly because many failed to consider what a theme really was before launching into lengthy descriptions of types of change exemplified in the collection. Some failed to acknowledge that the statement was someone’s opinion or view and not a foregone conclusion, leading many to accept the premise as self-evident by virtue of the sheer number of poems they could cite that showed some sort of change. Listing, whether of names of poems or of techniques, is never a compelling line of argument for it betrays signs of superficiality and shallowness of debate. It hardly needs mentioning that those who dismissed the importance of change out of hand in order to pass rapidly on to exploring an alternative theme showed little ability to debate and evaluate. What was often being demonstrated here was students’ desire to write about something, in fact anything, they could remember or something written as a preparatory essay. Such off-task responses might evidence keen knowledge of some other theme but cannot score highly for AO1 for their limited relevance, or for AO3 in their inevitable skewing of connections and comparisons. ‘Little Red Cap’ once again attracted perhaps more attention than she deserved, where change was construed quite literally as physical growth but less attention was paid to the concept of maturity and autonomy that are clearly parts of that growth. Many students felt that blow by blow accounts of Little Red Cap’s tussles with the wolf and the odd bit of biographical reference to Duffy’s early sexual experiences with her older poet lover would suffice as evidence of change; they did not. Description and narration are Band 2 features at best. Obviously, certain poems lent themselves better to supporting the theme of change argument, such as ‘Thetis’ or ‘Mrs Midas’, whereas ‘Salome’ did not as she does not manage to show much progression and even admits that she’d probably do it all again. Judicious choice of poem is a must for success. Similarly, the need to introduce a counter-argument or develop the debate is essential to escape low Band 2 and far too often students spent insufficient time on these. Ignoring the key word ‘important’ of the question also led to responses that focused poorly on explanation of that importance and unfortunately encouraged students to produce sprawling, uncontrolled responses that piled on more and more examples of change. What was needed was more exploration of reasons behind the changes and, above all, the use Duffy made of the theme to explore her views and

demonstrate her poetic skills. Undoubtedly robust arguments could be made about the importance of other themes and many were made, but students needed to balance their points and illustrate their lines of argument with relevant textual evidence that was appropriately analysed for its effect. Responses that consisted mainly of listing themes with little or no evidence or linking between poems were not going to impress.

Successful students:

- Engaged with the theme and concept of change in a diversity of ways, moving on to challenge and qualify views with careful exploration of tone and prudent choice of examples
- Used a wide and discerning choice of poems to produce a balanced and informed debate.
- Explored Duffy's stance and poetic techniques with confidence.

Less successful students:

- Simply agreed with the given view and failed to focus on the positive and negative aspects of change shown in the collection.
- Wrote general responses with very little consideration of their need to evaluate and validate their views with precise detail and analysis.
- Paid little or no attention to Duffy's choices of form, structure and language, often describing rather than analysing a poem's features.

Question 5

This was the less popular choice but those who chose it seemed to engage well with the need to explore the poem and their reasons with gusto. Unfortunately, those who did not move beyond the poem to reference and explore the wider collection, or to consider why Duffy had not actually made 'Mrs Beast' the final poem, choosing 'Demeter' instead, were not going to do themselves justice in balancing and debating, essential features of band 3 and above. It is always advisable to pay careful attention to all the key words of any question and those who explored why it would or would not be a 'triumphant' conclusion were able to show understanding of tone and form, as the dramatic monologue reveals most about the speaker and her desires. It would be well for students to show they could discern between Duffy's intents and those of the speaker to avoid making simplistic comparisons between Mrs Beast's excoriating brand of militant feminism and any feminist ideals of Duffy. Those comparisons also needed to be evidenced by careful reference to specific poems of the collection rather than by reference to Duffy's life in general. Links to other poems with similar subject matter such as 'Circe' and 'Queen Kong' (and even the ubiquitous 'Little Red Cap'!) might have helped to show 'Mrs Beast's' appropriateness as a conclusion. Or there could have been valid links made to poems with similar style such as 'Eurydice', 'Mrs Sisyphus' or 'Frau Freud'. A robust counter-argument could have been based on the positioning of 'Demeter' as the end-marker and all the reasons why this profoundly different poem in terms of content, tone, style and effect makes a better choice. Alternatively, students could have offered any number of alternative poems, making sure their validation was sound and

convincing. It was also possible to construct a debate based on other themes of the collection that would better deserve to triumph such as love (as evidenced in poems like 'Queen Herod', 'Anne Hathaway', 'Queen Kong' or 'Demeter'). All too often, students offered accounts of the content of 'Mrs Beast' missing, in some instances, the irony that Duffy revels in. Better responses were characterized by an appreciation of this feature and Duffy's ability to be critical of females as well as males. Counter-arguments of quality often revealed Duffy's interest in more subtle representations of powerful women and happy women or were able to explore the structure of the collection in confident detail to show just where 'Mrs Beast' fitted into the larger picture of Duffy's intent. Contrasts and comparisons of the tone of the speakers was, to a degree, also helpful in exploring the true nature of female autonomy and confidence and where students could appreciate the more quietly confident ones of 'Penelope', 'Eurydice' or even 'Pygmalion's Bride', for example, they were able to offer more measured, reflective evaluations.

Successful students:

- Engaged with the view expressed in the question, specifically challenging or qualifying its premise and offering well-founded consideration of Duffy's intentions, avoiding the purely narrative and descriptive; explored the focal poem with confidence and relevance.
- Used a range of less common but nonetheless relevant poems to produce interesting counter-arguments that balanced the debate as well as offering some reference to 'Demeter' as the chosen end-marker.
- Analysed Duffy's considerable poetic prowess with confidence and skill.

Less successful students:

- Offered simple agreement with the question's premise and/or narrowed the debate by ignoring the 'triumphant' tone and possible over-confidence of the speaker.
- Wrote very general responses about feminism and strong women in an indiscriminate way and/or ignored the need to evaluate.
- Paid little attention to Duffy's choices of form, structure and language.

***Skirrid Hill* by Owen Sheers**

Sheers attracted a good number of takers this January with some interesting responses to both questions. Quite the man of the moment, with a confident hand in all genres of literature Sheers may epitomise someone for whom the struggle for identity has never been a problem. However, his insightful blend of national pride mixed with contempt, passion mixed with reserve and delicacy with head-on robustness of style, contribute to poetic themes that disturb as well as delight. Sheers' sheer chutzpah causes students to look afresh at relationships and moments of interface between man and nature. His ability to range across so many varied and eclectic areas of identity makes him deservedly appealing. This time out, students, in general, remained well-focused on his distinctive craft but in doing so sometimes neglected the key words of the questions with the result that generalisation and superficiality sometimes intruded and attempts at meaningful analysis (i.e. that which fed into the argument and fuelled the debate) sometimes went undeveloped.

Question 6

This was the more popular of the questions, offering ample opportunity for students to engage with the appreciation and antagonism that exists in Sheers' poetic explorations of encounters with the opposite sex. Offering also that opportunity for candidates to explore their own choice of poems, it highlighted how important it is for careful selection. The question clearly stated the object as 'strong women' not females in general so those who noted Sheers' interest in the mare of 'The Farrier' and the undeniably equine lexis of 'Skirrid Fawr' were sailing close to the wind of loose interpretation unless they were clearer about strong females in general, when most were able to validate their arguments. Most students were in agreement that Sheers was indeed fascinated by strong women but the quality of their arguments determined their success as did their reference to appropriately illustrative poems and the ability to offer balance in their debate. Popular and secure choices of illustrative poems that supported the given view were 'Amazon' and 'On Going' although some students were vague as to whether the women described were Sheers' mother or grandmother, some even using the terms interchangeably. Clearly, it can never be advisable to ignore the given view but that is largely what weaker students did when they sought to write about what they hoped had been the topic of the question, for example, Nature, childhood or division in all things animal, vegetable and mineral. To resort to this, after only a cursory glance at the idea of strong women, is bound to indicate poor focus and limited knowledge and understanding. One examiner noted that a few very well argued responses were along the lines of "he's not bothered about strength, he's after their bodies" with the debate that ensued providing a lively and informed counter-argument that retained sufficient reference to the terms of the question to avoid superficiality or irrelevance and offering close, analytical reading of some well-chosen poems. Subtler arguments cited 'Show' where women's strength may be interpreted differently, as indeed it can be in 'Drinking with Hitler'. The best answers were undoubtedly those where students paused to think about and explore what strength really meant and why mental, emotional and spiritual strength, as well as strength of character, might be more productive avenues to explore for themselves as well as Owen Sheers. Counter-arguments were possible and usually involved the analysis of strength and reinterpretation of it in some way, or in the introduction of the idea of Sheers being even more interested in male strength and solidarity. Other lines of counter-argument allowed for discussion of concepts in which Sheers may be even more fascinated such as the rhythms of life and its cyclical movements, landscape, Nature, power and weakness. Whichever areas were chosen for discussion they needed to be placed against a clear consideration of the given view and not, as stated earlier, a hasty dismissal of it. As is usually the case, the weakest responses were characterized by poor paraphrasal approaches and much narrative and descriptive reference.

Successful students:

- Chose highly appropriate poems to explore Sheers' expression of interest in, and even fascination for strong women, taking time to clarify the precise nature of those strengths and choosing equally appropriate poems to validate insightful lines of counter-argument.

- Paid close attention to the choices and effects of form, structure and language, offering sensitive interpretation and analysis.
- Explored a wealth of poetic techniques in an attempt to more clearly articulate Sheers' enthusiasms and areas of interest.

Less successful students:

- Simply offered broad agreement with the given view and struggled even to exemplify the techniques Sheers used.
- Ignored the question's key words and failed to evaluate their agreement or disagreement with them.
- Made generalisations about Sheers' choice of form, structure and language, often asserting rather than illustrating their points.

Question 7

It was apparent in some responses that this was probably the first time some students had read and reflected on the prefatory poem 'Last Act'. An examination that tests students' overview and reflection on a collection is not really the place to tackle an 'unseen' poem so it remains a puzzle as to why such under-prepared students would attempt this question. The poem is somewhat enigmatic and even paradoxical in its content and positioning and that should have warned off those who were not capable of thinking and linking. Happily, most responses seen proved that students were up for this challenge and an interesting range of ideas were put forward to support arguments that were largely in agreement with the premise. One line of validation of this view stated that "if Sheers has placed this poem first then that is the best place for it because, taking his lead from Coleridge, not only are the words the best ones in the best order but the poems are too!" Quite a confident and bold opening gambit and, in that instance at least, one that was ably validated in the spirited debate that followed. The weakest approaches were ones that gave a mediocre explanation of the poem's content and made very few clear links to the rest of the collection. The strongest were those where students showed sensitivity to Sheers' use of extended metaphor and his poetic techniques, thoughtfully proving how these skills are developed in the collection, exploring well-chosen poems along the way and linking them back to the named poem with care. Such a question was a gift to those who had understood and enjoyed Sheers' performances contained in *Skirrid Hill* and some showed maturity of overview in being able to link the prefatory poem to Eliot's lines from *East Coker* that immediately follow it. Congratulations go to the students prepared to offer original insights and imaginative interpretations of the poem's name, content and technique in order to make illuminating explorations of the collection. Strong responses also coped well with the structure of the collection and the form and structure of the named poem. Some students confidently pointed out that Sheers had written 'Last Act' last but had placed it first to provoke and puzzle as well as to introduce his interests, themes and frequent introspections. Where students fully understood the poem the debate was fascinating, taking in poems with similar subject matter such as 'Inheritance', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort' and 'Skirrid Fawr' or those with similar style such as 'Farther'. The strong responses seen often relied on finely-tuned debate of the suitability of the named poem as an opener rather than on a direct counter-argument but some interesting alternative prefatory poems were

offered and engaging reasons given in their support. Most successful were the students whose counter-arguments were informed by their personal response rather than recourse to secondary literary critical views.

Successful students:

- Produced a balanced debate which considered, developed and agreed or refuted the idea that the named poem provided an appropriate introduction to the collection, in an engaged, incisive manner.
- Linked 'Last Act' to a range of other relevant poems and/or made an arresting case for another poem providing a suitable preface.
- Explored Sheers' form, structure and language choice with confidence, citing examples relevantly and with analytical dexterity.

Less successful students:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Last Act' could be an appropriate introduction to the collection, often because it was not understood or had never previously been considered as such.
- Wrote basic accounts of the named poem and/or others in the collection with little relevant or developed reference to the impact of form, structure and language.
- Were unable to move beyond generalisations and assertions in respect of 'Last Act' being an appropriate introduction or any other poem being a more suitable choice.

To summarise:

In general, across Questions 2 to 7 there was a good deal of engaged and intelligent analysis that was not clearly relevant to the question or to the candidate's line of argument. Students should take care to select appropriate poems and focus on only the most relevant aspects of them, rather than offloading all they know about it. Planning remains an important factor here. It was clear that where students had taken a few minutes to collect their thoughts, having perhaps also identified the key words of the question, their responses were better structured and focused. This observation is also pertinent to Section A responses. 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 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 acceptable and can still enable candidates to gain the highest marks.

Students sometimes struggle to explore poetic effects created by writers' choices of form, structure and language. Exploring aspects of form, in particular, such as rhyme, metre and stanza form can lead to 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?” Candidates should also ask these questions themselves and use them to shape their responses when it comes to AO2.

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.