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

English Literature A LITA3

(Specification 2740)

Unit 3: Reading for Meaning

Report on the Examination

General

The question paper was judged to have been successful in enabling performance. As well as being accessible to the full range of the candidature, it was considered to offer sufficient challenge to those of the highest ability. Students related well to the items on the paper, and the examiners were impressed by the engaged nature of the majority of the responses. As one senior examiner noted: 'the items have proved extraordinarily well matched for the purposes of comparison. Students have been offered a very wide range of comparative points.'

Strong answers had similar features to those in previous series. Often they began straight away, directly addressing the question by comparing the items and offering some overview. In addition, high-performing candidates had taken the time to think about the items and to plan their answers. This was not only evident in the overall understanding that they often demonstrated at the outset, but also by the comparative approach that they adopted throughout – indeed the arguments advanced by such answers usually proceeded by means of comparison. As one examiner noted: 'the very best candidates are those with an overview of the task already prepared before they start to write. This is revealed in the quality of their introductions and their shaped and coherent writing'. The best answers also made excellent use of wider reading, remembering that the main purpose of such links is to elucidate the unseen items; accordingly, there was a strong sense that these wider reading links had been selected carefully – because of their aptness – and that their selection enabled the formulation of richer responses. Strong uses of context functioned similarly: there was a sense in which a given approach worked not because it had been prepared earlier, but because choosing it suited the unseen items.

By contrast, lower-performing answers were often marked by willingness to adopt a given approach whatever its relevance, or a desire to use pre-learnt passages as wider reading. In a similar vein, there are still a significant minority of students who seemingly come to the examination with pre-formed agendas. In many cases, this involves categorising one or both of the items, labelling them as examples of, for example, 'forbidden love' or 'unrequited love' and then proceeding to offer wider reading to fit the category rather than the items themselves. Usually, such categorisation led to a reduction in interpretive possibilities, and the students in question might have achieved more had they simply responded to the items themselves, exploring their complexities and ambiguities regardless of whether they fitted a theme that had been studied. In short, categorisation led to simplification of the items, which frequently resulted in responses that reached no higher than Band 2 on the mark scheme. One senior examiner voiced the thoughts of most of the examining team when he noted: 'the trouble is that once students have decided a love is unrequited, or forbidden or whatever, they often close their minds to what is actually going on in the text itself'.

Often weaker answers made poor use of the introductions to the items. At one end of the spectrum students failed to read the introductions effectively, which resulted in errors such as writing about Richard in Item A as though he were already the King. At the other, they paraphrased, or copied parts of the introductory matter. In addition, there were some who seemed to feel the need to provide introductions that recycled parts of the question. As one examiner noted: 'Something like "Despite being written nearly 400 years apart by different writers . . ." is a plodding start, as is an opening

along the lines of "in the following essay I am going to write about …and analyse how the writers use form, structure and language as well as make references to my own reading". Such answers rarely get down to real analysis. Time is short. I would advise students to get stuck in straight away'.

Weaknesses in expression and structure were significant features of scripts achieving low marks. The very lowest amongst these often contained several weaknesses of this type, such as inaccurate sentence construction in which sentences were sometimes demarcated by the use of commas rather than full stops, or when fragments were left to stand alone as sentences. Some scripts were marred by the use of colloquialisms, clichés and the over-reliance on terms such as 'positive' and 'negative'. Commenting on the answers that she had seen, one senior examiner noted that students might have benefitted from more practice in the planning and structuring of answers: 'there was no shortage of wider reading, but writing skills were often poor, suggesting an imbalance in time spent preparing *content* for the course as opposed to preparing students in *how to answer the questions*.' Another noted that even in higher achieving answers, students sometimes weakened their arguments by using colloquial or clichéd expressions such as 'cheating on', 'getting with' or 'love interest'; he also commented on the over-use of modifiers such as 'almost', 'incredibly' and 'huge', which he felt ought to have been avoided completely. In addition, the misspelling of 'woman' as 'women' sometimes led to confusing statements. A further area of weakness in expression for some was the imprecise use of terminology: for example, every piece of writing that praises a lover is not a blazon; every reference to another person is not an apostrophe.

By contrast, students were rewarded for expressing themselves using correct punctuation and grammar. Accurate writing is not just something that the examiners reward in itself; it helps students to develop clear, persuasive arguments and to explore subtleties and complexities in writers' language more effectively and precisely. It was pleasing when students used words such as 'infer' correctly, and when they took care to quote precisely, to name book titles correctly and to indicate line endings when quoting verse.

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 series the genre was drama.

The examiners were pleased by the variety of interesting responses to this question. Despite depicting an ambiguous situation and having less in the way of figurative or rhetorical writing to attract comment, the majority of students found plenty of ways to write about the Pinter passage, with most responding in an engaged manner. As one examiner noted: 'generally most students are very well tuned in to the subtleties of Pinter and could articulate their views effectively'. The extract from *Richard III* was also enabling, with many of the best answers often choosing to comment on the ebb and flow of the dramatic action and making good use of moments such as the spitting, the offering of the sword and the acceptance of the ring. Furthermore, many students used details from the introduction to Item A to inform their reading of the passage. For example, some commented on how the deformed physical nature of Richard might have encouraged a Shakespearean audience to view him as being a morally twisted character. Those who read the introduction to Item A carefully and had noted Richard's ambitions were able to appreciate his duplicity from the outset;

those who had not often mistook Richard's flattery for sincerity. The students who made this mistake, however, did not always perform poorly. As one senior examiner noted: 'not appreciating Richard's duplicity did not disable candidates disproportionally in appreciating other aspects of the passage'. Another remarked that several of the answers that she had marked in response to the first question centred around ideas of power, dominance and gender roles, noting that 'these are obviously interesting areas to examine, but some scripts dealt exclusively with these areas as if there were nothing else to say about either A or B. It seems a shame that the subtleties of Shakespeare's poetry are sometimes reduced to the prosaic generalities of who controls whom and that many of the intricacies of this piece were missed as a result'.

Some did, however, write about Shakespeare's use of language and form to good effect. The language of Richard's compliments was explored by many students, with some arguing that he plays the role of courtly lover perfectly, turning Anne's bitterness into praise, but noting that the exaggerated nature of this praise makes his words not so much courtly as clichéd. One noted that Richard's compliments were littered with exaggerations and paradoxes, citing 'They [Anne's eyes] kill me with a living death' and commenting that members of the audience would recognise and respond to the falseness of Richard's performance. Richard's use of imagery associated with eyes and weeping in his long speech on page 4 attracted numerous comments, and some students were able to analyse the effects of formal features such as the shared line at the top of page 5 (when Richard finishes Anne's line 'I have already' with 'That was in my rage') or the sequence directly after that line when Shakespeare uses stichomythia to craft a speedy exchange of dialogue where the main characters speak alternate half lines in a dispute in which Richard has the last word. While many commented on the soliloquy at the end of the extract, some weaker responses ignored it, or suggested that Richard's rhetorical questions express uncertainty. More usefully, the final line was deemed by many students to strike a foreboding note, with some considering the 'won' as being indicative of the game that Richard was playing with Anne and others suggesting that it prefigures an unpleasant end for her later in the play. Shakespeare's stagecraft also elicited comment from students, particularly those in the higher range of achievement. Some explored the way in which the presence of the pallbearers and the coffin casts a dark, sinister tone over the passage and commented that the odd juxtaposition of the trappings of a funeral and the words of love suggests a love that is insincere or one that foreshadows a marriage that will be based on misery.

While not all students were responsive to the nuances of the manipulative language in Item A, most were able to comment with some effect on Pinter's use of language in Item B. As one examiner noted: 'students were usually alert to Ruth's tone' and 'less able students found it easier to respond to Item B than to Item A'. In addition, most were able to comment on the use of pauses in Pinter, with the least successful, paradoxically, being those who had some experience of Pinter and who commented on the effects of the Pinter pause at length and in general terms; more successful students explored the effects of specific pauses, commenting on how the specific pause and the dialogue around it worked together. Furthermore, many high-performing students compared the pauses in Pinter to moments of tension, or dramatic twists, in Item A, often commenting on language and the battle for power in each item as they did so.

As well as comparing the nature of the power struggles in each of the items, many chose to compare aspects of language, with the monologues of the male characters receiving a good deal of attention. Some commented on the ways in which Richard's long speech is engaging, persuasive and effective, climaxing with the offering of the sword to Anne, while Lenny's seems purposeless, ineffective and leads to a power

struggle over the insignificant item of the ashtray. Other students compared the use of language in both items: Richards's fawning attempts to win Anne, with their subtly suggestive phrasing were compared to Ruth's euphemistic language and – like Richard in his quick responses to Anne — her use of Lenny's words against him in lines such as 'If you take the glass … I'll take you'. While there was much to be gained by exploring the differences between the rhetoric of Richard and the less elevated language of Lenny, there was little point in simply picking out the occasional metaphor or a colloquial utterance. Some students chose to compare the playwrights' use of props and staging. The use of the sword in Item A and the use of the glass in Item B proved to be a fertile point of comparison, and several students compared the phallic nature of Richard's sword to the yonic nature of Ruth's glass. When combined with comparisons generated by the use of proxemics in the scenes, such approaches often yielded sophisticated and mature writing. Others commented on the Pinter's use of costume, with Lenny's pyjamas being seen by many as a sign of his vulnerability compared to Ruth who is fully clothed. Others, however, made a good case for the pyjamas connoting his sexual, or louche, nature.

There were various ways in which students used contextual approaches. Many referred to *The Homecoming* as a postmodern text, and some were able to extrapolate from this to comment convincingly to explore its lack of stable meaning and deliberately ambiguous nature. In addition, others commented on how Pinter's work might be seen to be attuned to the zeitgeist of the mid-1960s by presenting a sexually aware and seductive female, who outmanoeuvres her male counterpart, rendering his attempts to intimidate her through macho posturing harmless and leaving him confused and ineffectual. Others were able to make sense of some of the strangeness of the item by considering it in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd. Some also used their contextual understanding of Shakespeare to good effect, suggesting that the reason for the damning depiction of Richard was for the dramatist to provide useful propaganda for his Tudor queen.

Wider reading worked best when it supported the analysis of the items, without dominating them. One student, for example, wrote impressively about Richard's use of language, showing how he presents himself as having been weakened by love: his manly stoicism has been supplanted by feminine feelings as can be deduced by his eyes, which have been 'made blind by weeping' for love of her. An illuminating reference was then developed when this was compared to the presentation of love in *Antony and Cleopatra* when Antony is weakened by his love for Cleopatra and comments to her that his 'sword [is] made weak by my affection'. Some also compared the presentation of Ruth to that of the teasing and powerful Cleopatra. Other useful references included those to *Much Ado About Nothing*, the best of which avoided straining to over-emphasise the similarities between the couples in the items and those between Beatrice and Benedick, instead linking by means of a competitive exchange, then going on to explore a range of differences. Other popular wider reading choices included *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *A Doll's House*, with successful links being those that were founded on the well-chosen moments. For example, one apt link was made between the suggestiveness of Ruth's glass and the time when Blanche uses sexually suggestive language, when flirting with the young man who is collecting for the *Evening Star* by asking him about his choice of soda. Several others compared Ruth's suggestiveness to Nora's when she shows her stockings to Dr Rank. Less successful were references that seemed to have been prepared in advance, and there were many strained links to plays that supposedly featured a male dominating a female. The comparison between Stanley and Lenny rarely developed very purposefully or very far, and the Helmers were another common pairing that failed to cast much light on the items, with candidates often citing similar quotations such as 'little skylark', 'little songbird' and 'little squirrel' to

prove Torvald's dominance. In a similar vein, one examiner noted 'that some students had a very limited range of reading to call on, so that Miranda's first meeting with Ferdinand in *The Tempest* became a frequent, but unconvincing, demonstration of an 'assertive' woman to place alongside Anne in item A'.

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 poetry. There is also a focus for comparison; in this series it was 'the separation of lovers and its consequences'.

The situations in both items were understood by most students, though in the case of Item C some focused on the relationship between Canon Jocelyn and Mary, or on Mary's loss of her mother rather than on Mary's feelings in the light of her separation from Mr Herbert. While answers were not penalised for this and the examiners did seek to reward well-argued unusual responses, neglecting to comment on the separation of Mary and Mr Herbert often resulted in the student being only able to demonstrate basic understanding of the item. There was much useful comment on point of view, though weaker responses tended to generalise, making claims such as the reader is distanced from the characters because the passage is in the third person. High-performing students were able to comment on the subtle shifts in perspective as the narrator moves towards the feelings of Mary in the second paragraph and towards Canon Jocelyn in the final paragraph of page 8. Some used apt terminology such as free indirect style to help them explore Mayor's narrative techniques (but paying close attention to the text and exploring the effects created and how they shape meaning were more important factors in creating sophisticated and mature responses than the use of particular terminology). Narrative viewpoint also provided some engaged comparisons between the items, with some students contrasting the neutral perspective of Mayor – which several argued was sympathetic to both Mary and her father and allowed readers to sympathise with one or other or both – and the more subjective first person narrative of Byron – which, they argued, presents only the speaker's feelings directly, conveying his bitterness and grief.

The second paragraph of the Mayor passage drew much engaged comment on language, including exploration of the imagery of the moon and of death. Some explored how several elements worked together to build a mood of despair, and several used their knowledge of Gothic texts to enrich their readings of this part of the passage. A few commented on the way in which Mayor presents Mary's perceptions in the light of her separation from Mr Herbert, suggesting that the depiction of the items in the nursery uses the imagery of death and loneliness to provide an external projection of her feelings of depression as she confronts a new-found darkness in her life.

The Byron poem attracted a range of responses, though some examiners reported that, on the whole, 'students often spent less time exploring the details of the poem than the extract from the novel'. Those who wrote maturely about Byron were usually skilled in analysing verse. Able to form an overview of the poem and its subject matter, they linked individual analyses to the meaning of the whole poem. By contrast, low-performing answers to Question 2 were often marked by what one senior examiner termed a '"word sampling" approach' to Byron (where words were selected for comment without much reference to overall meaning) and concluded that 'this de-contextualised approach to meaning is necessarily limiting'. As has been

advised in previous reports on the examination, students should avoid simply picking out words and phrases of interest, but should follow the overall meaning of the poem as they read whole clauses and sentences. Those who adopted such an approach, reading the poem closely and carefully for meaning, performed well. Many offered plausible comments on the nature of the relationship between the speaker and the addressee, with some commenting on the thermal imagery of the first two stanzas which, they argued, creates a deathly effect similar to the language in paragraph two of the Mayor extract.

The careful exploration of relatively accessible aspects such as tone, repetition and the use of exclamatory and interrogative sentences – when well-developed and linked to meaning – usually led to sophisticated analysis. Many also explored the poem's structure making sensible comments on, for example, the shifts in tense and the cyclical effect produced by the repetition of words from the first stanza in the poem's final line, which they argued suggests that the speaker is perpetually trapped by his painful feelings caused by his separation from the addressee. Less impressive were answers that failed to follow the advice above and attempted to analyse devices without much sense of their effects or how they helped to shape the meaning of the poem. Notable amongst these were vague remarks about rhyme and rhythm; one examiner commented: 'there was very little meaning made of the "abab rhyme scheme" although many students felt obliged to point it out'. Another added that 'students need to know what is appropriate when commenting about rhyme and rhythm in verse. Too many claims are left unsupported and unexplained. This is always a more difficult area, but at least some sense of how rhyme and rhythm/metre work in relation to meaning would be helpful'.

Contexts were used helpfully in some cases, such as by those who referred to Byron and Romanticism, often making reference to the Romantics' prizing of spontaneous feeling over logical reasoning to explore the moods in the poem. Others commented on the passionate, Romantic nature of Byron's poem and contrasted his freely expressed emotions with the reticence and repression in the Mayor passage. Those who knew something of Byron's biography often deployed such knowledge to deduce that the sense of shame and secrecy in the poem suggested an adulterous relationship, with some going on to consider it as an autobiographical lyric that had sprung from an actual separation in his life. Comments on the context of Item C proved more problematic. While some students wrote sensibly about Canon Jocelyn's repression and his old-fashioned, Victorian sensibility that places high value on work and duty, there were others who commented unhelpfully on the item as having been written not long after World War One or on the novel as a modernist text. While useful analysis might, of course, have arisen from more specific versions of these comments had they been more fully thought through, such offhand contextual remarks usually led towards generalisations and away from the specific details of the item. As one senior examiner noted: 'the best contextual comments were attached carefully to aspects of the passages set for comparison'.

While the quality of wider reading references varied, those that had been selected for their aptness to a given item and which contained specific detail – often from a given moment in the wider reading text – were invariably of a high quality. In addition, it is important that sufficient contextual detail is included (in the sense of where the reference comes from, or its significance in the wider reading text as a whole); such detail helps the examiner to make sense of the reference and to appreciate how it

relates to the item in question. One senior examiner offers the following advice: 'a wider reading reference works well when a link is made clearly; some contextual explanation within the text is given to make the reference understandable; a particular example is explored, including AO2; and when the wider reading is actively compared to (or contrasted with) the item or items'.

Often it was not so much the wider reading text but the way in which it was used that determined its success. *Wuthering Heights* produced several plodding references of the 'I am Heathcliff' variety, or by means of strained thematic contrasts to Item D – such as on the basis of eternal love and non-eternal love; however, some students were able to use the novel purposefully and did manage to develop apt and detailed connections. For example, several commented on the imagery of loss and death in the items, making precise and illuminating connections to the effects of the death of Catherine on Heathcliff, sometimes comparing language, and Gothic imagery in particular, with sophistication and maturity.

Some poems also proved useful as wider reading. Larkin's 'Talking in Bed' provided some useful points of comparison and contrast, and often Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' produced specific and detailed links to the Byron poem, with many making apt comparisons between the cyclical effects in both 'When We Two Parted' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. In addition, many compared the effects of a separation on the two speakers, as well as the poets' use of language closely. Some, for example, compared the ailing knight in Keats's poem who has 'a lily on [his] brow/ with anguish moist and fever dew' to Byron's speaker who felt the 'dew of the morning' which 'sunk chill on [his] brow'. Such work on this single poem exemplifies a general rule: it is necessary for students to know some poems in detail so that they can be flexible and precise when choosing references and quotations, and to enable them to develop close and illuminating comparisons.

Less helpful links came from candidates who relied on poems that they were only able to make partially or tangentially relevant to the items. Poems that often fell into this category were Ben Jonson's poems on the deaths of his children and the ubiquitous 'Funeral Blues'. Perhaps students' straining for relevance in their verse wider reading came as a consequence of having revised ineffectively or of having only a limited pool of poetry to draw upon. It is recommended that, in addition to their AS poetry text, students sitting LITA3 have studied at least one full poetry text (which might be a published anthology, or one compiled by the school or college). In addition, it is worth noting that a small minority of students still seem to depend on pre-selected extracts, which almost always has a limiting effect on the ways in which they are able to make wider reading links. Having said that, there were fewer instances this series of what some examiners term 'off-loading' of unsuitable or digressive wider reading, and fewer students were dependant on extracts that have been used on previous question papers.

One senior examiner offers the following sensible advice to students: 'they are expected to <u>select</u> from their wider reading; a well-selected link should not be seen as a product of luck but of good preparation. Not all wider reading will be used in the examination'. It is wise to avoid simply displaying knowledge or using the items as springboards for writing about wider reading or generalised context. As another examiner pointed out: 'those answers which provided considerable detail about a wider reading text without explaining precisely why it was relevant were often the

least successful'. Above all, students should remember the aims of wider reading: to cast light on the unseen items and to facilitate fuller and more sophisticated responses.

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.

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.