



General Certificate of Education

English Literature

Specification A

**LTA1C The Struggle for Identity in
Modern Literature**

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - January series

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General

This January's paper marked the first of the new specification in its four module format and the first ever AQA AS paper in the Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature. Whilst Maya Angelou's and Carol Ann Duffy's poetry has been the subject of study and examination for some time now in other specifications, Owen Sheers' *Skirrid Hill* put in its first appearance. In the face of so many innovations in education in general, schools may have been cautious in entering students so early in the course, perhaps keen to get a glimpse of the new style paper first. Indeed, in future years, the January cohort will probably consist mainly of students re-sitting the module rather than those being entered early. Responses to the Angelou and Sheers texts were modest with Duffy attracting significantly the largest proportion of students.

Despite the relatively short time available for Year 12 entrants' preparation prior to examination, some good responses were seen as well as a few very perceptive and mature ones. Weaker answers usually revealed students' limited exposure to and understanding of contextual issues and poor assimilation of the themes of the struggle for identity, such as community, the home, gender, religion, class, sexual identity, ethnicity and socio-historical factors. With wider reading recognised as the crucial underpinning of this specification, it is to be expected that students should be able to make reference to all three genres of writing when responding to Question 1 in order to make relevant links and developments. It was noticeable that some students were unable to refer to all three genres and also tried to rely on references to Owen, Angelou or Duffy as sufficient evidence of their study of poetry. Most students were able to write in adequate length to address the challenges of the questions and to budget their time wisely between the two questions. However, a few were not and some brief responses were seen, suggesting that some year 12 students were insufficiently prepared for the examination or had insufficient stamina for a two-hour paper. Whilst there will always be talented individuals who are well able to assimilate a range of demanding texts and their associated assessment objectives in the four months between GCSE results and the January LTA1 examination, these are perhaps exceptional. Centres might need to accept that the majority of students will need longer to acquire the maturity of reflection and the wide range of knowledge that this paper tests. Premature exposure can be demoralising for students and centres may wish to consider their entry policy carefully when planning for future LTA1 series.

It was felt that this LTA1C paper was effective in testing the Assessment Objectives. It enabled the full range of abilities to demonstrate their textual knowledge and understanding, as well as affording numerous opportunities to explore, link and develop responses in illuminating, insightful ways. There were few rubric infringements but it should be noted that centres must check that they do not disadvantage their students by erroneously focussing on proscribed poems. For example, clear directions were given in the specification and support materials that Angelou's poems in the separate collection *Shaker Why Don't You Sing* would **not** form part of the study and therefore should not have been referred to in answers in Section B. Centres should also be aware that more specific and direct addressing of the four Assessment Objectives in Question 1 and the three in Questions 2 to 7 would enable students to achieve better marks, especially when considering form, structure and language. Whilst recognising that mechanical 'trawling through' the terminology in order to feature-spot is an unproductively sterile process, form, structure and language choices are part and parcel of a writer's repertoire and merit informed comment. Many students were able to recognise and engage with interesting linguistic choices and features but were neglectful of observations and analyses of form and structure both in the extract and in the poetry: a serious and limiting omission.

It is worth repeating that the appropriate Assessment Objectives are embedded in the wording of the questions and, as long as students write relevant answers using the key words of the

questions they will meet these objectives. The majority of students showed some awareness of the Assessment Objectives tested in this paper and wrote accordingly. When responding to Question 1 students do need to apply themselves to both the directed tasks but there does not need to be a sharp division between the two areas of response and answers certainly do not benefit from being subtitled as 1a) and 1b) or 1(i) and 1(ii). It is also not unreasonable to expect students who ignore the information offered in the preamble to Question 1 to disadvantage themselves.

Question 1

The extract from *It's a Long Way from Penny Apples* by Bill Cullen was chosen for its relatively simple expression of some vexing but ubiquitous issues of stereotyping, oppression and discrimination, set against a backdrop of clearly defined family, community and wider social factors. There were different voices and discernibly different viewpoints within the extract as well as some interesting and subtly-expressed differences between male and female presentations and perceptions. An informed, thorough and sensitive reading of the extract yielded much material for appreciation and comment. Students who skimmed the surface and offered paraphrased versions of the content would not be able to offer perceptive responses to the writer's thoughts and feelings and would find those of the speakers and the subject of their conversation, the Maggies, difficult to discern or differentiate. Without recourse to observations on form, structure and language choices, much would be missed in terms of the ways writers express themselves both in the extract and in students' wider reading. The 'similar to/different from' phrase allows students to comment on well-chosen wider reading drawn from all three genres but the answers of better students were characterised by the quality and development of those links. Weaker students also seemed to take comfort in 'off-loading' information of a general nature loosely pertaining to context and SFI issues, without anchoring their points into close textual references or matters of structure, form and language choice. Whilst, to a degree, the extract is chosen to act as a 'springboard' into relevant exploration of students' wider reading, it does require some careful comment and analysis in its own right and stronger responses showed this attention to the detail of the piece.

It was pleasing to note variety in the choices of wider reading cited in students' responses. Most students seemed happiest when exploring prose, whether it was non-fiction or fiction with poetry and drama sometimes being eclipsed by this. No text should have been merely 'name-dropped' as appropriate evaluation requires specific engagement with aspects and features of those texts.

Successful students:

- Explored the extract with confidence and insight
- Made effective links between the extract and their wider reading and were able to explore across poetry, drama and prose
- Paid attention to the language and style of the extract as well as those of their wider reading.

Less successful students:

- Wrote general paraphrases of the content of the extract
- Made few or 'forced' links to their wider reading, sometimes ignoring the breadth of genres
- Struggled to engage with form, structure and language choice.

And Still I Rise

Despite Angelou's continued high profile in the struggle for identity on a range of issues and causes, only a few responses were seen. Some editions of the collection *And Still I Rise* are available with the section *Shaker Why Don't You Sing* affording students opportunity to reflect on those poems **in their wider reading** but were not set for specific comparison and should not have been cited except by way of the wider reading introduced in Section A responses. There was evidence that students had been well taught on the themes of Angelou's poetry and the relevant details of her extraordinary life although there is little opportunity to credit extensive biography in Section B questions. Less prominent was an ability to deal with the specific terms of each question, when selecting and shaping an appropriate response. Some students seemed intent on rewriting a version of what was perhaps their 'mock' or practice questions with consequent loss of focus and some inevitable irrelevance.

Question 2

This was marginally the more popular of the Angelou questions with many students relishing the opportunity to explore Angelou's iconoclastic ideas and techniques with a free choice of appropriate poems. Some attention to the word 'always' in the question may have allowed students the opportunity to refine their comments and argue their cases more insightfully. A more analytical approach to the selected poems was a feature of the more successful responses and, as is often the case, beneficent selection from the prescribed poems was intrinsically rewarded. Students who chose their resources carelessly made the job of arguing their case much more of a struggle whichever side of the debate they were intent on fuelling.

Successful students:

- Chose appropriate poems for the exploration of Angelou's ideas about race and class
- Analysed Angelou's use of form, structure and language choice
- Carefully integrated relevant contextual material while maintaining focus on the text.

Less successful students:

- Wrote narrow biographical responses that may have used proscribed poems from *Shaker Why Don't You Sing*
- Remained at the surface of their chosen poems
- Paid scant attention to Angelou's use of form, structure and language.

Question 3

This was, perhaps surprisingly, slightly the less popular choice and was not always answered successfully, particularly where a poem being offered as better worthy of centrality was chosen from the proscribed section *Quaker Why Don't You Sing*. Students who barely mentioned the named poem disadvantaged themselves because an element of appraisal, comparison and evaluation was prerequisite. Where the named poem was explored and appreciated in some depth (as a case for its centrality or otherwise was being proposed), some lively and informed

responses were seen: Angelou is clearly able to evoke strong and vociferous comment. Strongest of all were the responses that seamlessly explored technique as part and parcel of Angelou's phenomenal skill, warming to her rhythm and musicality.

Successful students:

- Produced a balanced debate which considered the idea that the named poem was "of central importance" in a thoughtful, engaged manner
- Linked 'Phenomenal Woman' to a range of other relevant poems
- Explored Angelou's choices of form, structure and language with confidence.

Less successful students:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Phenomenal Woman' could be central to the collection
- Wrote basic accounts of the poems with little reference to form, structure and language
- Were unable to engage with ideas about gender, class and racial pride.

The World's Wife

The popularity of this text has survived its shift to a new module and has elicited, once again, some lively and engaged responses. This text attracted by far the largest number of responses from the cohort and some of the lengthiest individual answers. It was pleasing to note that students, in the main, avoided assertions of a negatively 'male-bashing' nature and began to explore the more complex and subtle areas of Duffy's technique, as well as showing that they enjoyed the mythical and fairytale elements of her poetry. Evidence of engaged readings was clear in the better responses but there was a tendency to resort to loosely assimilated ideas about feminist writing in general and ascribe some of these to Duffy, particularly where students were less sure of their own thinking.

Question 4

This was a successful question despite being the less chosen option. The keywords 'simplistic' may have proved a challenge to some who perhaps wished to substitute 'simple' or 'crude' with some unfortunate skewing of the question's remit. The adjectives are not synonymous. Weaker students were also inclined to disregard the adjective 'overstated' in an attempt to make generalised points about Duffy's imagery rather than dealing with the effect her imagery has upon the reader in a specifically articulated way. Shallow readers in effect approximated the question's key words to mean a quick tallying up of all the ways in which Duffy is linguistically offensive through the mouthpieces of her various speakers. Closer readers realised that the question was an invitation to consider the rich complexities of Duffy's poetic language and link them to her intent as well as to evaluate the shock tactics that form part of Duffy's arsenal.

Successful students:

- Engaged with the view expressed in the question and challenged its assumption of a negative or pejorative intent
- Used a range of poems to produce a balanced debate
- Explored Duffy's poetic technique with confidence

Less successful students:

- Simply agreed with the question's main idea
- Wrote general answers and/or confused or ignored the crucial adjectival key words
- Paid no attention to Duffy's choices of form, structure and language

Question 5

This was the more popular choice of Duffy questions, enabling well-informed students to write about the way whole-text themes are reflected in the question's focal poem- with the added piquancy of the poem allegedly touching an otherwise unfathomable 'soft spot' in the poet's usually well-defended persona. Most students were able to enumerate the named poem's atypical features and similarly were able to make a range of valid connections to other poems in the collection. 'Salome,' 'Mrs Quasimodo', 'Queen Kong' and 'Queen Herod' featured strongly as useful comparisons, showing how Duffy's poetry in this collection can and does explore complex relationships between the genders without necessarily defaulting to 'male-bashing'. 'Demeter' was also cited as evidence of a love poem albeit to a daughter rather than a husband. A few were able to expand upon the reasons why the poem might be almost unique within the collection and why Duffy might admit to it being her favourite, providing cogent and compelling arguments as they did so.

Successful students:

- Explored the focal poem with confidence
- Established a range of relevant connections between 'Anne Hathaway' and the rest of the collection
- Analysed Duffy's choices of form, structure and language with confidence.

Less successful students:

- Wasted time on offering poor explanations of the relationship between Anne and William and their bed
- Wrote general answers about whole-text themes but failed to focus on 'Anne Hathaway'
- Paid little attention to Duffy's poetic technique.

Skirrid Hill

Very few students answered on this text, possibly for the reasons stated at the outset of this report. *Skirrid Hill* presents students with some very interesting challenges and is a powerfully broad and deep text. Sheers' inimitable ability to explore the peripheries of the physical, social and topographical has engendered some fine poetry that, just like the issues he explores, does not fit into any neat niche. Centres who have not yet considered his collection might be inspired by its force. It is to be hoped that because there is, as yet, very little published literary criticism, this is a liberating text, rather than a daunting one.

Question 6

This was the more popular of the questions on *Skirrid Hill*, offering students the opportunity to explore their own choice of poems from this broadly diverse collection. Students offered plenty of examples of Sheers' imagery and usually managed to link these to some sort of evaluation of its effects.

Successful students:

- Chose appropriate poems for the exploration of Sheers' imagery and its effects
- Analysed Sheers' choices of form, structure and language
- Used Sheers' poetic features other than imagery to create an interesting line of counter-argument

Less successful students:

- Simply agreed with the given view and struggled to find evidence of any alternatives
- Ignored the question's key words
- Made broad generalisations about the effects produced by Sheers' choice of form, structure and language.

Question 7

This was surprisingly the less popular choice given Sheers' Welsh heritage. Some answers revealed little understanding of the text or subtext of what is a typically ambiguous poem. Much of its potential was therefore overlooked. The word 'key' is of fundamental importance in suggesting an ability to unlock Sheers' ideas and intent and to lead students forward to making crucial connections with other poems and ideas in the collection. The named poem's central theme of death and renewal should have been fundamental to a balanced argument.

Successful students:

- Produced a balanced debate which considered the idea that this poem is "the key to the collection" in a thoughtful, engaged manner
- Linked 'Border Country' to a range of other relevant poems
- Explored Sheers' form, structure and language choice with confidence.

Less successful students:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Border Country' could be the collection's key poem
- Wrote basic accounts of the poetry, with little relevant or developed reference to form, structure and language choice
- Were unable to move beyond generalisations.

To maximise their students' chances of success in answering Question 1, centres are advised to develop a programme of wider reading, such as the one in the AQA-endorsed Nelson Thornes publication, *AQA English Literature A: Literature of World War One* (ISBN 978-0748782949). Of course, centres are not obliged to use this supporting textbook, but they may find it useful as a model when constructing their own programme of wider reading. Centres are reminded that there is further guidance on how to prepare students for Question 1 in the 'Contextual Linking' advice which was issued in the summer of 2008.

Texts referred to in students' responses:

PROSE FICTION

| | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Margaret Atwood | The Handmaid's Tale |
| Murakami Haruki | The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle |
| Jackie Kay | Trumpet |
| Andrea Levy | Small Island |
| Anne Michaels | Fugitive Pieces |
| J D Salinger | The Catcher in the Rye |
| Alice Sebold | The Lovely Bones |
| Alice Walker | The Color Purple |
| Irvin Welsh | Trainspotting |
| Jeanette Winterson | Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit |

PROSE NON-FICTION

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------------|
| Maya Angelou | I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings |
| Cupcake Brown | A Piece of Cake |
| Emmett Till | The Laundry Diaries |
| Amrit Wilson | Finding a Voice |

DRAMA

| | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|
| Samuel Beckett | End Game |
| Claire Dowie | Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt |
| Brian Friel | Translations |
| Sarah Kane | Blasted |
| Arthur Miller | Death of a Salesman |
| Sean O'Casey | Shadow of a Gunman |
| J B Priestley | An Inspector Calls |
| Willy Russell | Educating Rita |
| Tennessee Williams | A Streetcar Named Desire |

POETRY

| | |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| John Agard | |
| Simon Armitage | |
| W H Auden | Refugee Blues |
| T S Eliot | The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock |
| Allan Ginsberg | Howl |
| Langston Hughes | |
| Grace Nichols | The Fat Black Woman |
| Phillip Larkin | |
| Theodore Roethke | |
| Benjamin Zephaniah | Too Black, Too Strong |

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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