



## **General Certificate of Education**

# **English Literature** *Specification A*

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

# **Report on the Examination**

*2009 examination - June series*

**This Report on the Examination uses the [new numbering system](#)**

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## General

This May's paper was the first to be sat by a nationwide cohort after the modest entry in January. It has proved very successful in testing candidates' abilities to think for themselves and to broaden their own understanding of The Struggle for Identity through linked but independent reading across the modern period. Centres may have been understandably anxious about such an innovative examination but those who took to heart the two central principles of all LTA 1 options, the development of deep and broad reading, will have enjoyed seeing their students so actively engaged and motivated by the course. The numerous and varied ways of putting together a successful course were evidenced aplenty in this examination via the enormous range of wider reading texts cited in Section A. The confident understanding evident in many responses to the Section B poetry demonstrated how well this genre lends itself to the expression of the struggle intrinsic to being autonomous, heard and respected. Angelou and Duffy have helped perhaps to provide familiar voices, whilst Sheers has offered some novelty and opens up yet more areas of the struggle. Despite being 'the new kid on the block' he seems well on the way to establishing an enthusiastic following. That said, responses to the Angelou and Sheers texts made up about one third of all responses, with Duffy still attracting significantly the largest proportion of candidates, perhaps attributable to Duffy's pedigree at GCSE and her current high profile, even before being appointed the first ever female poet laureate.

As testimony to the hard work and creativity of teachers and students alike many perceptive and mature responses were seen, confirming that this option encourages informed independent thinking and privileges those who are not afraid of the varied reading they have been judiciously guided through by their teachers or may have undertaken as part of their individual, paired or small group contribution to the course: this specification is very much about participation and active learning. Unfortunately, not all candidates had been prepared for the examination in this manner. Some centres seem to have prepared candidates by placing excessive emphasis on a very limited number of texts with little breadth of reading. This resulted in every candidate from these centres relying on very similar references to the same texts, often using the same quotations. Centres should avoid this restrictive approach: it makes differentiation between candidates very difficult and denies them access to the higher bands of the mark scheme which require a display of confidence, maturity and sophistication. Similarly, candidates are advised not to prepare all-purpose answers which can be unloaded whatever the question happens to be. Whether referring to their wider reading or selecting appropriate set poems, it is essential that candidates consider each question afresh, rather than trying to twist inappropriate material prepared in advance to fit the keywords. The best way to prepare candidates for this examination is through a full course of exposure to the literature of the modern era (loosely equated to texts written during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries), wider reading and by studying the whole set poetry text: there are no short-cuts.

A balanced course that prepares students for any or all of the issues in the extract for contextual linking would be the most enabling approach for centres to adopt. It is always pertinent to remember that the struggle for identity starts from birth usually within a family context and then moves outwards through areas of gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, etcetera. Unfortunately, not all candidates had been prepared for the examination in this manner. Weaker answers usually revealed candidates' 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 varying socio-historical factors.

With wider reading recognised as the crucial underpinning of this specification, it is to be expected that students make reference to all three genres of writing when responding to Question 1 in order to make relevant and sustained links and developments. Poetry was noted as the genre most likely to be avoided by candidates in their wider reading references yet a

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useful and legitimate way through the course might well initially begin by introducing students (even if in extracted poems only) to the works of all three Section B poets because there, in wonderfully condensed form, are so many of the areas of the Struggle for Identity. In Question 1 responses it was noticeable that some candidates were unable to refer to all three genres and also tried to rely on references to just their one Section B poet as sufficient evidence of their study of poetry, with limiting consequences. 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. Short responses were not widely in evidence but relevantly shaped responses sometimes were, in both sections A and B. Candidates should have the keywords of the questions almost engraved upon their minds and do need to maintain focus on them at all times.

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 arguments. To this end, it is also important that candidates are prepared for the experience of the examination by following a programme of regular timed essay practice. This is essential not just for the development of their skills in structuring and organising ideas into coherent forms, but also to enable them to develop and to practise legible handwriting under pressure: candidates will have a far greater chance of examination success if the examiners can read what they have written. Centres are reminded that the examination requires very different skills to the coursework and handwriting is one of them. Procedures exist which enable candidates with serious handwriting difficulties to access an amanuensis or a word processor for the examination: centres are advised to make full use of these opportunities.

The general quality of some candidates' written expression was also the cause of some concern to examiners this summer. Too many candidates do not avail themselves of the structuring opportunities which writing in paragraphs would offer them: they seem to regard paragraphing as an optional extra, for aesthetic purposes only, rather than a vital requirement in meeting Assessment Objective 1. Similarly, some candidates are unable to spell simple but important words such as "woman" or "independence". The unthinking use of colloquial expression ("she sort of says"... "he kinda suggests that...") is not acceptable in a formal AS examination. In the same way, candidates who claim "the poem talks about..." show little awareness of the literary artefact with which they are dealing. Clearly, many students, quite rightly, enjoy talking about their studies but when called upon to write about them should be equipped to respond in an appropriately formal register. On the other hand, examiners were pleased to note that a significant number of the candidates *are* able to express their views with clarity in an appropriate and articulate manner: a skill which centres can encourage with regular written work as practice for the examination.

Pleasingly, there were few rubric infringements but it should be noted that centres must check that they do not disadvantage their candidates by erroneously focussing on proscribed poems where Angelou is concerned. 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 candidates 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 candidates 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 limiting omission.

Although the main purpose of this report is to summarise the ways in which this summer's candidates responded to the demands of the LTA1C paper, as is already evident it also offers advice on how centres can most effectively prepare their candidates for future examinations. Centres should use the report in conjunction with the June 2009 mark scheme which contains not only the relevant assessment grids but also an Indicative Content section for each question, suggesting possible approaches which successful candidates might adopt in their responses.

It is also worth mentioning that candidates should be encouraged to comply with the rubric instructions and enter the numbers of the questions they have answered in the relevant box at the top right of the examination answer booklet's front page. It is not reasonable to expect examiners to complete this clerical task on their behalf and it can sometimes result in examiners having to make educated guesses about which option the candidate has exercised.

When responding to Question 1 candidates 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 candidates who ignore the information offered in the preamble to Question 1 to disadvantage themselves.

### **Question 01 Contextual Linking**

The candidates who did least well in this examination were often those unable to establish any sort of convincing connection between the extract and their wider reading: their use of arbitrary, bolted-on texts with no obvious relevance to the extract resulted in narrowly assertive answers. In many cases these unsatisfactory responses appeared to be the consequence of very limited wider reading or of the candidate's determination to twist some sort of all-purpose, pre-written material to fit whatever the extract happened to be about. Fortunately, the vast majority of candidates did not approach the examination in this manner: those with a broad knowledge of the literature of the modern era pertaining to the struggle for identity were able to select the most relevant examples from their wider reading and build a persuasive and cogent argument. It is to be hoped that this open-minded approach will persist among the candidates taking LTA1C and that centres will not fall back on a narrower, more formulaic approach as the patterns of the extracts and questions become more familiar in subsequent series of this examination.

A few centres seemed unprepared for the adjustment to the wording of this section's generic question which was first implemented in the January paper. This arose from the concerns expressed by LTA6 examiners that candidates sometimes become bogged down while trying to address the idea of "typicality" (and, indeed, this proved to be the case for a small group of LTA1C candidates this summer), so candidates are now directed simply to compare the extract with relevant aspects of their wider reading. Of course, in answering this question, candidates will still be considering what is typical of modern literature, but they will be doing so through the more direct means of exploring the similarities and differences between the extract and the most relevant parts of their wider reading.

The extract from *Jarhead* by Anthony Swofford was chosen for its interesting and engaging approach to the autobiographical genre and the way struggling for identity can impact both positively and negatively on family life. It employed some thought-provoking expression of issues of self-determination, gender and class stereotyping, oppression, dislocation and discrimination, set against a backdrop of family, community and wider social factors. There were different voices and subtly different viewpoints within the extract as well as some hints of bias and revisionism attributable to varied factors but particularly those of life-experience and personal perspective. An informed, thorough and sensitive reading of the extract yielded much

material for appreciation and comment. Candidates who skimmed the surface and offered paraphrased versions of the content would not be able to offer responses perceptive of **the writer's** thoughts and feelings and would also find those of his father and family 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 candidates' wider reading. The 'similar to/different from' phrase allows candidates to comment on well-chosen wider reading drawn from all three genres but the answers of better candidates are characterised by the quality and development of those links. Weaker candidates also seemed to take comfort in 'off-loading' information of a general nature loosely pertaining to context and FSI issues, without anchoring their points into close textual references or features of structure, form and language choice. Whilst, to a degree, the extract is chosen to act as a 'springboard' into relevant exploration of candidates' 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 enormous variety in the choices of wider reading cited in candidates' responses across the cohort, although individual centres sometimes showed rigid similarity of textual reference. Most candidates 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 and how they might be similar to or different from the extract. It is relevant and valuable for candidates to discern differences and contrasts as well as similarities. The quality of their articulation of these differences, with close textual reference to provide substance, would be a key determining measure of worth.

Successful candidates:

- 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
- Paid attention to the form, structure and language of the extract as well as those of their wider reading.

Less successful candidates:

- Wrote general paraphrases of the content of the extract
- 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.

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## Section B

### *And Still I Rise*

Despite Angelou's continued high profile in the struggle for identity on a range of issues and causes and her interesting, topical switch of allegiance from Hillary Clinton to Barack Obama in 2008's Democratic Party elections in the USA, fewer than anticipated responses were seen. Some editions of the collection *And Still I Rise* are available with the section *Shaker Why Don't You Sing* affording candidates the 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 candidates had been well taught on the themes of Angelou's poetry and the relevant details of her extraordinary life although **there is no opportunity within the mark scheme 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 candidates seemed intent on rewriting a version of what was perhaps their 'mock' or practice questions with consequent loss of focus and some inevitable irrelevance. Each question attracted a broadly similar number of respondents.

### Question 02

Maya Angelou's own words prefaced the question's central issue of 'home' and provided a valuable way into their essays for many candidates, but it was not intended as an opening of the floodgates to irrelevant biography. Some attention to the phrase 'at home' as well as 'home' itself should have indicated that the question encompassed areas of mental and emotional ease as well as geographical and topographical. The 'I long' of the prefatory comment should also have suggested an element of the hypothetical, metaphorical and ideal in addition to the literal and real, to suggest ways of broadening out or even challenging the question. It was also a legitimate though slightly risky departure for there to be some exploration of the dangers of the home environment where violence and abuse can be performed behind closed doors. This aspect of home might stand in opposition to Angelou's declared longing to be there of course! Clearly the format of the question required an evaluative and argumentative approach and candidates who saw it merely as an opportunity to write about places Angelou may have lived during her long and varied life were taking their eye off the crucial elements of exploration of theme and analysis of technique. As ever, beneficent selection from the prescribed poems was intrinsically rewarded. Candidates 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 candidates:

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

Less successful candidates:

- Wrote narrow biographical responses that may have used proscribed poems from *Shaker Why Don't You Sing* or failed to discern the mythological, metaphorical, aspirational or nostalgic elements within Angelou's poems
- Remained at the surface of their chosen poems

- Paid scant attention to Angelou's use of form, structure and language and/or the key words of the question

### Question 03

Candidates who barely mentioned the named poem disadvantaged themselves because an element of appraisal and evaluation was helpful in providing a framework for the exploration of 'the important ideas' contained within the collection. Where the named poem was explored and appreciated in some depth before diversifying into poems that reflected similar or different themes, some lively and informed responses were seen: Angelou is clearly able to evoke strong and vociferous comment and it was very pleasing to see integrated appreciation of her form, structure and language choices as plausible evidence of Angelou's passion and skill in conveying her central or preoccupying ideas. Those who discerned the hint of heavily suppressed fear in the named poem, despite its chirpy ebullience, often made perceptive references to the effects of injustice on mind, body and soul and achieved those prized additional readings of Angelou's poems. This serves to emphasise that personal engagement and free-thinking often reap rewards, especially in response to poetry, the genre perhaps most firmly linked to the emotional and the metaphysical. 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. Candidates who saw this as an opportunity to swiftly relegate the named poem down the pecking order and write a possibly prepared and often unshaped response on another poem (usually 'Still I Rise') were missing the chance to show synthesis. The ideas expressed in the collection as a whole did need some reference.

Successful candidates:

- Produced a debate which considered the idea that the named poem provided an 'insight into important ideas' and demonstrated what those ideas might be through dextrous linking to other poems and illustrative detail. Alternatively, they suggested, with recourse to well-chosen detail, why another named poem might provide those insights even more clearly.
- Linked 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me At All' to a range of other relevant poems
- Explored Angelou's choices of form, structure and language with confidence.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me At All' could offer insights into the collection
- Wrote basic accounts of the poems with little reference to form, structure and language
- Were unable to engage with ideas expressed in the poems about gender, class and racial pride.

### ***The World's Wife***

As discovered in January 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. In the main candidates 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 darkly mysterious and witty 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 candidates were less sure of their own thinking.



**Question 04**

This was the more popular option. The keyword 'entirely' rightly proved crucial in many of the ensuing debates but it was noticeable that in the enthusiastic responses candidates were not as attentive as they might have been in differentiating between Duffy's view and that of her female speakers, arguably all of whom are as flawed as the men in their lives. There is a reminder in the question itself that Duffy is merely the presenter of a series of behaviours and that careful candidates will be looking to explore her techniques and intent rather than oversimplifying an argument about Duffy's feminist credentials. It was not an opportunity to make generalised points about Duffy's imagery but rather a chance to deal with the effect her imagery has upon the reader in a specifically articulated way. More confident or better informed candidates would have seen through the gender stereotyping to appreciate the possible bias and questionable motivation of the female speakers from whose perspective the males are viewed.

Successful candidates:

- Engaged with the view expressed in the question and challenged its assumption that the female speakers are ventriloquist's dummies for Duffy's own voice
- Used a range of poems to produce a balanced debate
- Explored Duffy's poetic technique with confidence.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply agreed with the question's main idea
- Wrote general answers or ignored the need to evaluate
- Paid no attention to Duffy's choices of form, structure and language choices.

**Question 05**

This was the less popular choice of Duffy questions, despite it enabling well-informed candidates to write about the way whole-text themes are reflected in a focal poem. Most candidates were able to enumerate the named poem's typical and, more interestingly, atypical features and similarly were able to make a range of valid connections to other poems in the collection. All manner of reasons were put forward as to 'Mrs Faust' being important but many overlooked the 'key' metaphor in terms of it unlocking several important concepts in the field of the struggle for identity or in Duffy's poetic technique. It proved essential to a reasoned confirmation of the poem as 'key' to expand on why, with recourse to other well-selected poems and how they developed themes or messages evident in 'Mrs Faust'.

Successful candidates:

- Explored the focal poem with confidence and overview of Duffy's repertoire and technique
- Established a range of relevant connections between 'Mrs Faust' and the rest of the collection
- Analysed Duffy's choices of form, structure and language with confidence.

Less successful candidates:

- Wasted time on offering poor explanations of the relationship between the couple and vague references to the sources of Duffy's subject matter
- Wrote general answers about whole-text themes but failed to focus on 'Mrs Faust'
- Paid little attention to Duffy's poetic technique.

## **Skirrid Hill**

*Skirrid Hill* presents candidates with some very interesting challenges and is a powerfully broad and deep text. Sheers clearly arouses interest and lively debate with his unusual eye for detail and often uncomfortable metaphors, pushing at the boundaries of the physical, social and topographical. Refusing to occupy any neat niche, Sheers' poetry takes on the world with pugnacious confidence and centres have enjoyed his probing wit. One suspects that his popularity is waxing, partly because, with little published literary criticism as yet, students may feel freer to interpret Sheers' work uninhibitedly. With an absence of biography and received interpretation there can be fewer opportunities to move away from the text and that keeps students remarkably well-focussed on what matters, i.e. "the best words, in the best order".

### **Question 06**

This was marginally the more popular of the questions on *Skirrid Hill*, offering candidates the opportunity to explore their own choice of poems from this broadly diverse collection. The quotation of the question was pared down from the original which wrote of many more separations than the ones given, so it was pleasing to see the most perceptive candidates also expanding their arguments into additional areas of separation as well as clarifying or challenging how Sheers deals with the ways relationships are perceived between the genders and the generations. Candidates offered plenty of examples of Sheers' treatment of separations and usually managed to link these to some sort of evaluation of its effects. Those who were able to suggest in their extension or counter-arguments that Sheers also dealt with moments of elision, repair and coming-together, were to be commended, especially where these moments were expertly pinpointed, analysed and evaluated.

Successful candidates:

- Chose highly appropriate poems for the exploration of Sheers' treatment of moments of separation and its effects
- Analysed Sheers' choices of form, structure and language
- Explored a wealth of Sheers' poetic techniques and articulated his intent in order to create interesting lines of argument and counter-argument.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply offered broad agreement with the statement and struggled to even illustrate those moments of separation effectively
- Ignored the question's key words
- Made broad generalisations about the effects produced by Sheers' choice of form, structure and language, often asserting rather than illustrating their points.

### **Question 07**

This may have surprised some in its departure from citing one named poem and the substituting of two but the very nature of the pair makes them, in many respects, indivisible. Some answers revealed little understanding of the structure of the collection as a published work over which the poet has exercised his editorial integrity and decisiveness; some potential areas for comment were therefore overlooked. The word 'heart' is of fundamental importance in suggesting a central message, emotional impact or 'pulse' in Sheers' poetic work and essential in leading candidates forward to make crucial connections with other poems and ideas in the

collection. The named poems' central themes of death and renewal, the harsh beauty of the natural world and the heartbreak that is an inevitable part of love and loss, should have been fundamental to a balanced argument.

Successful candidates:

- Produced a balanced debate which considered the idea that these poems are “the heart of the collection” in a thoughtful, engaged, incisive manner
- Linked ‘Y Gaer’ and ‘The Hill Fort’ to a range of other relevant poems and/or made an arresting case for another poem or pair of poems constituting the heart of the collection
- Explored Sheers’ form, structure and language choice with confidence, always citing examples relevantly and with analytical significance.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply dismissed the idea that ‘Y Gaer’ and ‘The Hill Fort’ could be the collection’s heart
- Wrote basic accounts of the poetry, with little relevant or developed reference to form, structure and language choice
- Were unable to move beyond generalisations and assertions.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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