



General Certificate of Education

English Literature

Specification A

LITA3 Reading for Meaning

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

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General

The first January series of LITA3 has been a success. All the examiners commented on the high quality of the paper, finding it varied, interesting and offering an appropriate challenge to candidates, even to those at the top end of the scale. It might, however, be expected that the first synoptic examination, taken after only a term's A2 study, would produce a greater percentage of low marks than would be expected in subsequent series.

The best candidates were those who spent sufficient time reading, thinking and planning. This enabled them to begin writing from a position of strong understanding and to select aspects for comparison and further comment. One feature of many Band 4 answers was the way in which they developed ideas by comparison and contrast. Such an approach would have been very difficult had they not planned in a systematic way. Others adopted a 'first one, then the other' approach to comparing the texts. While this might be acceptable for some students, it often limited the more able. As one examiner noted: this approach 'tends to inhibit if not preclude comparison.' Another examiner noted a similar effect for candidates who 'wrote a paragraph about structure, a paragraph about form and a paragraph about language', finding that this method 'was clearly constraining for the most able candidates'.

The quality of candidates' reading was a key issue. Able candidates – who had been practised in reading, thinking and planning – were able to demonstrate confident reading skills as well as respond to alternative readings and subtext. It was also noticeable that such candidates were able to relate their observations on small details of the texts to overall understanding. At the other end of the scale, misreading was evident, as was the selection of small details from a text without sufficient reference to how those details related to the text as a whole. In the words of one senior examiner: 'the use of disembodied quotations led to much empty comment. Some candidates selected a single word, such as "fierce" or "sweets", which attracted explanation without reference to the role of that word in the sentence, or even the clause, in question.' Another weak approach was to take a minor aspect out of context, such as a poet's use of punctuation and to compare this to a similar minor aspect in another text. For example, the use of commas or dashes (the latter often referred to erroneously as a hyphens), were compared to the use commas or dashes in an otherwise unrelated text from that candidate's wider reading.

Wider reading was a key discriminator. The aim of a wider reading reference is to cast light on the unseen texts. For a reference to help a candidate to score marks in Bands 3 and 4, it must be more than simply a link. While references based on subject matter or theme can sometimes be helpful, often those that deal with aspects of language, form or structure enable candidates to explore wider reading references in more productive, well-developed and impressive ways.

The number of wider reading links is not indication of quality. (As a guideline, a reasonable balance between comment on wider reading and unseen items would be around 60-70% on the unseen items, with the remainder on the wider reading.) Clearly, not all texts studied for wider reading will be relevant to specific examination questions; the judicious selection of material is often a hallmark of Band 4 work. Candidates who chose relatively few references, but did so discriminatingly (and developed them so that they illuminated the texts under discussion) scored high marks. Those who made a plethora of tenuous or tangential links produced diffuse responses; such answers languished in Band 2 or Band 1.

Those who had thorough knowledge of their wider reading texts, and who could quote accurately from them, were able to develop interesting connections. Well-chosen quotations from verse texts often enabled such candidates to explore aspects of form, language or structure and to compare or contrast these to the form, language or structure of the unseen

texts. As well as quotations, well-chosen detail and specific examples from prose texts enabled candidates to develop enriching and illuminating comparisons and contrasts.

When making wide reading references, the watchword should always be 'relevant'. Yet several weaker candidates were determined to use the texts that they had revised in the ways that they had revised them – whether they were relevant or not. Such uses failed to score. Even from centres where most students had studied the same texts, however, more discerning candidates were able to adapt what they had learned and find interesting ways to make convincing connections. Often such candidates, while able to notice an element of similarity, were able to develop the discussion by exploring the many differences presented.

Centres should remember the rubric when preparing candidates. For Question 1 only wider reading references from the genre of the texts (in the case of January 2010, poetry) gain credit. Candidates must also make at least one creditable wider reading reference to each of the three main genres of poetry, prose and drama across the whole paper. A small minority failed to adhere to these regulations and their marks suffered accordingly. A few also tried to use material that was included in the answer to Question 1 for a second time in the answer to Question 2, or to refer to item A or B as examples of wider reading for the second answer. No credit was given for these approaches.

There was an unfortunate tendency in some of the weaker responses to 'off-load' pre-learnt information, such as generalisations about love or material from textbooks. Another unhelpful tendency was for some students to use terms that they failed to fully understand to use them to categorise texts reductively. In this way, Louis MacNeice's 'Meeting Point' became a 'modernist' text and *The Well of Loneliness* an example of 'postmodernism'. Of course, the fluent use of appropriate terminology is an indicator of work in Band 4, and one candidate was able to comment on the more traditional aspects of MacNeice's use of form before exploring what he termed the 'modernist, even surreal' imagery of the third stanza in which a bell is transformed into the outer shell of a flower.

While many could comment on the unseen texts using terminology to assist them in developing their responses, several weaker candidates simply spotted features or felt compelled to name every single part of speech or rhyme (often wrongly) in a mechanistic manner. Sometimes weak candidates appeared to have begun writing too soon, before the unseen items had been fully understood. This approach, combined with the feature spotting outlined above, often produced a 'can't see the wood for the trees' response, where there were flashes – or, in some cases, glimmers – of comprehension amidst a general sense of confusion. In the lowest performing answers gross misunderstanding of the items accompanied by assertion meant that examiners were able to find very little to reward. On the other hand, examiners were highly impressed by some of the answers scoring high Band 4 marks that demonstrated not just confident understanding and a command of the details, but conceptualised thinking and often a strong overview of the texts.

To ensure that answers are founded on secure understanding, candidates are advised to read the unseen items thoroughly. It is recommended that they read, think and plan for around 30 minutes per question and spend around 45 minutes writing each answer.

Question 1

This question tested the candidates' ability to compare two unseen items from the same genre and to make relevant wider reading references to texts within that genre, in this case, poetry.

Many successful candidates had read both poems thoroughly before beginning to write and were able to focus their responses on comparisons and contrasts, often comparing the ways in which time is treated in the texts. Literary analysis often explored the combined effects of several features and related to the overall meaning of the poems in question.

Many candidates responded to the Shakespeare poem as a sonnet, and many of the most successful were able to comment on a shift in tone at line 8, and an even stronger one after line 12. Weaker candidates, unfortunately, were hamstrung by notions of what a sonnet should be and often attempted to make this sonnet fit their preconceived notions of what a sonnet should be, making comments about the octave, sestet and so on in ways that did little to explore the meaning of the poem or help compare it to MacNeice's.

There were many interesting wider reading links. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?' is the sonnet that precedes the one set and its subject matter and style provided ample scope for illuminating connections as did its concluding couplet: 'So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.' It was noteworthy that very few candidates noticed that 'Sonnet 19' (like 'Sonnet 18') was not addressed to a woman. One of the few to do so commented relevantly that 'Shakespeare's sonnet could be about the platonic love to his "young man" as many of the series of sonnets are' and commented on the poem's lack of 'lustful language'. 'Sonnet 116', particularly the third quatrain which begins 'Love's not Time's fool', was another useful comparison. On the whole, 'Sonnet 130' was less helpful, with many weaker candidates seeing that poem as a case of 'my mistress is rather ugly, but I like her anyway' rather than a satirical treatment of the hyperbole and clichés of earlier sonneteers.

Misreading and surface reading were features of many weak responses. Often, weak answers belied an inability to read whole clauses or whole sentences; such answers were often fixated on isolated words or images to the detriment of secure understanding of the whole poem under discussion. Perhaps such candidates, having taken their examination in January, rather than June, suffered from a lack of practice in analysing unseen texts independently, or a lack of practice in reading, thinking and planning systematically under timed conditions. One candidate, after modest achievement in Question 1, did not even attempt Question 2 and wrote a note to the examiner saying that she had not been fully prepared and would be re-sitting in June.

As well as misreading, a failing noted by examiners was the quality of written expression. One noted: 'I saw a lot of very poor expression and ungrammatical English.' Another examiner noted the inappropriate use by many weaker candidates of a colloquial register, in which some candidates referred to authors by Christian names or responded to texts using clichés such as 'Shakespeare takes the reader on a journey.' In addition, it is disappointing when A level English literature candidates fail to lay out quotations correctly as verse. A quotation that extends beyond a line should indicate the line ending by either a forward slash (/) or by taking a new line when the poet does.

Many successful candidates, however, were able write fluently, grammatically and, in some cases, with sophistication and style. One examiner noted: 'I did also see some apt and engaged technical skill.' Many stronger candidates were able to read whole poems confidently, commenting, for example, on Shakespeare's extended use of personification and his speaker's

attitude towards time. Often such discussions led to well-developed comparisons to MacNeice's use of this trope and his speaker's attitude towards time in the poem. The best answers on MacNeice were able to respond sensitively to tone, verse form, refrain and overall structure. In addition, several details of language and imagery were selected for insightful comment. One candidate wrote of the interesting shifts of perspective in stanza 4, with the vast distances of 'miles of sand' on their 'cups and plates' really only being the inches that separated them as they sat at their table. Another responded to the very ordinary nature of the images that MacNeice uses to convey love, contrasting them with the more striking images of Shakespeare, yet noted the ways in which MacNeice's mundane details are also transformed into the exotic: the patterns on 'the cups and plates' give way to thoughts of 'stars and dates'; the cigarette ash, comes to resemble 'tropic trees' and 'forests'.

Both poems gave rise to a variety of relevant wider reading links. The presentation of time in the poems was sometimes well-linked to the ninth song in Auden's 'Twelve Songs' (also known as 'Funeral Blues' and by the first half of its first line 'Stop all the clocks'). While the majority of such references led to an enhanced response to the unseen poems, some allowed their knowledge of Auden to undermine their comprehension of MacNeice, misreading 'Meeting Point' as being about a man whose lover had died (sometimes mistakenly citing the references to bells in the third stanza, and God in the penultimate, to substantiate this view).

The metaphysicals produced a range of relevant links through poems such as 'To His Coy Mistress'. The ways in which this poem was used gave a good measure of a candidate's performance: weaker responses kept mainly to the poem's subject matter, contrasting it the unseen poems, but stronger answers often knew relevant quotations, which helped them compare form, language and structure as well as cast new light on the unseen items. Other useful references included those to Donne's 'The Sun Rising' and 'A Valediction: forbidding mourning'.

As well using Shakespeare sonnets, there was a wealth of relevant reference to other sonnets from the 'relaxed' and relatively recent 'Anne Hathaway' by Carol Ann Duffy, to Victorian poets such as Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning and to Tudor poets such as Wyatt and Spenser. Spenser's 'Sonnet 75' enabled one Band 4 candidate to refer to the lines 'let baser things devise/ To die in dust, but you shall live by fame' and offer the view that Shakespeare, by writing of immortalizing beauty through his verse, was writing in a popular tradition.

Question 2

This question tests the candidates' 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. There is also a focus for comparison; in this case it was 'forbidden love'.

This question proved more challenging for many candidates, and many of the weaker candidates misread aspects of the Stoppard extract. The Hall extract was better understood and examiners reported that it was 'enjoyed' and that it elicited more 'engaged' work. Most were able to respond with interest to the dialogue between Stephen and Angela, many could comment on Stephen's use of language (some on its 'romantic' tone, its 'hyperbole' or its 'idealism') and one argued that the descriptions of the setting presented 'the seclusion of Morton Hall' as 'almost a safe-haven for the couple to escape to and find the "peace" and comfort of each other'.

Weaker candidates failed to read the Stoppard piece closely enough to note that, while forbidden in Victorian times, homosexuality was acceptable in Ancient Greece. Many commented on AEH's rhetoric and Housman's naivety, some explored the tutor – student quality of their exchange and others wrote convincingly that the meeting of the two parts of the same character offered AEH a chance to alter Housmann's fate.

There was much interesting comment on Stoppard's use of language. One candidate, for example, said that the line 'any more laying-downs we can think of?' might be played as innuendo; another explored the connotations of 'desire' and 'subversion' in what AEH referred to as love's 'mischief'; and many wrote at length on the use of the image from Sophocles in which love is characterised as being like 'the ice held in the hand by children'. One related this to the many forms of love saying that "'children" illustrates the innocence of love' whilst "'hand" emphasises its intimacy' before going on to consider ice as a form of water and how, like water, it can come in many forms 'whilst being the same emotion in the end. Water is a basic need, mirroring how love is a need in life, whilst the property of "ice", which melts very easily, reflects how easy it is to lose love'.

Several candidates connected this imagery to the ice imagery in Hall. Many were also able to compare the attitudes to homosexual love, and the ideas of dying for love to good effect. Some contrasted the 'safe' biographical nature of Stoppard's piece and the more 'daring' autobiographical nature of Hall's, often using the introductory information on the banning of *The Well of Loneliness* to inform their understanding, and making sensible deductions about possible contemporary reactions of the play and the novel.

Considering the context of reception also led to less helpful comments and generalisations. Some candidates made blanket judgements about texts being from, in the case of *The Invention of Love* 'the post modern era', or in the case of *The Well of Loneliness* 'the Victorian era'. Often such generalisation was followed by bogus cultural history which, rather than enriching the readings, nearly always led candidates away from the texts.

There were a great many useful links to wider reading, many of which explored elements of style, such as the star imagery in Hall (which some connected to star imagery in *Romeo and Juliet* or to Keats's sonnet, 'Bright star! would I were as steadfast as thou art!'). Stephen's comment that she and Angela were 'not two separate people but one' was likened to a similar concept in other texts, including ee cummings's 'i carry your heart with me'.

Key moments, such as the kiss in *The Well of Loneliness* also attracted purposeful wider reading connections. A close reading of that kiss and the build up to it was compared

illuminatingly to a similar moment of connection between Maire and Yolland in *Translations*. The first kiss in *Romeo and Juliet* also produced a sophisticated and illuminating connection when one Band 4 candidate compared the transgressive elements in both, noting that the one in Shakespeare is ‘described as a prayer; Juliet wills “give me my sin again” as though their love is holy, but at the same time a sinful, guilty pleasure.’

As with Question 1, the discriminator was not so much the wider reading text used, but the ways in which it was used by the candidate. Many used potentially enriching material such as a passage from *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* or *The Color Purple*, but such connections were often founded on shaky understanding of the wider reading text as a whole – something that was made obvious by errors of fact, or oversimplification of the text. Accordingly, these connections in many cases amounted to little more than tenuous links, which failed to develop beyond basic similarity of subject matter.

Texts that did not always enrich comment on the unseen extracts included *Enduring Love* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*. Weaker candidates tended to make a connection – often a tangential one – then ‘offload’ what might have been pre-learnt material on how love is presented in the chosen text before carrying on for paragraphs without further mention of the unseen items supposedly under discussion. That having been said, those who read more closely were able to make relevant connections to these texts; some, for example, exploring the obsessive nature of Stephen’s relationship to Angela and comparing this to the central relationship in *Enduring Love*, often making close references to both texts, exploring differences fully and comparing aspects of form such as narrative point of view.

Some of the most impressive answers were able to view the texts conceptually and extrapolate from them to form interesting conclusions – a task that was often assisted by apposite quotations from wider reading texts. One candidate, for example, noted how A E Housman’s unrequited love was subtly suggested by the text: rather than ‘talking about his own experiences, he instead deals with those written down, referring back to history and how love felt then. This could connect to the idea that love is a result of clichés and literature that almost tells us how we are supposed to feel. De Bernières deals with this in *A Partisan's Daughter* in which he writes “it is learnt from songs and films and books and there’s probably nothing natural about it.” This suggests that we draw on other people’s experiences to determine our own.’

Although the main purpose of this report is to summarise the ways in which this January’s candidates responded to the demands of the LITA3 paper, it also offers advice on how centres can prepare candidates effectively for future examinations. Centres should use it in conjunction with the January 2010 Mark Scheme, which contains not only the relevant assessment grids but also Indicative Content for each question. The Indicative Content is not intended to be prescriptive, but teachers and students might find it 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.