



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2011**

English Literature A

LITA3

(Specification 2740)

Unit 3: Reading for Meaning

Report on the Examination

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Reading for Meaning

General

The examiners were pleased with the performance of the Question Paper, which was judged to be both accessible to the full range of the candidature and to offer sufficient challenge to those of the highest ability. In the words of one senior examiner, ‘the actual examination was excellent once again: a true skills-based test in which even the least able could do their very best’.

The features of high achievement were similar to those displayed in previous series. The ablest constructed cogent answers in which they argued knowledgeably, analysing a range of features with confidence. Such sophisticated responses showed an appreciation of the complexities of the texts: exploring the subtleties of both the items themselves and of the similarities and differences between them. Wider reading was used judiciously in the best answers and contributed seamlessly to the ongoing discussion, often casting new light on the item, or items, in question. While high achieving answers in some ways seemed the effortless work of gifted candidates, it was also clear — from plans and notes — that such writing was produced by those who had spend a significant proportion of their time reading carefully, thinking and planning. Such planning extended to time management: strong candidates ensured that they spent at least half of the time available working on Question 2.

By contrast, a minority failed to manage their time well, which meant that, for the second question, they tended to skim parts of the items and their introductions, leading to answers that often were brief or weakened by misunderstanding. As one senior examiner pointed out: ‘Candidates need to interpret particular details of a text in the light of the meaning of the whole piece. Too often they insist on a certain reading of a small part of an extract that just does not fit in with author’s treatment in the whole piece.’ And that, by contrast, ‘candidates who address the author’s intentions or attitude often give themselves a line of argument, which can steer them through a discussion of the extract very effectively and help to generate a comparison. The author is missing in many weaker answers’.

As in previous series, wider reading was a discriminator, and those who depended on the same taught extracts, or on items from past examination papers, struggled. If a candidate has been inspired by a prose or a drama extract through examination practice, then perhaps they might be encouraged to read more, if not all, of the text from which that item comes, otherwise they risk being dependent upon a tiny part of it that will rarely rest easily in a comparison of two other texts. Forcing extracts to fit often leads to fanciful readings. Poems from past papers, however, have been used more successfully — but only when candidates have gone on to study those poems in detail. For example, some candidates in this series, who had studied ‘The Scrutiny’ by Lovelace (which appeared in January 2011), made valid connections between the attitudes to sexuality in that poem and those in the items on Question 2.

Regarding contexts, one of the most useful proved to be literary context. For example, those who had studied a text from the Restoration, or indeed who had studied the dramatic genre of comedy, were well-placed to make relevant links to Item C. Those who had studied a Hardy novel were also able to make useful connections, as one examiner noted approvingly: ‘one or two chose to look at the importance of marriage to a girl in the nineteenth century’, which led to some sophisticated readings of the situation in Item B. (Candidates who had

studied other AS options were also able to use their experiences to good effect, with one examiner noting ‘some skilful references to *Birdsong*’ and illuminating links provided by ‘interesting examples from the work of Owen Sheers’.)

Other contexts often proved problematic and some of the weaker candidates wandered into irrelevance by trying to use learned material. In the words of one examiner: ‘there was still evidence of much off-loading of largely irrelevant historical and social detail. Comments on context were very general, sweeping and assertive.’ Another concurred, noting that ‘historical context proved unhelpful in many cases where asserted generalisations were made concerning Victorian propriety when discussing a pastoral country scene’ and that ‘many asserted the nature of post-modernism when referring to any text that was written in the 20th century.’

A final contextual caveat must be added regarding critical theory. One senior examiner spoke for many of her colleagues when she said that ‘few candidates managed to apply critical theory helpfully to the extracts’, going on to report that ‘there were lots of clumsy applications of Marxist theory to *Jude the Obscure* and countless cod-feminist readings of *Disgrace*.’ It is worth considering that while candidates may use any relevant context, there is no specific requirement to use material of a theoretical, social or historical nature. In the experience of the examiners, it is those aspects of context that candidates learn in conjunction with the study of specific whole texts – rather than those that are taught discreetly – which are the most successful.

While examiners find it difficult to give much credit to strained wider reading or digressions that arise from misapplied critical theory, it is relatively easy for them to reward mature writing skills, which are not only valuable in themselves but also for the ways in which they help candidates to demonstrate their other skills. Indeed, they would like to congratulate those centres in which the improvement of AO1 has been a focus. One examiner noted that ‘AO1 has improved generally’ and that ‘there was a higher degree of accuracy and structure in the responses’ than in previous series. It is worth candidates aiming for precision in their writing, and knowing, for example, that ‘juxtaposes’ is not a synonym for ‘contrasts’ and that to ‘infer’ is not the same as to ‘imply’.

There were fewer infringements of the rules regarding wider reading this series and teachers should be congratulated for this. As one senior examiner noted, there will always be some candidates who would ‘dump wider reading thoughtlessly’ but that, for teachers, the main message should be ‘one of praise and of encouragement’.

Question 1

This question tests 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, prose.

Careful reading of the introductory material proved helpful. This led many candidates to consider how the events in the *Disgrace* extract might foreshadow later happenings and some were able to comment sensibly on the ways in which Lurie’s conduct with Melanie showed signs of leading to the shame suggested by the novel’s title. Others made good use of the introduction to Item B and made links between protagonists whose lives of scholarship, were, in different ways, harmed by the feelings of the flesh. Those who read the introductions carefully were able to avoid errors such as claiming that Jude’s relationship with

the girl (whom we, a little later in the novel, discover to be Arabella) was defined by a significant social inequality, or that the relationship in Item A was illegal one, centring on a young girl and a ‘pervert’.

Many aspects of Item A attracted analysis, including the possible significance of the dance film. Some, for example, argued that the film and the responses to it underlined the age gap between the characters; such readings often cited the older technology associated the film, which Lurie ‘first saw a quarter of a century ago’; others concentrated on the contrasting responses to it and the anticlimactic two sentence paragraph where Lurie ‘wills the girl to be captivated too. But senses she is not.’ The dialogue also attracted much comment, with many responding to its stilted quality, which, they argued, suggested dissonance or discomfort between the couple. Some made a case for the dialogue showing Lurie to be in control, and commented on his more detailed speeches, which they argued, demonstrated his superior intellect or cultural capital. Others argued that Melanie was presented as childlike, for example, in both the content and manner of her questions, yet some of those candidates could also see her final actions as decisive. One commented on the assertiveness and clarity of her final utterance, considering this curt refusal to be walked home as ‘a short one syllable response that seems almost rude and cold.’

The best candidates resisted the temptation to make the extracts fit preconceived notions, and, rather than seeing Lurie straightforwardly as a predator and Melanie as his prey, they commented on aspects such as her quick and flirtatious response to his suggestion that a woman has a duty to share her beauty – ‘And what if I already share it?’ Many noticed that when Lurie touches her she ‘does not withdraw, but she does not yield either’, and many suggested that ‘the hint of breathlessness’ which accompanied her words was not so much as a consequence of nerves but of excitement and pleasure. Of course, this was not the only way to read the exchange and several argued convincingly, casting Coetzee’s protagonist as a lurid lecher who lures Melanie through practised and systematic seduction techniques.

Item B also elicited engaged personal responses, although, in general, candidates were more comfortable in commenting on the terseness of Coetzee’s dialogue than the more elaborate texture of Hardy’s prose. Those who refrained from picking out disconnected fragments and took time to read whole clauses and sentences were able to formulate sophisticated responses, appreciating, for example, that in this item it was the male who was naïve and the object of female attention. The presentation of Arabella was analysed, but few commented on the complexities of Hardy’s description, with many avoiding aspects such as her ‘coarseness of skin and fibre’ and the fact that she wasn’t so much handsome as ‘capable of passing as such at a distance’. Those who did read carefully made connections between the deceptive nature of Arabella implied by the above description, the sly glances at the beginning and the end and the crafty manner by which she is able to make herself sexier by giving the interior of her cheeks ‘an adroit little suck’.

Several were able to pick out ‘a semantic field of warfare’ and select terms such as ‘manoeuvre’, ‘orders from headquarters’, ‘missile’ and ‘artillery’ to advance lines of argument. Here the most successful grounded their readings in Hardy’s text, although the least successful tended to spot the military terms, before launching into pre-learnt material without either grappling with the language or commenting on overall effects. Another, more successful, line of attack came when candidates commented on symbolism. One, for example, argued that the description of Arabella ‘demonstrates her fertile quality’ and that ‘the imagery of the “hen’s egg” suggests growth, fruition and above all a new beginning,

reflective of their courting'. The most popular type of symbolism to attract comment was, predictably, the pig's pizzle. One examiner, echoing the reports of most, noted that this detail 'caused much mirth' and another recounted reports that it had even provoked smiles and sniggers in the normally hushed and cheerless confines of school examination halls. Most of the comments on the detail gained credit, especially when they were linked to wider ideas, such as authorial intention; one of the most impressive was from a candidate who contended that 'Hardy maintains a satirical view of "love at first sight" by using the pig's penis as a mockery of cupid's arrow'.

The examiners reported that Item B worked well as a counterpoint to Item A. Many candidates responded to the use of narrators in both and there were many who could analyse and compare point of view. It was particularly impressive when they could do more than spot the similarity of the items being written in the third person. For example, one argued that 'Hardy uses an authorial voice to suggest the thoughts of both the male and the female characters' and that 'Hardy describes the "momentary flash of intelligence" between Jude and the country girl to reveal Jude's naivety and the country girl's subtle seduction which Hardy perhaps suggests was pre-meditated by the country girl' before going on to argue that, by contrast, 'Coetzee focuses mainly on the thoughts of his male protagonist which has the effect of keeping the female character coy and aloof, which makes her unpredictable – heightening the sexual tension between the lovers at this early stage in their relationship.'

Many commented convincingly on structural elements. A prominent example was after Lurie's quotation from Shakespeare's first sonnet – "From fairest creatures we desire increase" – when which many candidates detected an anticlimax, as they saw Lurie change from potential lover to actual teacher. Others, knowing that the extract comes from near the beginning of the book, suggested that the meeting with Arabella marked the beginning of Jude's first experience of love: an experience which – given all the unfavourable elements of foreshadowing, such as the deceptive dimples, the provocative bodily movements and the painful thump from the private part of a pig – can only prefigure pain.

Less helpful were comparisons that came from pre-conceived ideas. Some asserted that both extracts explore how women are 'objectified' by men. While some were able to make a convincing case for such a reading by using Coetzee, few were unable to do so with Hardy, especially when they tried to argue that Jude was a predator. (Some might, for example, have raised a feminist objection to Hardy's depiction of the sexes by arguing, for example, that his narrative intrusions cast his characters as exemplars for what happens in all cases of courtship – a sly woman deceives an unfortunate man whose life will be ruined as a consequence.) Comparisons exploring the extracts' use of animal imagery had mixed results, but limited success when commenting on Arabella as a 'complete and substantial female animal' who was being criticised by Jude (of course, the words were more accurately ascribed by many candidates as being those of Hardy's narrator). In addition, in the words of one senior examiner, 'the "animal" was not well responded to. This is where we had objectification of women and only a few saw the raw erotic sexuality in the word.'

There were a number of thoughtful wider reading links, including some from candidates who used *Jane Eyre* to cast new light on the relationship in Item A, in which they often noted that Jane's eventual husband, Mr Rochester, is twice her age. Others developed a line of argument that began by comparing Hardy's depiction of her sexually appealing dimpled cheeks to the depiction of Clara's mouth in *Sons and Lovers*, which Lawrence describes as being 'made for passion'. Other candidates compared Lurie's sharing of cultural experiences of dance and ideas of aesthetics and poetry with Melanie to the experience in *Sons and Lovers* in which 'Miriam takes Paul to see a "wild" rosebush — an experience from which

Miriam hopes to grow close to Paul. Miriam feels the sharing of the rosebush will create something “holy”, almost a communion.’ The candidate went on to comment on Paul’s lust, comparing it to *Disgrace* and ‘the way in which Lurie is more interested in a sexual connection, rather than the sort of spiritual connection that Miriam craves’. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* also proved useful, with some contrasting the presentation of the titular character with Melanie in *Disgrace*; rather than being passive, Constance Chatterley was seen as one who actively satisfies her needs through her relationship with Mellors, a man of lesser status, whom Lawrence at one point terms ‘the mere phallus bearer’.

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 ‘attitudes towards sexual relationships’.

While this was felt to be the more demanding question, it did elicit a great many lively and engaged responses. Many appreciated the *The Rover* as a comedy or as a piece of Restoration drama. For example, one candidate remarked that the liberated atmosphere ushered in by the restoration of Charles II ‘had great impact on drama, which once again began to thrive. Bawdy humour was considered enjoyable, especially now that women were on stage and so a play discussing a sexual relationship such as *The Rover* would have been fitting’. Others responded to the carnival setting, with one candidate noting that ‘Item C presents the hedonistic attitude which was rife in Italy during Lenten carnivals, popular amongst the English and their romantic notions of Italy’. Others commented specifically on the carnivalesque features on stage, such as the costume and mask that allow Hellena to both verbally tease Willmore – creating enjoyable dramatic irony for the audience – and to tease him physically by removing and replacing her mask. The introductory material about Behn was well-used, with some arguing that the biographical detail ‘supports much of the argument found in the extract such as the unquestionable dominance of the woman’, or by commenting on the irony of Hellena’s speech about her own promiscuity to Willmore, contending that ‘she is merely voicing this opinion to tease Willmore and that Behn is using humour to mock men’s liberal views of sexual relationships – “young pleasures”’.

Several other sections of the extract attracted significant attention, including Angellica’s second speech. Many commented on the ironies of this seemingly low character having the most poetic lines as well as drawing attention to the topsy-turvy nature of Restoration morality, where the one who loves most deeply is the one who performs acts of love for payment. Some of the better candidates developed their analysis of Angellica by commenting on the dramatic impact of her aside and her exit speech, which several argued showed her dignity in retiring rather than provoking a confrontation with the unfaithful man whom she watches courting another woman. The final section – which shows Willmore being reduced to the briefest of utterances as Hellena makes him squirm by quoting his sexual boasts and which contains the stage business of him kneeling to Hellena – received much engaged commentary. Some detected a proto-feminist satirical bent on the part of Behn, arguing that the action ‘parodies the real marriage ceremony, as Willmore is declaring his love to Hellena and only Hellena and swearing by the book’. Similarly, others focused on the way that Willmore kneels to her, viewing it as a parody of a traditional marriage proposal.

Item D was the one that provided the most scope for stretch and challenge. Candidates who read the poem carefully and who could see it as a whole could construct convincing responses; those who skimmed and picked out a few disembodied details often misread or

digressed. As long as readings were predicated on close reading, the examiners gave them credit, and candidates offered a wide range of reasonable interpretations. One examiner noted that ‘the prompt about Boleyn produced some very intelligent, engaged responses’ but ‘it also threw the dead men further into oblivion as they struggled with Henry and Ann at the expense of the poem itself.’ The latter was certainly not the case for those candidates who used the information with subtlety, including one who argued that the women that Wyatt’s speaker ‘used to see as “tame and meek” and who would have sexual relations with him have now become sexually adventurous – “wild” – in order to advance their social status by sleeping with men higher up in society’.

Many read the poem’s tone well and there was much comment on animal imagery, the best coming from those who saw the subtleties of Wyatt’s words and suggested that the women were like birds or deer – very different beasts from the ‘wild inconstant’ fellow that Willmore is, or indeed some of the bestial men that had been encountered in wider reading, such as Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. High-performing candidates also saw the subtle interplay of past and present in the poem and were able to write sensitively about the important second stanza with its central image of the particular incident in which the woman’s gown drops and she catches the speaker in her arms.

Form and structure attracted the attention of many candidates, but, of those who identified the rhyme scheme, disappointingly few could comment on specific effects. Some, for example, noted a couplet at the end of a stanza; of those, some suggested that this emphasised the stanza’s main idea, but few could link that to meaning or even state what that main idea was. Some good comment, however, was made on Wyatt’s use of caesura and short lines. For example, one candidate identified that, largely, the poem comprised iambic pentameter lines, but that the most climactic – the one that rendered the delicate sexual experience (‘Therewithal sweetly did me kiss’) – was given greater prominence by being a shorter, tetrameter, line. This, she argued, was entirely fitting since that experience was central to this poem which was a dream-like lyric that looked back with longing to a former time. Another showed how ideas gained emphasis by techniques such as choosing the unusual polysyllabic word ‘newfangledness’ and placing it at the end of the endstopped antepenultimate line. It was argued that this prominently positioned word, with its length and ugly vowel sounds, slows the reader, underlining the speaker’s disgust for the new behaviour of his formerly gentle and sweet former lover.

There were various ways in which candidates made links. Some compared the treatment of men in the items, noting that when calling captains ‘severe observers of your vows to chastity’ Hellena ‘demonstrates wit and control’ and that ‘the dramatic irony allows the audience to be a part of Hellena’s joke, amplifying the idea that she is in control. Similarly in ‘They Flee from Me’, we see that the narrator is subject to being controlled by a woman. However, this seems to be feared – describing them as “wild”, “tame” and “meek” shows how he cannot cope with the change – and “wild” suggests they are uncontrollable and animalistic . . .’ Others contrasted the tone and immediacy of the items, arguing, for example, that ‘the elegiac qualities of the poem contrast to the drama extract, which has an immediate impact on the audience and more comedic value as opposed to the serious recollection of sexual politics’. There were also areas to avoid. Having read of Angellica the courtesan in Item C, some sought to characterise Wyatt’s speaker as a user of prostitutes, which usually took them away from the main thrust of the poem and led to assertions.

There were a number of excellent wider reading references. One commented on the control gained by Hellena and argued that ‘similar to Beatrice in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* Hellena uses Willmore’s own words to counter his argument. Both Hellena and

Beatrice make the men look foolish by using their own words against them, creating the idea of the women being not only more intelligent, but also more witty.’ Other useful plays included *The Country Wife* and, in some cases, *Othello*. The latter was handled best by those who drew out differences as well as saw similarities. There is a link between the texts to be made about, for example, the destructive qualities of jealousy, but Angellica is a very different character, and in a very different genre of play, to *Othello*. When candidates knew plays well they could forge interesting links. For example, the ways in which gender is presented in *The Rover* and *The Importance of Being Earnest* are interesting, as are their different styles of comedy. Similarly, one candidate was able to compare the attitudes to sexuality in *The Rover* and *A Doll’s House* by commenting on the radical elements of both, suggesting that both texts seek to subvert masculine authority, albeit in different ways.

Apt choices of verse wider reading included that of the candidate who compared the ambiguous climax of ‘They Flee from Me’ to the one in Owen Sheers’ ‘Keyways’ – another poem that deals with the break up of a sexual relationship. Another candidate connected the feelings of Angellica, who ‘paid him: a heart entire’, with those of A. E. Housman’s speaker in ‘When I was One and Twenty’ who advises ‘Give pounds and crowns and guineas/ But not your heart away’ and found it interesting that both examples suggest to the reader that it is unwise ‘to fall in love for fear of being heartbroken and robbed. In Behn’s play this particularly strengthens her view that men are dangerous when it comes to sexual relationships, whilst Housman’s poem suggests the same about women’. Sexual relationships depicted by the metaphysicals provided many links, with ‘To His Coy Mistress’ emerging as the most popular choice. There was a marked difference between those who seemed only to half-remember a few scraps from poems, which they used regardless of their relevance, and those who obviously had a feel for the poems in question and were able to write something sensible about aspects of form, structure and language as well as to *select* the most relevant parts to substantiate an on-going argument.

While, in general, there has been an improvement in the range of wider reading, some concerns remain. One examiner noted that a few centres, it appeared, had ‘taught textbook extracts alone, augmented by two poems from the old AQA GCSE Anthology – “Anne Hathaway” and “Sonnet 130” – and that in a minority of cases candidates from the same centre ‘offered the same three texts for comparison – a play, a poem and a novel – whether these were appropriate or not’. While the intentions of offering narrow wider reading programmes might be to assist less able candidates, the examiners’ experience of marking their scripts suggests that such an approach serves only to disadvantage them.

On the whole, though, centres and their candidates deserve credit for their efforts to construct balanced courses that offer a broad range of wider reading. In many cases, even when the links were not of the highest order, the efforts of the candidates were. As one senior examiner reported of wider reading: ‘Some links were hung on but a word. Some were exquisitely tangential. Some were just irrelevant. But mostly they tried!’

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 centres can prepare candidates effectively for future examinations. Centres should use it in conjunction with the June 2011 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

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