



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

English Literature A

LTA1C

(Specification 2740)

Unit 1: Texts in Context

The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature

Report on the Examination

Further copies of this Report on **the Examination** are available from: aqa.org.uk

Copyright © 2011 AQA and its licensors. All rights reserved.

Copyright

AQA retains the copyright on all its publications. However, registered centres for AQA are permitted to copy material from this booklet for their own internal use, with the following important exception: AQA cannot give permission to centres to photocopy any material that is acknowledged to a third party even for internal use within the centre.

Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

The Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales (company number 3644723) and a registered charity (registered charity number 1073334).
Registered address: AQA, Devas Street, Manchester M15 6EX.

Texts in Context: The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature

The entry was around 7000 permitting examiners to see the full range of marks and approaches. Centres will find the June 2011 LTA1C mark scheme a very useful document here, as it contains not only the assessment grids which will be familiar from the previous series but also an Indicative Content section for each question, suggesting possible approaches which successful candidates might adopt in their responses. In addition, centres will also find it useful to refer to subsequent reports going back to January 2009.

As a preamble, centres should remember that although Assessment Objective 4 is tested in Section A but not in Section B, centres would do well to advise their students to note the specific contexts of the extract set in Section A and to adapt their comments accordingly. Candidates find the whole course more engaging and satisfying if they can understand the importance of central events of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in respect of the Struggle for Identity. The vast majority of centres are by now well aware that this is a specification which requires candidates to read widely and independently - indeed, it is often one of the main reasons that centres choose this specification. Successful centres understand that they have a duty to prepare their candidates thoroughly for the examination. By so doing their candidates will have every opportunity to make and sustain viable links between their eclectic body of wider reading and the extract set for contextual linking in Section A, regardless of its content subject matter. It is also a good idea to consider how attitudes to ethnicity and gender in particular vary in different parts of the world and to avoid using terminology that is inappropriate to different cultures, eras and situations, for example 'apartheid' and 'segregation', 'the women's suffrage movement' and 'the women's liberation movement'.

As this June saw the sixth outing of this paper it would be hoped that centres and candidates alike were, by now, used to the format and requirements of the Specification and examination procedures. In the main, this has been the case but there remain a few areas of concern that will receive special commentary in this report.

This paper functioned very well indeed with its content enabling candidates to perform to the best of their abilities, demonstrating the skills they had acquired during the course. There was evidence of sound teaching of textual analysis with candidates relishing the features of form, structure and language choice in the passage set for contextual linking, although it was also evident that a taught approach to linking the extract to the wider reading meant, in some instances, whole centres responding in a rehearsed way, citing narrow rather than wide reading that had probably been taught as extracts rather than whole texts. Best practice, combined with a fuller embracing of the spirit of Specification A, should allow for individuality of choice of texts. The study of whole texts also allows for better understanding of context and is usually reflected in more mature overview in students' responses.

The best way to prepare candidates for Question 1 is by providing students with non-fiction extracts from Modern Literature that deals with a full range of identity issues. Although centres have already identified three wider reading texts (one from each literary genre) and submitted details of these to their coursework advisors, it is vital that candidates' wider reading extends beyond this minimum required by the QCDA regulations governing every A-Level English Literature specification. This point is emphasised on page 7 of the Specification: "These three texts may be supplemented with a collection of relevant extracts and shorter pieces of writing." Candidates whose wider reading only stretches as far as their centre's three nominated texts may well find themselves at a disadvantage in the examination if their opportunities to establish relevant links to the extract are limited by the narrowness of their reading. Candidates are, of course, able to refer to their prose and

drama coursework texts too; indeed, as these texts are liable to be very well-known to them, they are likely to be able to refer to these in some depth and detail. To maximise their candidates' 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 Thorne's publication, *AQA English Literature C: The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature* (ISBN 978-07487-8292-5). The title of this text and the title of the unit also reminds candidates that the focus of their reading should be texts of the modern era, loosely defined for these purposes as twentieth and twenty-first century texts. 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 candidates for Question 1 in the 'Contextual Linking' advice which was issued in the summer of 2008.

As stated in previous reports, it is also worth remembering that the extracts used in Question 1 will relate to at least one of these key areas of Struggle for Identity :

- Gender
- Ethnicity
- Sexual Orientation
- Religion
- Cultural Diversity
- Class
- Discrimination
- Alienation and Dislocation
- Issues of Inequality caused by all or any of the above

The wording of the question will provide a 'steer' towards one of these areas, offering further guidance to candidates as they consider which of their wider reading texts will be of most relevance to the extract. Centres should consider coverage of all these areas when planning their course of wider reading; they may also refer to the wider reading list on pages 18 – 20 of the Specification, although the list is not exhaustive: the best centres will introduce their candidates to material from beyond this list. Centres should ensure that candidates' wider reading covers all three literary genres in equal measure: candidates are required to refer to at least one example of their wider reading in each genre when answering Question 1 and omitting a genre is bound to have a limiting effect on the mark awarded. It is not advisable to use a very narrow range of centre-chosen texts and extracts (or readings of those texts and extracts). It is not helpful for candidates if all those entered by a centre restrict themselves to exactly the same texts and extracts and exactly the same points and interpretations. Instead candidates should be encouraged to develop their own repertoire of wider reading and *readings* so that their responses are individual and so that they can choose the most meaningful links relevant to the given extract.

In attempting Question 1, candidates are advised to split their time evenly between the two parts of the question. It is perfectly acceptable for candidates to focus on the extract for thirty minutes, then spend the next thirty minutes writing about their relevant wider reading; however, more confident and sophisticated candidates may be able to produce integrated responses in which the extract and the wider reading comparisons are interwoven throughout the answer. Contrasts will also be an important part of successful responses, but their inclusion should be coherent: arbitrary, bolted-on texts with no obvious connection to the extract will not help candidates reach the higher bands of the mark scheme. However, this is most likely to occur in the responses of candidates whose wider reading has been limited to three texts: it should not be a problem for those candidates who are able to draw on a truly wide experience of texts about identity struggle.

Section A: Contextual Linking

Question 1

This June's piece for contextual linking came from a statement, written in 1995 by the Nigerian political and environmental activist, Ken Saro-Wiwa, to the military court which was trying him. The unusual nature of his trial, as a civilian in a military court, was partly the reason that he could not address the Judge directly, requiring him to compose his words into this written form. It was evident, however, that Saro-Wiwa also had a wider audience in mind as he carefully structured what would become a testament to his supporters and oppressors alike. This plurality of audience and purpose was intriguing to many candidates who were also able to appreciate Saro-Wiwa's skills in polemical persuasion. One examiner commented, "the statement was a powerful and impassioned plea for equality as well as personal, tribal and national identity with such a range of emotions and motives colouring the lexis that candidates were almost spoilt for choice". Unfortunately, another examiner noted ruefully, "it was clear many candidates knew very little about the struggles for identity pertaining to the African continent and many saw Saro-Wiwa's focus as one dominated by blacks fighting against white colonial oppressors." Some candidates completely ignored the information offered them in the preamble and sought to engineer links to the African-American experience of racial oppression in a predominantly 1960s American context, completely missing the concerns for tribal (the Ogoni) self-determination in the face of an oppressive military government and national and social unity in the call for Nigerians across the social range to come together to demand their common human rights and to accept their common responsibilities. Happily, the vast majority of candidates were able to engage with Saro-Wiwa's rhetorical address, noting many features that rendered his statement compelling. Stronger responses were able to go beyond the spotting of such features and engage more thoroughly in exploring how they impacted on the various audiences, leading some to make stylistic links to their wider reading texts. Many discerned a strongly religious trait in Saro-Wiwa's choice of language and were able to articulate sensible comments on his faith and determination, some linking these qualities to those of Dr Martin King Jr. However, as the requirements of this specification are that students make links to their wider reading texts, it would have been more sensible for links to have been made with Dr King's speeches rather than just loosely referenced to the man himself. As Dr King made many speeches it would also be wise for students to cite which speech or text they were referencing much more specifically. When candidates remain vague about such important specifics it is often a sign of weak understanding or poorly assimilated references to a diet of extracts and previous LTA1C examination papers. Stronger responses confidently noted Saro-Wiwa's tonal shifts from angry and even mocking to calm, reverent and humble. Those who were able to pinpoint the corresponding lexis that created the tone showed impressive attention to detail and confidence in exploring technique. Candidates were well advised to avoid simply paraphrasing the extract or in offering large chunks of quotation with turgid 'translation' from time to time. Curiously, many students were convinced that Saro-Wiwa's opening address in his statement to 'My Lord' could mean only one thing: that Saro-Wiwa was addressing his god and that the statement's content was thus an intimate prayer. Such a single-minded even purblind reading was to deny the context of an address to the Military Court before which Ken Saro-Wiwa and his co-defendants were appearing. Whilst it could be acceptable as an additional reading to show awareness of metaphorical reading and even evidence of Saro-Wiwa's personal faith, it was not always used as such because some candidates were bent on 'setting up' a link to their wider reading, usually to Celie in 'The Color Purple'. It is evident that candidates need to reflect fully on the extract before making links and there is much to be gained from exploring subtle differences rather than in forcing similarities where none exist. Those who performed best were those who retained full focus on the terms of the question and were confidently able to explore Saro-Wiwa's thoughts and feelings as a result of their own careful reading and sensitive reflection upon the issues of social, political, tribal, national and personal identity. In addition, those who were able to move beyond merely

commenting on features of form, structure and language to actually appreciate the overall shape and structure of the passage were likely to be displaying Band 4 traits.

As stated above in this report, candidates do not have to treat the question in two distinctly separate halves. This year many more seemed capable of adopting a more integrated approach which saw them weaving between the extract and their wider reading to display confidence as well as overview. Such responses also showed more care in developing the links between the extract and the wider reading, Band 3 and 4 indicators. Least impressive were those who hardly commented upon the extract at all but looked upon the question as an opportunity to cite as many wider reading texts as they could with little or no cognizance of the need for relevance and focus. Merely citing a text is not evidence of understanding. Links between the extract and the wider reading need to be reinforced with some sort of comment, exploration and development of focus on technique and/or relevant reference to contextual factors that shaped the extract and the wider reading. AO4 is the most heavily weighted objective in question and to overlook the need to explore contexts meaningfully is to do oneself a great disservice. After a promising advance last year, the ways in which the drama wider reading texts were used seemed to have regressed a little. Few candidates seemed to think it necessary to consider their drama text as a piece of drama and there was little evidence of the understanding of genre features as well as the contribution such features make to the overall struggle for identity that is being explored. Perhaps such omissions were evidence of texts being studied only in extracts rather than as whole works. Such truncation inevitably damages dramatic impact. Again, several centres seemed to take a casual approach to the interpretation of wider reading with candidates offering very little by way of reference to poetry. One poem only seems a meager interpretation and surely limiting to candidates chances of forging sustainable, interesting and appropriate links. Even more suspect were the centres who forced their candidates to rely solely on the poetry they had prepared for Section B. How can this really be interpreted as WIDER reading? It would also be advantageous to candidates if their references to the poetry included some sort of acknowledgement that they were appreciating the genre of poetry. Candidates do not do themselves any favours by adopting the unhelpful terms “positive” and “negative” in their answers: these are not useful critical labels as they suggest a simplistic judgment of a text rather than a close reading that appreciates complexity and ambiguity. Similarly, loose assertions such as “the rhyme gives it rhythm” and “the rhythm helps it flow” do not suggest a genuine understanding of how poetic effects are created by a writer. In the same way, candidates who refer to an autobiography as “a novel” or who mix up the terms “paragraph” and “stanza” reveal themselves to have an insecure grasp of genre. Some candidates attempt to impress the examiner by using flashy critical terms, even though they do not really understand them (one examiner complained that a particularly large centre he was marking seemed to have taught its students nothing but post-modernist theory); others make grandiose but improbable claims for the effects of punctuation (semi-colons are seldom “meaningful”: candidates would do better to focus on the words in the vicinity of the semi-colon instead). As one senior examiner reported “there has often been an attempt to deliver ‘terminology’. So some modest candidates have been identifying semantic fields and rules of three fit to bust; without giving any consideration to how and why they have been used.” Some candidates use inappropriately colloquial expression (“It gives off a negative vibe” does not constitute an analytical approach to literature), while the phrase “The poem says...” often indicates a candidate with very little awareness of the writer or of the literary construct. Unfortunately, under the pressure of the examination, the expression of some candidates loses both accuracy (one examiner reported that “it was really disappointing to see so many AS level students unable to use possessive apostrophes”) and precision. As ever, the quality of the response in Question 1 depended largely on the quality of the links made to the wider reading texts (AO3) and on the candidates’ abilities to develop AO2 and AO4 detail. The extract should have afforded ample opportunity to craft such links and, in the main, these were apparent. It was a little worrying however to see *Othello* or *Hamlet* being offered here and a continued reliance on the 19th century texts *A Doll’s House* and *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

It was similarly worrying that some centres routinely relied on Section B poetry and others submitted candidates who were routinely unable to refer to a full complement of three genres in their wider reading.

One examiner offered this further advice to Centres:

- Students need to consider **genre** in Q1. They must prepare by analysing a range of non-fiction pieces in relation to their wider reading so that they can point out the differences in the ways in which choice of genre will shape the writing.
- It is most likely that looking for **differences from** as opposed to **similarities to** wider reading will lead to genuine exploration of how writers work. While it is right to point out thematic links, it is essential to be able to show how differently authors treat these themes.
- Listing literary devices is not analysis. Pointing out that other authors use the same devices is not analysis and can lead to some strained links.
- Beware of lazy assertions about context. Beware of unloading context only loosely linked to the given passage.

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 of the Modern era
- Paid attention to 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, wrote very short responses or responses that paid too little attention to the extract, especially its Postscript and conclusions
- Made few or 'forced' links to their wider reading, sometimes ignoring the breadth of genres and often inadequately developing those links
- Struggled to engage with form, structure and language choice in the extract or in their wider reading examples; made inadequate reference to the different contexts of the extract and their wider reading; generalised about context in an inappropriately narrow way.

Section B: Poetry

In Section B candidates should: select and then analyse appropriate poems in detail; closely explore the key words of the question; and co-ordinate a balanced response to the debate. A blend of these priorities ensures success, but the debate remains primary. Inevitably, some candidates do not achieve their full potential – often because of the reductive or corner-cutting approaches they adopt in answering the poetry questions. Too many candidates seem to forget that Assessment Objective 3 is dominant in Section B: they simply write about one or two poems in a general manner, without making their relevance to the question explicit and without making any attempt to construct a balanced debate in response to the given view. This tendency is most marked in the questions which focus on a specific poem: some candidates write only about that poem, without establishing any links

to the rest of the selection; others dismiss the poem in a few lines and then write about some different poems instead. Neither of these approaches leads to success.

In the same way, while it is important that centres prepare their candidates for Assessment Objective 2 by training them to recognise stylistic features and to use technical terms confidently, it is equally important to ensure that this does not degenerate into mere feature-spotting. Examiners saw too many candidates who made no attempt to engage with the intended effects of the literary devices used by the set poets, but merely ticked off those devices in a sterile, un-integrated manner. In extreme cases, this took the form of long paragraphs which did little more than list features and explain their use, sometimes with isolated quotations dropped in as examples, but made no attempt to respond to their meaning. Candidates who were not familiar with the whole of their set poetry text were similarly disadvantaged, as were those who attempted to recycle practice answers to past questions: a narrow range of textual knowledge will inevitably inhibit the quality of a candidate's response, while it is vital to consider the questions on the paper afresh - they may sometimes be similar to previous questions, but they are never the same.

To some extent, the effectiveness of the poetry questions in differentiating between candidates is intensified by the simple fact that some candidates have a secure understanding of the relevant Assessment Objectives and the best ways to meet them, whereas other candidates seem to think it will be sufficient to write simple accounts of the few poems they happen to have skimmed through during the evening before the examination. Candidates need to remember that Assessment Objective 3 is dominant here: the questions invite candidates to construct a balanced debate in response to a given opinion, supporting their arguments by detailed analysis of relevant poems. Many candidates do exactly this and are rewarded with appropriately high marks. However examiners reported a range of unsatisfactory approaches which inevitably restricted candidates to the lower bands of the mark scheme. Some less successful candidates often spend much of the poetry question's allocated hour going through one or two poems line by line but paying scant regard to the opinion up for debate; others write whole paragraphs about the importance of individual words (or even individual punctuation marks!) but fail to show any understanding of the whole poems from which the words have been extracted. Less confident candidates often use up precious minutes explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases rather than analysing the effects produced by their use; others make no reference whatever to the poetic forms and techniques used by the writers. Centres would do well to remember that it is those candidates who are prepared to explore the poetry and respond to it in an informed personal manner that this Specification seeks to reward.

***And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou**

Comparatively few responses were seen to Questions 1 and 2 on this text. Fortunately, those seen managed on the whole to avoid reference to irrelevant poems from the proscribed section *Shaker Why Don't You Sing*. Whilst poems from this section could be used effectively as wider reading in Section A, it should not be cited in Section B responses. As ever, strong responses scored on candidates' abilities to balance their arguments and to maintain excellent focus on the key words of the question. There is a good deal of biographical information available on Maya Angelou's long and colourful life but Section B questions should not be seen as the appropriate place to offer extensive references to such material; on the whole, this was observed or used very deftly, particularly in responses to Question 2.

Question 2

The question invited some exploration of suitable poems to support and refute the asserted view that Angelou's poetry presented female struggle more effectively than male struggle. It

was noted that stronger responses were those that were fully engaged with the ‘ **more effectively**’ steer towards evaluative comment and personal engagement. What the question was not asking for was a straightforward explanation of the content of poems dealing with males compared to one or two dealing with females but that is what some candidates offered with inevitably limited success. More informed were the responses that could acknowledge Angelou’s gender might allow her a more personal insight into female struggle for identity but not necessarily to the detriment of her ability to empathise with male struggle too. Adopting a narrowly biographical line of interpretation of poetry is to pay scant regard to any poet’s ability to externalize and Angelou’s talent in particular. Personal experience can be used as a way of reaching out to others as individuals rather than as types defined merely by gender. Candidates who read Angelou closely were able to evaluate the effects created by references that transcended gender in poems such as ‘Refusal’, and ‘Junkie Monkey Reel’. A particularly effective response cited ‘Life Doesn’t Frighten Me’ as firm evidence of Angelou’s ability to speak for both male and female in powerful poetic cadences and it was possible for the frequently cited ‘Still I Rise’ to be pressed into service as a testament to the indomitability of spirit regardless of the gender of the poet. It is always a mistake to identify the ‘I’ persona in any poem solely as the poet and to do so with Angelou, as tempting as it might be to make simple biographical readings, is unimaginative and limiting. Candidates who tried to re-hash responses to previous papers’ questions or who offered only superficial readings of any of their choices, damaged their chances of scoring highly in AO2 and those who offered little reference to the breadth of Ms Angelou’s repertoire neglected AO3.

Successful candidates:

- Chose appropriate poems for the exploration of Angelou’s ideas about gender struggle
- Analysed Angelou’s use of form, structure and language in a meaningful way that avoided ‘feature-spotting’ and integrated focus on style with her success as a poet
- Carefully integrated only strictly relevant contextual material while maintaining good focus on the key words of the question and key features of their chosen material.

Less successful candidates:

- Wrote narrow biographical responses, very short, underdeveloped responses or failed to construct a convincing debate
- Remained only at the surface of their chosen poems or selected inappropriate poems on which to base their arguments
- Paid little attention to Angelou’s use of form, structure and language and/or the key words of the question.

Question 3

Candidates who barely mentioned the name of the poem disadvantaged themselves as an element of appraisal and evaluation of ‘Ain’t That Bad?’ was helpful to providing a framework for any exploration of the themes and ideas relating to ethnicity that are contained in the collection. Where the named poem was explored and appreciated in some depth before diversifying into poems that may have provided a better focus on Angelou’s exploration of and celebration of African-American ethnicity, many informed and valid responses were seen. Surprisingly, it became evident that some candidates had very little understanding of the named celebrities in the poem, for example referring to Jesse Jackson as a woman. Others claimed that the poem spoke more about Angelou’s pride in her gender but this would surely be to ignore the switch from the personal pronoun ‘I’ (‘Don’t I shine and glow?’) to ‘we’ (‘Now ain’t we bad?’) in the final stanza. Some ignored the way in which Angelou reclaimed the perjorative uses of ‘bad’ and ‘black’ to celebrate them as adjectives of positivity and power. Most, however, were able to appreciate Angelou’s fine use of rhythmic rap beat and colloquial dialect as evidence of her avowed support for African-American enrichment and

diversity. Best of all were the responses that clearly appreciated the ironic techniques so evident here, in the use of the rhetorical question mark in the title and throughout the poem. Links were made to other poems showing how they did/ did not express more effectively Angelou's pride in African-American ethnicity. Sometimes these were poems that revealed similar subject matter such as 'Still I Rise', 'Willie' and 'Thank You Lord' or they were poems written in a similarly ebullient style such as 'Phenomenal Woman' and 'Through the Inner City to the Suburbs'. Counter-arguments based on elements of Angelou's writing about ethnic pride not captured in 'Ain't That Bad?' or with some hint of criticism of African-American types were successfully mounted, particularly with reference to 'A Kind of Love, Some Say', 'Men' and even 'Kin'. The success of any response, as ever, was largely determined by how well the arguments and counter-arguments were mounted to produce a balanced debate.

Successful candidates:

- Produced a debate which considered the idea that 'Ain't That Bad?' could be seen as the best expression of Angelou's pride in African-American ethnicity in the collection and came to convincing well-evidenced conclusions. Alternatively, they suggested, with recourse to well-chosen detail, alternative poems that better demonstrate these ideas but avoided dismissing the named poem as irrelevant or being largely without merit.
- Linked 'Ain't That Bad?' to a range of other relevant poems in order to develop the debate.
- Explored Angelou's choices of form, structure and language with confidence, integrating such features into smooth, seamless lines of argument.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Ain't That Bad?' could be of much interest when exploring Angelou's ideas about pride in ethnicity in the collection.
- Wrote basic accounts of the poem or alternatives with little reference to form, structure and language.
- Were unable to engage with ideas expressed in the named poem and in others that broadened the debate of Angelou's interest in expressing pride in African-American ethnicity.

The World's Wife by Carol Ann Duffy

True to former years, this text again attracted the huge majority of all the Section B responses and shows that Duffy maintains her popularity. Fortunately, whilst 'The World's Wife' is being retired from 2013, a replacement Duffy collection will take over in the form of 'The Feminine Gospels' so Duffy fans will not be disappointed. By and large, candidates managed to refrain from extraneous biographical references but a characteristic of weak answers was an inability to differentiate between the voice of the speaker of the monologue and Duffy's own voice or views. Weaker responses also showed much more reliance on references to poems that had been at the centre of the previous year's questions, in particular, 'Little Red Cap', usually in an inappropriate and irrelevant way with some even claiming it would serve far better as a concluding poem to the collection but with little real explanation as to why. Much more positively in evidence, however, was an increased facility to debate in a more balanced way. One examiner who had noted this in previous years, observed "a continued reliance upon 'Anne Hathaway' as the default text for balancing and counter-arguing in a blanket way that often precluded any real attempt to shape the points to the specific requirements of the question". However, there was a pleasing case being made for 'Queen Herod' and 'Queen Kong' in many counter-arguments seen this summer although in a few instances it seemed that candidates perhaps did not differentiate between the two or were woefully slapdash in recognizing that they were two very different poems both in

content, tone and style! One examiner rightly bemoaned the reliance of some candidates on poorly digested tracts of critical theory that did little to help them craft an informed personal response, “There was much description of Duffy as an ecofeminist (dubious) and a fair amount of discussion of essentialism, only occasionally with any signs that the concept was understood.” From this it would seem clear that a critical theory-based approach might work with the most able students who fully understand it and can manipulate their references to it with confidence, otherwise it leads to much assertion with the text, when the text is interpreted in ways to make it fit the assertion. Candidates should be reminded that their own informed interpretations of the poems is preferable to most second hand sources of literary criticism and that diversity of view can be discovered in classroom or seminar-based discussion and does not need to emanate from some *recherché* source. Evidence of engaged reading was clear in better responses and, in the main, inappropriate grumblings about feminist writing in general was kept to a minimum. This summer the responses were spread far more evenly between the Duffy questions with most candidates finding plenty to write about but with some failing, in general, to shape their considerable knowledge of Duffy’s work, to the demands of the questions.

Question 4

The introductory quotation was intended to get the mind working on the debatable issue of violence as a liberating theme in Duffy’s poetry. The qualifying statement was there to get candidates to focus more specifically on the nature and purpose of that violence when used by females. Neither was intended as a springboard into a description of two or three poems where the women speakers use violence. Unfortunately, this was the approach adopted by many who believed that a narrative and descriptive approach to the question was called for. In doing so they limited themselves to attaining no better than a mark in Band 2. Strong responses often engaged with the idea of violence being liberating especially for women and more especially for the oppressed or misunderstood women who voice the majority of the monologues in this collection. Such responses inevitably drew candidates to ‘The World’s Wife’ with some extremely pertinent discussion of society’s ambivalent or even hypocritical attitudes towards females who use violence when compared to their male counterparts. Many also profitably cited ‘Mrs Quasimodo’ but occasionally with little reference to the real objective of her violence against the bells. Others referenced ‘Medusa’ and ‘Salome’ with interesting exploration of the purpose of female violence in these poems but arguably a shade less understanding of the ways in which Duffy had subverted the original stories. Accounts of ‘Salome’ as an avenging spirit punishing John the Baptist for his gross acts of domestic violence needed to explain the ground for this interpretation a little more carefully if they were to be effectively persuasive in their lines of argument. Those who used ‘Queen Herod’ often did so with careful observation of her motives and of Duffy’s but were best to stop short of feminist treatises or loose gender propaganda. On the subject of Duffy’s sources, it seemed counterproductive for candidates to wrongly ascribe her tales to mythology or the bible when they were folkloric or to claim they were fairytales when they were mythical or biblical in origin. A little research goes a long way to achieving accuracy. Many candidates enjoyed using ‘Mrs Beast’, relishing the lexis of violence so evident here, but were not quite so forthcoming or confident in their explanation of Duffy’s possible objectives here or indeed whether the violence was an objective in itself. Candidates who performed creditably were those who read Duffy’s poems more closely and eschewed a description of content in favour of a clear exploration of Duffy’s motives when arming her female protagonists with violent words, actions, thoughts and characteristics. Significantly, counter-arguments that explored objectives other than the nature and purpose of female violence, were often illuminating and allowed for arguments that refused to polarize the genders. Successful responses made clear cases for Duffy’s language choices, use of perspectives, structure and form. Less articulate responses often laboured biographical features about the speakers or sought to impress with unfocused explanations of the original stories behind Duffy’s monologues. There seemed to be more reference than ever to Duffy’s

use of enjambment, perhaps in a bid to engage with structure and form but there were few responses that showed confidence in articulating the effect of this device on the overall argument or counter-argument they were making. Similarly, it would be encouraging if more candidates could explore the effect of features of form in more detail rather than just noting that ‘Demeter’ and ‘Anne Hathaway’ as well as the ‘Medusa’ section of ‘The Devil’s Wife’ are examples of sonnets.

Successful candidates:

- Engaged with the views expressed in the question’s quoted prefatory remark and the view expressed in the question, moving on to challenge and qualify views with careful exploration of tone and prudent choice of examples.
- Used a wide and discerning choice of poems to produce a balanced and informed debate.
- Explored Duffy’s stance and poetic techniques with confidence.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply agreed with the given view and failed to focus on the diversity of emotions expressed in the collection.
- Wrote general responses with very little consideration of their need to evaluate and validate their views with precise detail and analysis.
- Paid little or no attention to Duffy’s choices of form, structure and language, often describing rather than analysing a poem’s features.

Question 5

Most of the difficulties encountered by candidates with this question stemmed from the perverse interpretation of the words ‘effective conclusion’ as ‘typical of the collection’. As a result much time was ill-spent on explaining why ‘Demeter’ was typical or atypical of the collection and giving little consideration to its tones of resolution or finality or how it linked with or contrasted with other poems in the collection. Much time, in general, was spent on loosely suggesting other poems from the collection that would be acceptable as concluding poems but with very little valid reasoning as to why in a perfunctory, mechanical counter-argument style. Some responses gave ‘Demeter’ itself very little consideration either because it was deemed obviously the best choice of concluding poem (a limiting assumption) or because it was dismissed as obviously a wayward and foolish choice by the poet (equally limiting). Others saw it as an opportunity to explain how happy Duffy had become since the birth of her daughter and how she was “now giving up on man-bashing”! Those who were able to focus on ‘Demeter’ with sufficient clarity and purpose were able to explore the use of time and link this effectively to the time-scale of the collection, ideas about growth and maturity and the cyclical or seasonal shifts and rhythms of the collection. Such line of argument gave ample opportunity to make successful links to other poems in exploring natural imagery, pathetic fallacy, stylistic features and writer’s technique across the collection, but particularly appropriate when linked to ‘Queen Kong’, ‘Queen Herod’, ‘Thetis’ and ‘Mrs Beast’ as the penultimate poem. Many were able to articulate, when choosing the latter, how different the final tones and parting thoughts of the collection would have been if this had been Duffy’s choice, some even suggesting that if she had, her feminist credentials would have survived intact and that she had in fact “let down a whole legion of her supporters in wimping out with ‘Demeter’”! Subtlety was a real discriminator here with confident responses showing the ability to appreciate Duffy’s craft as well as her delicate restraint in ‘Demeter’, especially when compared to other poems in which maternal love feature strongly. Counter-arguments, based on elements of Duffy’s writing not present in ‘Demeter’ were used appropriately to produce a balanced debate, particularly those focusing on humour, withering irony, sexual explicitness and heterosexual love.

Successful candidates:

- Engaged with the views expressed in the question, specifically challenging or qualifying the idea of ‘Demeter’ forming an ‘effective conclusion’ to the collection and offering well-founded consideration of Duffy’s intentions, avoiding the purely narrative and descriptive; explored the focal poem with confidence.
- Used a range of less common but nonetheless relevant poems to produce interesting counter-arguments that balanced the debate.
- Analysed Duffy’s considerable poetic prowess in the named poem and across the collection, with confidence and skill.

Less successful candidates:

- Offered simple agreement with the question’s premise and/or narrowed the debate by ignoring the key words ‘effective conclusion’
- Wrote very general responses about maternal love and strong women in an indiscriminate way and/or ignored the need to evaluate.
- Paid little attention to Duffy’s choices of form, structure and language.

Skirrid Hill by Owen Sheers

This collection proved a popular and profitable choice for many centres this year. Sheers’ poetry arguably best (of the three poets offered in Section B) explores the widest possible range of issues about identity from personal to national and social. On account of not fitting neatly into any pigeon-holing approach to the Struggle for Identity, Sheers is rightly seen as a liberating poet whose range of subjects and techniques makes him exciting and relevant to young people. This summer, candidates, in general, remained well-focused on that detail but were not always as scrupulous about their focus on the specific terms of the questions. Both questions had their followers, with neither proving a runaway favourite but it was perhaps more evident that Question 6 responses made greater reference to material covered in past questions than did those answering Question 7. Whilst judicious preparation using old papers can be useful, centres are advised to dissuade their students from any approach that substantially re-hashes past material.

Question 6

The test here was to explore the extent to which Sheers’ poetry is preoccupied with pain so to circumvent the question by briefly stating that it is not and then focusing on the way it is preoccupied with loss instead is to rewrite the question into one that had been offered in a past paper! Whilst a robust case could be made that the pain demonstrated in the collection is inevitably linked to loss or that loss somehow engendered pain, that case would need to be made and not assumed. Weak responses here tended to ignore the question and rattle through a few examples of poems that dealt with loss in its different guises. Most candidates tended to agree with the statement and then their task was to show why, as well as offering some sort of counter-argument based on the existence of other key features or themes of Sheers’ poetry such as respect for artisanal skill seen in such poems as ‘The Farrier’, ‘The Fishmonger’ and ‘Late Spring’ or poems with more positive outcomes and no obvious pain such as ‘Song’, ‘Winter Swans’ and ‘Swallows’ or even poems that celebrate the positivity of nature in overcoming any adversity. Strong responses were able to engage with the different types of emotions evidenced in Sheers’ poetry and make strong conclusions about Sheers’ motives and intent as well as informed, analytical reference to his distinctive poetic techniques.

Successful candidates:

- Chose highly appropriate poems to explore Sheers’ preoccupation with pain or his fascination with other topics, showing insightful lines of counter-argument.

- Paid close attention to the choices and effects of form, structure and language, offering sensitive interpretation and analysis.
- Explored a wealth of poetic techniques in an attempt to more clearly articulate Sheers' focus.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply offered broad agreement with the given view and struggled even to exemplify the techniques Sheers used or glossed 'pain' as 'loss' with attendant loss of relevance and focus
- Ignored the question's key words and failed to evaluate their agreement or disagreement with them.
- Made generalisations about Sheers' choice of form, structure and language, often asserting rather than illustrating their points.

Question 7

Most candidates were able to give a clear exploration of the named poem, 'Inheritance', and explain why it was interesting or even typical of Sheers' style and techniques, however, this did not usually satisfy the need to explore the idea of the poem being 'of central importance' to the collection. To achieve this, candidates needed to explore Sheers' use of words that arrested attention and created a stir in forging or crafting something/someone of originality and uniqueness yet at the same time owning the derivation of features, characteristics and essence stems from something passed on. Amongst these features were the paradoxical ideas of pain in pleasure, pride in labour and the resilience of relationships with their ability to withstand and endure. In addition, to validate the named poem's centrality, candidates needed to make interesting and secure links to the wider collection demonstrating some development of the ideas in 'Inheritance'. Most were able to broaden and connect in this way, citing close family relationships, natural imagery, pride in nation and heritage and referencing such poems as 'Landmark', 'Flag', 'Farther', 'The Wake' and 'Amazon' to good effect. Some chose to explore links to poems with similarly unusual style such as 'Keyways', 'Marking Time' and 'The Equation'. Clear counter-arguments were mounted based on poems in which Sheers moved away from the intensely familial or national, especially those set beyond Wales and England in poems such as 'Drinking With Hitler' and 'L.A. Evening' or contrasted with those that transcended time and place such as 'Swallows', 'Calendar' and 'Song'. Exploring and analyzing Sheers' choices of structure, form and language to show how he created a satisfying and intriguing celebration of personal and national identity as well as an expression of unifying, overarching humanity pushed these responses to the top of Band 3 and beyond. Above all was the need to shape these observations into an argument that clarified why 'Inheritance' was of central importance to the collection with its diverse themes or a clear counter-argument as to why something else created a more compelling case. These counter-arguments were often fuelled by convincing references to a wide selection of poems in which Sheers tackles diverse subjects, other than culture and personal identity, from unusual angles, such as 'L.A. Evening', 'Stitch in Time' and even 'Drinking With Hitler'.

Successful candidates:

- Produced a balanced debate which considered, developed and agreed or refuted the idea that the named poem was 'of central importance' to the collection in a thoughtful, engaged, incisive manner.
- Linked 'Inheritance' to a range of other relevant poems and/or made an arresting case for another poem's centrality to the collection.
- Explored Sheers' form, structure and language choice with confidence, citing examples relevantly and with analytical dexterity.

Less successful candidates:

- Simply dismissed the idea that ‘Inheritance’ could be ‘of central importance’ to the collection’.
- Wrote basic accounts of the named poem and/or others in the collection with little relevant or developed reference to the impact of form, structure and language.
- Were unable to move beyond generalisations and assertions in respect of ‘Inheritance’s centrality or any other poem being a more suitable choice.

To summarise:

Across Questions 2 to 7 a good deal of candidates’ time was given over to engaged and intelligent analysis that was not always clearly relevant to the question or to the lines of argument. Inevitably, there is still a tendency for less confident candidates to fall back on biographical information in their answers, but most candidates now understand that Assessment Objective 4 is not tested in the poetry questions and that their answers must maintain a focus on the poetry while constructing a balanced debate. Care should be taken to select appropriate poems and to select from those poems only the most relevant aspects, rather than offloading all they know about a particular poem or poems. One of the answers to this issue is planning; time spent planning is crucial. Many candidates begin writing too soon (and the same can be said of responses to Section A). Once candidates are writing, they should make frequent reference to the key words of the question and the central debate so as to ensure that the answer remains on track. Some candidates perhaps try to cover too many poems for their own good. They should remember that there are two perfectly acceptable choices: ranging more widely, or choosing to concentrate on two or three poems in more detail. If they choose the former they must be careful to cover depth and closeness of reading. If they choose the latter, then ‘two or three’ means just that; covering two poems is fine and can still enable candidates to gain the highest marks.

As stated in January’s Report, exploring poetic effects created by writers’ choices of form, structure and language still remains a difficult area for many candidates. Dealing with aspects of form, in particular, such as rhyme, metre and stanza form can lead candidates into empty feature-spotting with little relevance and/or asserted and unconvincing links to meaning. Such features, it is claimed, are chosen by writers to “make them stand out” (?) or to create vague effects such as “flow” and “pace”. For examiners the key questions when faced with these assertions are “How?” and “Why?” Candidates should also ask these questions themselves and use them to shape their responses when it comes to AO2.

The odd numbered questions naming a poem need just as much attention to the debate, to choice of material and poems and to planning. Across the whole paper, candidates should make every effort to express themselves with clarity and precision. AO1 might not be the most heavily weighted objective in Section A but it is the means to accessing all the others. No argument can be successful without clear articulation.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.