



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)
June 2012**

English Literature A

LTA1C

(Specification 2740)

Unit 1: Texts in Context

The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature

Report on the Examination

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The entry for this option has grown steadily since its inception with current numbers around the 8,000 mark. Students, schools and colleges have responded with great positivity to the cutting-edge nature of the course and this season examiners reported seeing robust responses featuring references to texts published in the past five years, evidence that this paper keeps students very much in touch with contemporary literature as well as that of the previous century.

Again, the largest percentage of the cohort chose to respond to Duffy's *The World's Wife* and very few responses were seen in general to Angelou's *And Still I Rise* in Section B. It should be noted that the former text is offered for the last time in January 2013 and should be the preserve of the re-sitters not the general 2013 cohort. In its place from 2013 comes the Duffy text, *The Feminine Gospels*. It is pleasing to note that Sheers' *Skirrid Hill* continues to attract a healthy and informed following as the currently high-profile poet fills the more metaphysical niche of poetrycraft. A well-constructed course lends itself to areas of supervised private study or specialisation in any of the quality texts of the modern era for students to really practise their wider reading, where the ensuing classroom-based feedback can cross-fertilise and engender stimulating debate. However, it would be well to stress that advice and supervision from the professionals as to what constitutes quality literature is helpful in guiding choice, as well as ensuring focus on both literary merit and appropriate areas of the struggle for identity.

Whilst students, in general, seem well-prepared for the twin demands of the paper which is the demonstration of wide and deep reading, some have failed to impress with their literacy skills and in the adoption of an appropriately formal register for written expression. This is perhaps the result of constraints on classroom or course time devoted to timed essay and specific examination-technique preparation. Students do need to remember they are expressing themselves in a formal context and should avoid colloquialisms. On a positive note, fewer instances of poor budgeting of time between the two sections were noted and students appeared more confident in balancing their responses to the extract with their wider reading in Section A. There is no preferred approach but students who showed they were able to integrate and link their struggle or language-level observations more seamlessly to their wider reading, as well as showing they could accurately wield the contextual detail, were always successful. In preparing students for the examined element of the course schools and colleges will find the June 2012 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 students might adopt in their responses. In addition, schools and colleges will also find it useful to refer to subsequent reports going back to January 2009.

Schools and colleges should remember that although Assessment Objective 4 is tested in Section A but not in Section B, they 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. Students will make better sense of the course, finding it more satisfying if they can understand the importance of central events of the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries in respect of the Struggle for Identity. It is also a good idea to consider how attitudes to sexuality, gender and ethnicity in particular for this June's paper, 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' or, for example, in suggesting that the Campaign for Civil Rights of the 1960s in the USA automatically cast in stone the legislation for personal freedoms at a global level. The situation in South Africa in the apartheid years was, in crucial detail, quite different from the late 1960s in the USA. The passage for contextual linking this time around was clearly prefaced as a 1994 publication from a man who had spent thirty years in prison for "his part in activities to bring about equal rights" but who had gone on to "become South Africa's first post-apartheid President". Combined with its form of autobiography, it should have been deductible that Nelson Mandela was reflecting on the past, commenting on the present and looking to the future of freedom in his country as well as in the broader context. Students who read superficially miss important detail and go on to misconstrue or diverge on a tangent of unrewardable loose biography, sociology or history. They also fail to appreciate the many ways in which the writer has constructed his work to create audience-appeal and to fulfill the requirements of genre.

This June was the seventh appearance of this paper so it was hoped that schools and colleges and students alike, would be well used to the format and requirements of the Specification and examination procedures. Unfortunately some schools and colleges persist in teaching their students to explore typicality which is NOT a requirement and in a few instances wider reading did not evidence the full complement of poetry, prose and drama. All three must be explored if students are to attain Band 4. References should be of sufficient detail and relevance to be considerably more than a name-check. Those who achieve the best results are those who develop their links to the wider reading in such a way as to explore the context, the area of the struggle or the techniques employed by the writer of the extract and the wider reading text. Where this is not evident the point can appear as a "bolt-on" or a distortion of the integrity of the extract or the wider reading text. There still remain a few areas of concern where inappropriate texts are cited in the Wider Reading. The paper tests understanding of The Struggle for Identity in **Modern Literature** so Shakespearean drama should not be referenced, GCSE texts and poetry anthology material is best avoided and references to "extracts" should be avoided. It is, of course, quite possible to use extracts from texts when teaching the course but students should be helped to understand the wider context of those texts and avoid sweeping generalisations based on only a cursory glance at a wider reading 'anthology'.

The June paper was very well received, clearly enabling students to access a wide range of subject-matter, literary style and technique in Section A and B. Nelson Mandela's autobiographical extract was **not** a speech, much to the disappointment of some students who clearly wanted to write about his Inaugural Address when he became President. Although it would be quite legitimate to explore some of his speech-like, rhetorical devices and the relationship he is forging with his audience(s) in so doing, it was incorrect to assume that any analysis of persuasive speech could be transferred wholesale to this text. Those who read carefully, could discern the very clever ways in which Mandela uses the autobiographical form to reflect, explore and to challenge as well as to inspire and motivate his audience who would be the reader

as well as the global one of an age of electronic advancement in media. The extract was actually the final three paragraphs of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, an expansive tome that Mandela was bringing to a rounding conclusion, discernible to careful readers in his tone as well as the on-going, extended metaphor of the personal journey. Mandela skilfully manages to keep his words personal and yet also imbue them with a broader, more general import that encompasses each and every one of us. Most students noted his move from the first person singular to the first person plural pronouns that helps to show personal struggle with the collective one. Combined with a sobering reference to “with freedom come responsibilities”, Mandela varies his syntax and adjusts his vision to move from the intimately frank admission of loneliness, to take in the brief but “glorious” moment of what the world could look like if we were all freed of our prejudices, but to choose to conclude with the need to strive further and move on. No room for complacency or triumphalism here. The energy and dynamism of the extract was apparent to close readers and insightful, informed references to this structure became a key discriminator.

To reiterate, the best way to prepare students for Question 1 is by providing students with non-fiction from Modern Literature that deals with a full range of identity issues. Although schools and colleges 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 students’ 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.” Students whose wider reading only stretches as far as these three nominated texts will inevitably 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. Students 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 students’ facility in answering Question 1, schools and colleges 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 remind students 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, teachers of the course 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. Schools and colleges are reminded that there is further guidance on how to prepare students for Question 1 in the ‘Contextual Linking’ advice which was issued in the summer of 2008. Wherever possible, whole texts should be studied to avoid misunderstanding of contexts and reductive comments that can blight an otherwise sound response. Students should be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning to some extent and in choosing some of their additional texts they will develop their own tastes as well as deepening their understanding of the breadth of the struggle for identity. It is extremely obvious to any examiner when students have been ‘blanket taught’ as they offer almost identical responses to a minimum number of texts. Interestingly, this is most noticeable in the approach to poetry where students cite a collection but can often make reference to only one poem and sometimes in such little detail that the genre qualities are deemed irrelevant. Whilst accepting that time is a factor,

wider reading should be exactly that. The keeping of reading logs and seminar discussions led by the students themselves could be the way forward in helping to support originality and fuller, informed participation in this course. The new OFSTED criteria would also support this approach. Students, most crucially in *Struggle for Identity*, need to be prepared for any of the areas of the struggle so a course built on just one main theme, for example, ethnicity, will be limiting and certainly require students to be challenged to the point of mental acrobatics to make valid links where the main struggle of the extract does not coincide. Of course, students do need to think for themselves and be encouraged to explore the fundamental bases of the struggle for identity: the achievement of autonomy and the finding of a voice through literary expression. The subject matter of Nelson Mandela's extract was not so much racial identity as the underlying, universal principals of freedom and equality of the human race. Whenever students can be encouraged to find such underpinning concepts they are likely to go on to see and explore illuminating links with their wider reading across the full range of SFI issues.

Naturally, students' wider reading should cover all three literary genres in more-or-less equal measure: students 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 worth noting that even though reliance upon Section B poetry is not strictly an infringement of rubric to do so does show, inevitably, narrowness that is at odds with the spirit of the course. Students should not restrict themselves to exactly the same texts and extracts and exactly the same points and interpretations chosen by any one teacher. Instead students 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 students should show they have read the extract carefully but they are not required to give an explanation of its entire content. Rather they should focus on interesting style and ideas, exploring them carefully and using these to provide springboards into their wider reading. In doing so, 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 students reach the higher bands of the mark scheme. Neither will very general references to discrimination and prejudiced attitudes that show understanding of sociological factors but very little relevance to how writers explore these attitudes through their themes and craft. These approaches are most likely to occur in the responses of students whose wider reading has been limited to three texts: it should not be a problem for those who are able to draw on a truly wide experience of texts about identity struggle.

One further point offered as a plea from examiners to students is for legibility of handwriting and more time to be spent on planning. Everybody can sympathise with the stress of sitting examinations and the effect this can have on the writing process but it is counter-productive for students to splatter their thoughts in an uncontrolled, barely legible way. Time spent in reading carefully, thinking and planning should mean that responses are better shaped and economically expressed. Students who write loosely, barely pausing to add vital punctuation or use paragraphs, do themselves no favours as the reader has to struggle to follow their thought processes. Planning more and writing a little less might well be mutually beneficial.

Section A: Contextual Linking

Question 1

This June's piece for contextual linking was the concluding part of Nelson Mandela's autobiography, published in 1994. Using the literary device of the extended metaphor or allegory, Mandela explores the fundamentals of human freedom, philosophising on the inextricable links between oppressor and oppressed in order to find common ground between them. His whole emphasis is on reconciliation and healing rather than on vengeance or the perpetuation of hostilities. As some noted, he employs the generic "a man" to stand for Everyman in an unashamedly ideological appeal to common humanity. His variation of sentence structure allows for pace and emphasis in its contrasts and the carefully chosen lexis ("Lexus" being something quite different!) is emotive, inspirational, visionary and empowering. The metaphorical reference to the casting off of chains evokes a clear image of enfranchisement from mental slavery or bigotry expressed eloquently and lyrically in visionaries from Blake to Marley, Orwell to King. Recognition that all can be victims of debilitating closed-mindedness is a mark of Mandela's ability to express simple truths clearly and economically as well as acknowledging his own faults in his aptly-phrased "missteps." Those who recognised a tone of humility here were aware of the nuance of his prose as well as its sometimes poetic cadences. Some students made astute links between those "missteps" and Mandela's imprisonment for what the state at the time deemed 'acts of terrorism' designed to endanger or take life. Construing his wording as an acknowledgement that such acts were misguided showed insight combined with felicitous understanding of the contexts of production and reception, Band 4 discriminators indeed. Forging links between Mandela's soaring rhetoric of that "glorious vista" brought about by the dismantling of apartheid and Dr Martin Luther King Junior's words of his last speech where he states he has been to the "mountaintop" and has "seen the promised land" was rewarding but students should ensure they cite King's words with care and avoid making very general references to just the man, rather than his words.

The way in which Mandela concludes his autobiography provided huge opportunities for students to make links between his sentiments and the messages of numerous types of wider reading where the characters themselves find no easy solutions to their problems or happy endings. If ever there was an extract with infinite possibilities to link widely and well this was the one and students were only limited by their ability to see and seize those opportunities.

Several examiners remarked that it was evident some students had no idea of the eminence of Nelson Mandela as a national or international figure. It was not necessary to have this understanding or overview as the ideas and sentiments expressed in the extract were accessible to all who read with sufficient care to weigh the words wisely. Nevertheless, it was surprising that students of a course in *The Struggle for Identity* had not come across Nelson Mandela, especially as he had been so recently in the news in March and April when the media had begun to hyperventilate about his admission to hospital and the chances of his imminent death- greatly exaggerated, thankfully! It was also a little worrying that some students misread South Africa for South America with attendant skewing of contextualisation. Careful reading can never be over-stressed evidently. On this tack, students should be advised that when referring to events in the USA, writing about southern America is misleading when they more accurately mean the **southern states** of the USA.

Whilst the general content of the autobiography proved accessible, the devil was in the detail and weaker students shied away from exploring and evaluating Mandela's ideology of freedom, juxtaposed with the depiction of oppression as a mental as well as a physical entity. Some were able to analyse the intricacies of the polemical style Mandela adopts and make cogent links to other political writers. Where weaker students simply enumerated the times 'free' or 'freedom' were used, more confident students could weigh the effect of the repetition and link this to the effect upon audiences as well as the exploration of other texts employing similar techniques. To recognise oratorical or rhetorical features of Mandela's prose style was helpful, especially where this could be linked to comments on the relationship the writer seeks to build with his audiences rather than just another point on a tick-list of 'feature-spotting'. As with all the pieces set for contextual linking, a great variation in the depth of reading was evident. Where too little time had been spent on reading for meaning, students tended to remain shallow in their appraisal of Mandela's message as well as generalised in their exploration of technique. It is always a challenge for students to expend a fair balance of time between the unpacking of the extract and the linking to their wider reading, but it is never advisable to skim the surface of an extract that has been chosen for its depths and subtleties. Superficial approaches invariably lead to poor understanding and shallow linking. Those links need to be carefully discerned, illustrated and developed if they are to demonstrate Band 4 skills. Students who merely paraphrased the autobiography were not exploring language, form and structure. Those who described features and techniques without explaining what this did to enhance the issues raised or show how they deepened or developed the links to the wider reading, were probably not going to escape Band 2 in general. Some students showed little interest in the contexts or SFI issues of the extract, looking instead to set up or engineer links to their wider reading with attendant skewing of content or distortion. Others were a little naive in some interpretations of Mandela's choices of language, for example, 'chains' could have been used to extend the image of imprisonment but it was unlikely that Mandela was solely invoking connotations of the physical shackles of some sort of slavery emanating from the African continent. South Africa has never gone in for slavery per se, so to use this term loosely was to show limited understanding of context. Additionally, those who insisted on referring to the racial struggles faced by minorities when delineating the problems faced by Mandela's "own people" were failing to understand the oppression of apartheid in South Africa affected the majority of the population who are black. In a global tally, white people are probably not the majority. Opening up the ideas to interpretation should be high on a student's agenda as should offering a clear, personal reading and response. When moving on to link to the wider reading, students would be well advised to accentuate the differences between the stance, views or issues of the passage and those of their chosen texts for in discerning contrasts and shades of difference they show themselves to be sensitive and truly capable of 'thinking on their feet' rather than being intent on forcing rehearsed material into their response.

Most students appreciated Mandela's skill in using different pronouns to explore his personal viewpoint as well as the collective one. Detailed explorations were offered of Mandela's anaphora, varied syntax and choices of tense. Where these explorations culminated in informed comment as to the impact of the devices on audiences Band 4 marks for AO2 were assured. Confident responses were often those where the overarching structure of the extract was noted meaningfully. Where interesting or

unusual lexis was analysed using sophisticated terminology again Band 4 AO2 was attained. In general, those who scored highest were able to use their analytical observations to reinforce their intrinsic understanding of Mandela's **thoughts and feelings**, key words of the question and therefore guaranteed to maintain focus and relevance.

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 students' ability to back up these links with focus on technique and understanding of relevant contexts.

It may be helpful to repeat the advice one examiner offered to schools and colleges:

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 students:

- Explored the extract with confidence and insight showing they could discern the struggles for identity of Nelson Mandela, personally, the broader struggle of the ethnic majority denied equal rights and opportunities in an apartheid-restricted society, the struggle to reconcile oppressed and oppressor and the struggle to inspire all human beings to recognise and respect humanity.
- Made effective links between the extract and their wider reading and were able to explore across poetry, drama and prose of the Modern era without merely name-dropping or focusing on just sociological and historical factors.
- Paid attention to form, structure and language of the extract as well as paying some heed to the genre features of their wider reading.

Less successful students:

- Wrote general paraphrases of the content of the speech, wrote very short responses or responses that paid too little attention to the extract, especially its structure and conclusions
- Made few of 'forced' links to their wider reading, sometimes ignoring the breadth of genres and often inadequately developing that link
- Struggled to engage with form, structure and language choice in the extract or in their wider reading examples; 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 this section students are expected to: 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 three priorities ensures success, with the need to show a balanced debate and some evidence of different interpretations or readings also in evidence.

To some extent, the effectiveness of the poetry questions in differentiating between students is intensified by the simple fact that some students have a secure understanding of the relevant Assessment Objectives and the best ways to meet them, whereas others seem to think it will be sufficient to write simple accounts of the few poems they happen to have covered, possibly just a short while before sitting the examination. Assessment Objective 3 is dominant here: the questions invite students to construct a balanced debate in response to a given opinion, supporting their arguments by detailed analysis of relevant poems. Those who do this are rewarded with appropriately high marks. Those who neglect this 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 the poet's choice of punctuation but fail to show any understanding of the whole poems from which the words and punctuation points have been extracted. Less confident students can waste precious minutes explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words or phrases rather than analysing the effects produced by their use; others make little or no reference whatever to the writer's craft. Schools and colleges would do well to remember that it is those students who are prepared to explore the poetry and respond to it in an informed personal manner that this Specification seeks to reward. Clearly, those who do best are those who maintain a clear focus on the specific remit of the question **throughout** their response, coming to a clearly substantiated conclusion rather than a repetitive recapitulation of most of the ideas that went before.

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

Comparatively few responses were seen to Questions 2 and 3 on this occasion but there were some strong, informed debates in evidence. Balancing the argument was key to success and this was further strengthened where students maintained a sharp focus on the key words of the question. Most students managed to avoid intrusive biographical information to explore the universal appeal of Angelou's poetry and to recognise that in writing about life, its vicissitudes and its rewards, Angelou is exploring philosophies that transcend the purely personal.

Question 2

Seeing both the literal and metaphorical significance of “journeying” was key to success in this question. Selecting appropriate poems to demonstrate the progression of life and the lessons learnt went some way to underscoring that success. Those who were able to acknowledge that Angelou had included a whole section in her collection under the title of 'Traveling' showed a sensible overview of the importance of the theme not only to the philosophy behind Angelou's poetry but also to the organisation or dynamics of the collection. In addition, being able to link those ideas back to Angelou's own words, used in the question of “defin[ing] who you are” showed maturity of understanding and, in most instances, a confidence in synthesising clear evaluations. Poems that were frequently cited in support of the point of view expressed in the question were 'The Traveler', 'California Prodigal', 'Through the City to the Suburbs', 'My Arkansas', 'Kin' and even (imaginatively) 'Mrs V.B.'. A clear counter-argument was possible with reference to poems that contained no explicit mention of journeying such as 'A Kind of Love, Some Say', 'Country Lover', 'Phenomenal Woman' or 'Bump D'Bump'. Some students were able to mount credible arguments for Angelou's celebration of **wherever** you happened to be in the journey in her life-affirming poems or her more humbly thankful sentiments in 'Thank You Lord' or 'Refusal'. Other lines of counter-argument took up different contenders for “important” themes, such as Angelou's attitude to men, citing 'A Kind of Love, Some Say' or 'Men' but whatever the counter-argument close attention did need to be paid to the theme of journeying as well. Weaker students struggled to get a grip on the need to show that Angelou **balanced** emotions or found it hard to work between the two extremes in a satisfactory way, preferring to take a linear approach to list one example of a journey or experience and then another which inevitably made it harder to balance the debate. Weakest of all were those who merely provided a few illustrations of types of journey with no evaluation of why the journey is/was an important one. Students 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 students:

- Chose appropriate poems for the exploration of Angelou's ideas about self-determination, journey and life experience.
- 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. Balanced the debate in varied and interesting ways, always keeping a close eye on the question.

Less successful students:

- Wrote narrow biographical responses failing to see the more generally philosophical pointers or conclusions in the poetry, wrote very short, underdeveloped responses or failed to construct a convincing debate especially where they were unable to focus on balance and the idea of defining who you are, without that being limited to being specifically Maya Angelou

- 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

Fewer responses were seen to this question but there was quite a pleasing range of approaches. Naturally, students who barely mentioned the name of the poem disadvantaged themselves as an element of appraisal and evaluation of 'Woman Work' was helpful to providing a framework for any exploration of the themes and ideas that are contained in the selection. The poem is a lyrical exploration of a range of tasks and the general busy-ness of a woman's day-to-day life but also a celebration of the worth and reward of such activity. Some students seemed intent on providing narrow readings that suggested Angelou was complaining about slavery in general and female exploitation in particular. Such views would need to be very carefully supported with specific textual reference and interpretation if they are to be credible or persuasive. Some reference to the interesting form of the poem with its use of rhyming couplets, naturalistic language and colloquial diction contrasted with more formal, metaphoric diction would have been valuable and a welcome contrast to merely explaining the content of the poem. This latter explanatory route invariably left students adrift of the key words "appropriate introduction" when what was needed was clear reference to other poems in the collection by way of comparison or contrast; AO3 here is a key discriminator. Links could be made to poems with similar subject matter such as 'Phenomenal Woman' or 'Still I Rise' and even to 'Lady Luncheon Club'. Links were also possible to poems with similar style such as 'Life Doesn't Frighten Me' or 'Ain't That Bad?' It was for students to validate their own reasons for accepting or rejecting the poem as an appropriate introduction but some interesting responses also afforded a look at 'A Kind of Love, Some Say', the opening poem, and were able to explore why this was or was not a better choice of introduction to Angelou's themes, style and the range of ideas contained in the collection.

Successful students:

- Entered into the debate which considered the idea that 'Woman Work' would form an appropriate introduction to the collection coming to convincing well-evidenced conclusions. In addition and alternatively, after some exploration of why 'Woman Work' was not suitable, they suggested, with recourse to well-chosen detail, other poems that might have been better suited to the task
- linked 'Woman Work' to a range of other relevant poems in order to develop discussion on both sides of the debate.
- Explored Angelou's choices of form, structure and language with confidence, integrating such features into smooth, seamless lines of argument.

Less successful students:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Woman Work' provided a suitable introduction, often asserting point ; alternatively, simply agreed with the given view, often providing a basic commentary.

***The World's Wife* by Carol Ann Duffy**

Again, the largest proportion of schools and colleges chose to study this text and it is to be hoped that the decision to keep a strong Duffy presence, albeit with *The Feminine Gospels* from 2013, will be a welcome one. As Ms Duffy continues to be topical and prolific, showing that the wreath of national laureate does not weigh too heavily upon her brow, students seem to know a good deal about her life and times. Such information is not welcome in responses for apart from being extraneous and prurient, it encourages students to think that Duffy is always the persona of the poem and that is damaging reductivism. Indeed, a characteristic of weak responses is to fail to see Duffy as manipulator and ventriloquist of her creations blurring all and sundry into the sort of loose biography often found in glossy gossip magazines. Successful answers stick to the key words of the question which always prioritise detailed knowledge of the poetry and some ability to extrapolate rational views on Duffy's intent and techniques. Wherever students find themselves merely writing about the poet rather than her poems alarm bells should ring. Similarly loose commentaries digressing into references to form, structure and language but with no relevance to the focus of the question, become tediously mechanical and merely reveal the student is struggling to get down to the debate. Weak students also seem to want to write in response to questions from past papers, failing to refresh and adapt their material accordingly and nearly always relying on 'Little Red Cap' and 'Ann Hathaway' as material for counter-arguments, more often asserted than clearly demonstrated. On the whole, however, students appear to be improving their lines of debate, balancing with more confident exploration of details of form, structure and language as appropriate and not just as a matter of course. Responses that heavily lean to the descriptive or narrative are also to be avoided along with reliance on second-hand ideas dressed up as literary criticism. When students fully understand schools of theory and can confidently and accurately use the correct terminology, this can be an asset but all too often such references have a hollow ring and detract from the originality of students' own voices. Again, schools and colleges should also be advised that literary critiques and even interviews with Ms Duffy herself, whether expressed on BBC Radio 4 or anywhere else, do not automatically confer relevance or scholarship unless used appropriately. Most literary criticism can be a blunt instrument when wielded by a student whose basic understanding of the poetry is weak.

This season saw students more evenly divided between the two questions on offer but there was a tendency for the second, that was grounded in one named poem ('Thetis'), to attract students who were perhaps less confident with the entire collection and who, as a result, sought refuge in what might, at first glance, have seemed the narrower remit. The key word there, however, was 'summary' and this naturally suggests a good understanding and overview of Duffy's entire range of themes and styles would be significant. Some also chose the second question without a clear understanding of what a summary truly was and seemed to gloss it as 'conclusion' which it most definitely is not.

Question 4

Whilst 'summary' caused a few problems for some, the nature and quality of mockery was slippery indeed for takers of question 4. It really was wide open for broad interpretation and those who fared best had the ability to define it and offer excellent examples of the shades of mockery in the collection in addition to exploring which gender, if either, was the more mocked. Thus, how well students understood and explored language, tone and effect was a key discriminator here. Considering all poets are wordsmiths and Duffy is one of the most accomplished, it would be unwise to omit wordplay, pun, irony, bathos, hyperbole and biting satire, not to mention the effects achieved from listing, colloquialisms and that measured 'mot juste'. A strong case could be made for the impressively animated, characterful monologue form itself which enables such a potentially damaging spin to be put on the diction. Successful responses were those that really took the time to unpick the ingredients that make Duffy's poetry unique as well as shocking and amusing by turn. Of course, the technique of subversion she frequently employs adds to the mix and students were spoilt for choice as to which of Duffy's linguistic techniques as well as structural ones they sought to explore. In addition, there were many ways of balancing the debate; some felt men got a rough deal throughout but fewer seemed happy to just put this down to 'male-bashing' by a none-too-subtle feminist. Varied were the reasons offered as to why Duffy mocked men and whether or not some deserved this mockery. Fewer, in general, were prepared to accept that Duffy mocked women more and many were happy to conclude, with evidence that she mocked both genders more or less equally. 'Circe', 'Mrs Faust', 'Mrs Darwin', 'Mrs Icarus' and 'Mrs Sisyphus' were popular choices to support the counter-argument of males being the more mocked gender but these often glossed 'mocks' as 'insults' or 'criticises' which does not do full justice to its connotations. Some were able to better explore the less obvious mockery that attaches to the speakers themselves who betray their foibles or darkly sinister natures when at last free to speak. Particularly interesting and well-argued were those responses which appreciated the immediate audience of some of the poems and how this contextual detail revealed yet more layers of the speakers' true natures. Some of the weaker responses showed a poor choice of material or misconstruction with a significant number commenting on how much Mrs Quasimodo is mocked for her appearance or Myra Hindley mocked for her weakness and susceptibility without fully recognising the more subtle elements of social critique going on in these poems. Some of the best responses were those where students were able to step back from the idea of gender mockery and construct compelling cases to show Duffy as a poet with a wryly humorous penchant for the mockery of society at large. Such responses revealed clear insight as well as confidence to reinterpret and back up with persuasively apt, brief quotation: mastery of detail, in effect.

Successful students:

- Engaged with and interpreted mockery in a diversity of justifiable ways, 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, with confidence, Duffy's stance as the manipulator and social critic, with clear analysis of the effect of her poetic techniques.

Less successful students:

- Simply agreed with the given view without much thought as to the subtext and Duffy's range that transcends gender. Alternatively they disagreed strongly and never stopped to consider what else was happening in the poems that might be fair game for Duffy's mockery or the mockery of the speakers.
- 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

'Thetis' as the second placed poem in the collection is a popular choice to illustrate many of Duffy's techniques of language, structure and form but this question asked for it to be looked at afresh as a possible 'contents page' for the collection. Consequently, showing the themes as well as the techniques and clearly proving how these were or were not demonstrated in the rest of the collection, were vital elements of success. Weak responses merely latched onto the named poem and gave a blow-by-blow account of what was happening in each stanza with a brief summative comment to suggest that things like this were happening in other poems. Some responses were as vague as that, with poems in the collection merely name-dropped. Showing how and why 'Thetis' linked to other poems or how it differed in crucial detail from them because of some extra ingredient or omission, was essential. It was not a legitimate line of counter-argument to completely dismiss 'Thetis' and instead focus on love or childbirth, for example. These may well be important subjects but neither is really a summary and the named poem needed some consideration before being discounted as a summary of the collection. Key word focus was sharp in the best responses with lively arguments mounted as to the scope of Duffy's themes. Best of all were responses that deftly interwove examples from 'Thetis' with examples from other poems across the collection showing mastery of detail, delicate selection and intelligent engagement with style and theme.

Successful students:

- Engaged with the view expressed in the question, specifically challenging or qualifying its premise and offering well-founded consideration of Duffy's intentions, avoiding the purely narrative and descriptive; explored the focal poem with confidence and relevance, linking it to themes of the collection as evidenced in specific examples.
- Used a range of alternative choices of poems as possible summaries, producing interesting counter-arguments that balanced the debate as well as offering some reference to 'Thetis'.
- Analysed Duffy's considerable poetic prowess as demonstrated in 'Thetis' and comparative or alternative poems, with confidence and skill.

Less successful students:

- Offered simple agreement with the question's premise or equally simple disagreement without any attempt to balance and frequently without any credence paid to the concept of a summary.
- Wrote very general responses about male dominance and the need for females to escape it in a general, often asserted way.
- Paid little attention to Duffy's choices of form, structure and language.

Skirrid Hill by Owen Sheers

Owen Sheers has maintained a high profile through his various enterprises across the media and his specific, recent engagements in drama and poetry inspired by soldiers' experiences of Iraq and Afghanistan. This ubiquity has ensured a growing popularity with schools and colleges and there was a good uptake for each of the questions on *Skirrid Hill*. Perhaps Sheers has appealed to groups of students where there is a more even gender mix or to those where there are more males as it can be tempting to think that males write more successfully about male experiences. Some readers of Sheers' poetry have wondered how he can merit a place on a course that explore the struggles associated with identity when he often comes across as supremely confident and assured of his own! Sheers' skill in shaping form and language to explore the more metaphysical avenues of thought are second to none and his stunning conceits linger long in the mind of all readers. So, this season's pair of questions allowed students to investigate two of Sheers' characteristic features: his exploration of masculinity and his ability to extend metaphors to create conceits. In general, students remained better-focused on the key words of the questions and were usually able to construct balanced debates. Unfortunately, there was some increase in rather redundant lines of exploration of Sheers' form with much loose reference to tercets and extravagant claims made that tercets show a poet's decisiveness or quite the reverse! When choosing to explore form, students should always ensure the point is going to add something to the argument; clarify meaning or demonstrate the way the rhythm develops; illustrate internal rhyme or consolidate a particular line of interpretation. Loose reference to making the poem "flow" does not impress because one always wants to ask "How?" and "Does that add anything to our understanding anyway?". It is also never wise to assume the subject of a poem is the poet himself. Whilst it may be inspired by personal experience (and there is a theory that **all** writing regardless of its form, has elements of the autobiographical) students should be taught to separate the persona from the writer to explore more objectively and to perhaps open up lines of interpretation that transcend the exclusively personal.

Question 6

This question evoked some lively responses, some of the best of which quibbled with the critic's statement and offered confident expression of Sheers' abilities as a poet and a sort of 'Everyman' figure, able to empathise and articulate what some men may find difficult to express. The main pitfall and characteristic of some of the weaker responses, was a tendency to stereotype males and masculinity or to explore only the face-value of some of the masculine images or personae presented and fail to explore the ironic tones of the observer or 'voice' of the poem or to notice bathetic sub-textual detail. There were many ways of balancing the debate, some of which included Sheers' confident exploration of female experience as shown in poems like 'Amazon' or 'On Going' as well as 'Show' and 'Night Windows'. Popular poems to explore manliness or the appearance of it were 'Farther', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort', 'The

Steelworks', 'Late Spring', 'The Wake' and 'Joseph Jones'. Students who were able to fillet out the precise detail in these poems and offer interesting explanations of sensitivity to manliness, femininity or both, with relevant analysis of the techniques of form, structure and language, were assured of Band 4 marks. All too often the explanations were limited or allowed for only a superficial reading which did a disservice to Sheers' subtly nuanced language. Some able students showed that Sheers explored human experience as opposed to simply that of one or the other gender, often using 'History' to exemplify the balance and overview. Those who consigned the provocative statement to the sidelines and pressed ahead with rehearsed points about nature, upheaval, war, sexuality, separation and pain as areas Sheers explores more frequently, were simply ducking the question and trying to write the one they wished had been on the paper.

Successful students:

- Chose highly appropriate poems to explore Sheers' expression of male feelings, female feelings, gender power-struggles or even the transcendence of nature above and beyond gender, taking time to clarify the precise nature of those feelings and choosing equally appropriate poems to validate 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' skill in exploring feelings, avoiding redundant focus on feature-spotting.

Less successful students:

- Simply offered broad agreement with the given view and struggled even to exemplify the techniques Sheers used, merely paraphrasing a couple of poems where men feature prominently.
- Ignored the question's key words, especially the discriminating qualifier "exactly" 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 or chose only physical examples of masculinity thus glossing over the focus on feelings and the subtleties of being a male.

Question 7

In the poorest of responses, it was evident that 'Song' had not been studied until possibly the time of the examination. There were some rudimentary and unedifying paraphrases of the poem that completely overlooked the shifts in tone and the darker elements that abound. Perhaps weaker students, in general, believed (erroneously) that the question that began with a single, named poem was the easier option and thus was more attractive to the less ambitious. Any response will succeed or fail on the quality of evaluation and linking to other poems in the collection. Some students had possibly never thought of the poem as a love poem, least of all the "purest" one of the collection and offered stilted descriptions of the actions of the male bird with some quite bizarre interpretations as to who or what the "farmer" was. Some struggled to evaluate purity when it was, to a degree, for the student to offer a sensitively valid interpretation. Some offered 'sincerity' or 'simplicity' whilst less useful

interpretations offered 'clean', presumably with the connotations of sexless or chaste. Most helpful was the line that explored unconditionality and could take that concept and unpick the extended metaphors appropriately, comparing the magpies with the arguably more mature or realistic love of the birds of 'Winter Swans'. Better responses appreciated the distinctive form and structure of the poem, relating the form to the notion of the song and making extremely pertinent reference to the idea of the song of the trapped female bird luring hapless males to their deaths. It really was for students themselves to establish better contenders for "purest" love song but many chose 'Show', 'Keyways' or 'Winter Swans' to explore heterosexual love whilst others chose 'On Going', 'Y Gaer', 'The Hill Fort' or even 'Service' to explore other types of love more akin to altruism. Most intriguing were the responses that dealt ably with Sheers' skills in the exploration of metaphysics and the transcending power of love.

Successful students:

- Produced a balanced debate which considered, developed, agreed with or refuted the idea that the 'Song' was the "purest love poem of the collection", offering original but also clearly supportable interpretations of the 'love' shown in the poem.
- Linked 'Song' to a range of other relevant poems and/or made an arresting case for another poem illustrating the purest type of love of all.
- Explored Sheers' form, structure and language choice with confidence, citing examples relevantly and with analytical dexterity but avoiding redundant feature-spotting.

Less successful students:

- Simply dismissed the idea that 'Song' was a love poem at all and spent most time writing about another poem that might have been more obviously about love. Remained solely at the surface of the imagery, failing to unpick it or make valid links to imagery used in other poems.
- 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 'Song' being the "purest love poem of the collection" or of any other poem being a more suitable choice.

To summarise:

Question 1 provided numerous opportunities for students to explore the fundamental principles of freedom and its attendant risks and responsibilities. Too many neglected to read the passage with sufficient care to understand its more philosophical and political ideas. There was some forcing of links to wider reading because of this failure to read deeply into the extract. Students should explore the essence of the struggle a little more profitably in order to feel their way into more meaningful comparisons and contrast. The best responses are those which are able to focus on literary detail also to using relevant contextual information of production and reception when expanding on the links. It was notable that students who showed familiarity with subtler details of their wider reading texts were far more able to manipulate their material and forge convincing links that sometimes compared **and** contrasted with elements of the extract. Poetry was the most poorly tackled genre

with numerous students relying solely upon their Section B poetry, risking the temptation to use material twice over in each section of the paper. In some instances only one snippet of one poem was referenced and some students thought to mention the name of a writer was sufficient. The whole spirit of the paper is to show off wide reading not to narrow it in such a reductivist way. Teachers of the course should also be wary of sole reliance on anthologised extracts because this encourages lazy reading and limits students understanding of the wider implications of areas of the struggle as well as contexts.

In general, across Questions 2 to 7 there was a good deal of explanation that was not clearly relevant to the question or to the student's line of argument. Students should take care to select appropriate poems and focus on only the most relevant aspects of them, rather than offloading all they know about it. It was clear that where students had taken a few minutes to collect their thoughts, having perhaps also identified the key words of the question, their responses were better structured and focused with far more informed debate. This observation is also pertinent to Section A responses. Once students are writing, they should never find themselves writing about **what** happens but more importantly about **how** something is expressed and explored and **how** something is linked or contrasted with their wider reading. Higher order self-questioning during the course and during the examination itself would produce more original, thoughtful responses.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below: www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.