



General Certificate of Secondary Education

English Literature

Specification 4710

47102F: Poetry across time

Report on the Examination

2012 Examination – June series

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GCSE English Literature 4710

Principal Examiner's Report Unit 2 (47102F)

The third series of this unit saw a huge rise in the number of entries and it is very gratifying to report that this was accompanied by a considerable increase in the skill of students in handling the paper. There was very clear evidence of students managing their time for the two sections more effectively and very few rubric errors occurred: teachers are to be commended for their hard work in ensuring that students know what is expected of them both in terms of rubric instructions and demonstration of skills. The improved quality of comment on AO2 indicates that teachers have implemented the guidance in previous reports on the examination, placing greater emphasis on the teaching of writers' use of language, structure and form.

Further pleasing progress has been made in reducing reliance on acronyms, which have been cited as unhelpful in earlier reports. Unfortunately, there are still too many schools teaching formulaic approaches in a sort of "one size fits all recipe for answering poetry questions". Teaching students to structure every comment in the same way: quotation – focus on one word – discuss connotations – suggest an alternative interpretation – comment on the effect on the reader – is surely the way to kill any enjoyment of poetry for student, teacher and examiner. Whilst the need for some support at this level is acknowledged, many students are seriously disadvantaged by such a straitjacket and this is clearly evidenced by performance in Section B which is sometimes far superior to that in Section A. Teachers are urged once again to empower their students with the confidence to deal with poetry in their own way.

There was some concern about the choice of poems for the Relationships questions, a few schools believing that *Ghazal* and *To His Coy Mistress* were both too difficult for Foundation Tier students. It is worth repeating here that the National Curriculum stipulates that 15 poems must be studied. Currently, three of the poems in each cluster have been excluded from consideration as named poems on this tier, which clearly indicates that any of the remaining 12 poems may be selected. It is therefore in the best interests of students to cover all 12 poems in the chosen cluster rather than speculate about which poems are likely/unlikely to be named. It has always been felt by the Principal Examiner that students who are taught and prepared in such a way that they have some confidence in approaching poetry rather than having "learned what it means" are much better equipped to deal with the question regardless of the perceived difficulty of the named poem.

In this instance, Question 7 on *Ghazal* was the most popular question on the paper and the mean mark for this question was in line with all other responses which would seem to indicate that schools' fears that students writing on Relationships would be disadvantaged have proved groundless. Question 8 on *To His Coy Mistress* scored the highest mark on the paper. Q5 (Conflict) was the second most popular choice of question. Place remains the least popular cluster.

Comparison continues to be the main area for development in Section A. It is hugely frustrating and disappointing when students write confidently in Band 4 or 5 on AO1 and AO2 then fail to make any meaningful comparative comments. Schools are reminded that all three assessment objectives are equally weighted so that failure to address AO3 results in students 'losing' a third of the marks. Sometimes, the failure to compare arises from an inappropriate choice of second poem, which may be a result of students having covered too few poems in the cluster or not giving themselves sufficient time to decide on a suitable text for comparison. For example, *Out of the Blue* was a strange choice for a question which asked about "ideas about war" whilst *Flag*

and *The Right Word* were deeply unhelpful for students attempting to compare feelings of sadness and loss. It would seem sensible to spend time in lessons categorising the poems in the chosen cluster and deciding on fruitful texts for comparison on a variety of themes. Schools are reminded again that comparative comments about techniques, structure and form are equally acceptable, but these should go beyond “this poem has 10 lines whereas this one has 8”.

It is worth repeating advice from the first report on this examination: students have often reached Band 3 or 4 on AO1 and AO2 by writing about the first poem: there is little to be gained by repeating the same level and type of comment when dealing with the second poem. This causes the answer to “stall” and thus achieve very few further marks. A sensible strategy would be to teach students to make comments on the second poem link back to what has been said on the first poem, thus using the second text to move through the bands on AO3 skills. Comparison of particular details/quotations is particularly productive. Schools are urged to practise this type of response in lessons.

Finally, although context is not tested on this paper, it is self-evident that the teaching of literature texts must incorporate some contextual material. Some poor responses were generated by fundamental misunderstandings of the words “mistress” (Marvell) and “maid” (Hardy). Answers which focused on the adulterous nature of the Marvell or reprehended the farmer for marrying merely to have someone clean his house were clearly on a primrose path.

Q1

Some students dealt with the notion of suffering with great sensitivity and had obviously been well taught about the role of a horse whisperer. When answers were less successful, they concentrated on the suffering of the horses rather than the man. Fruitful comparisons were made with *Hunchback in the Park* – both characters being seen as excluded from society or *Brendon Gallacher* with an emphasis on the theme of loss and sadness.

Q2

This was the more popular choice in Character and voice, many students clearly relishing the opportunity to discuss their likes and dislikes of various characters. However, students who identified the sinister undertones of *The River God* were in the minority, weaker students seeing this character as simply a river. The best comparisons focused on the idea of power in this poem and *My Last Duchess*. *Medusa* was also used with reasonable success. One senior examiner speculated that where this question had been particularly well done, it may have been as a result of being used for the extended reading task in Unit 3 of English Language so that students were already skilled in writing about it. If so, it certainly emphasises the desirability of integrating the two specifications where possible.

Q3

Very few answers on this question were seen and the theme of the poem was not well grasped by those students who attempted it though some were able to comment on the idea of control and the use of personification. Students struggled to find a suitable poem for comparison here, *Storm in the Black Forest* being the most widely used.

Q4

Even fewer students attempted this question and those that did almost universally failed to understand the deeper layers of meaning in *The Wild Swans at Coole*. However, some responses managed to identify the significance of the odd number of swans and the link with the writer’s feelings but only at a superficial level. This poem clearly needs some detailed teaching. Comparisons were made with *London* or *The Blackbird of Glanmore*, but responses rarely went beyond the obvious.

Q5

The Charge of the Light Brigade is becoming increasingly popular at this tier; in fact one examiner commented that “it is becoming the *Of Mice and Men* of this unit”! There was evidence of some strong responses generated by good teaching and detailed knowledge of the poem. Students engaged well with the language features used, particularly the repetition and some were able to make meaningful comments about rhythm. There was some confusion as to whether Tennyson was anti or pro-war and some responses got rather sidetracked by attempting to compare attitudes to war somewhat unsuccessfully at times, particularly those who saw *Flag* as intensely patriotic. *Bayonet Charge* was a popular choice for comparison on the basis of one soldier’s experiences versus those of 600 soldiers, along with *Futility* or *Mametz Wood*, focusing on waste and loss of life.

Q6

This was the more popular choice in the Conflict cluster, perhaps owing to its shortness and deceptive simplicity. Many students were able to comment on the metaphorical aspects of the falling leaves and the symbolism of the snowflakes and some were able to explore these quite fully – one senior examiner citing a response in which the candidate had made an extended comment on the single word “melt”. This kind of work is further evidence of some good teaching on writer’s use of language and structure and it is hoped will become more widespread. *Poppies* was an obvious choice of second poem here and generated some good responses, though often in a more generalised way. *Mametz Wood* and *Futility* were also used here generally to less good effect.

Q7

As already stated, this was the most widely chosen question in Section A and many good answers were seen. The poem is rich in imagery and students often commented effectively on the metaphors. Some grasped the sensuality in the poem but were largely unable (or unwilling) to articulate their ideas while many responses made sound comments on the structure and the significance of the couplets. Where students had clearly been taught about this poem, they understood the meaning of the title; where they did not some amusing attempts were made e.g. “A ghazal is a type of animal that tends to spring from place to place, in the same way that their love is springing.” Despite being wide of the mark, this comment exemplifies what students can do when asked to think independently about a poem and would have been rewarded appropriately. It also emphasises the need to teach students the importance of titles. *Praise Song for my Mother* was frequently chosen for comparison here, along with *Hour* (natural imagery) and *The Manhunt* (passion). *In Paris With You* was also used with many students commenting on the difference in tone, although more perceptive answers noted the effect of substituting ‘love’ for ‘Paris’.

Q8

There was clear evidence of engagement and enjoyment of this poem, many students delighting in the opportunity to vilify the man for his caddish ways or express impatience with the woman for her lack of willingness. There was a mixture of reticence and relish in exploring the sexual imagery here and it was occasionally done very successfully. Many students had been taught well about the structure and were able to comment effectively on it. The question asked about feelings for a woman and this therefore limited the choice of second poem but not all students noticed this and attempted difficult comparisons with, for example, *Brothers*. *Hour* was utilised on the basis of time but the most frequent selection was *The Farmer’s Bride*, the obvious connection being the sexual frustration of the men in both. *In Paris With You* was also a popular choice, again focusing on the rather seedy, salacious tone being similar to the persuasive attempts of Marvell.

SECTION B

It is very pleasing to note the improvements in approaching the unseen poem as the confidence of both teachers and their students develops. Several senior examiners felt that the wording of the question with its direction to “language and other techniques” has been helpful in eliciting much better responses to AO2. Most students managed to reach Band 3 with relative ease. There were also far fewer issues with timing in this section, a good balance of coverage on both parts being achieved by most students. It is worth reminding schools that this section is marked holistically: therefore it is perfectly acceptable for students to write one answer which covers (a) and (b) together. This is far preferable to a response which simply repeats in section (b) what has already been said in (a).

The poem provoked considerable empathic response and speculation that the persona may be dyslexic or have other learning difficulties – evidently, personal experience was operating in some answers. Weaker answers focused on the literal aspects of bullying and some moved away from the text altogether, giving personal accounts or impassioned denunciations of bullies and bullying, which could not be given any credit. Simply studying the title of this poem may have helped some students to move away from the literal interpretation. Better responses were able to discuss in detail the personification and similes, many focusing on the childlike aspects of these, along with the puerile language. Perceptive comments were made on the idea of being “locked away” and the irony of the fact that the child was using words even when s/he felt unable to say what they wanted to. The very best responses were those which were able to identify how the structural elements reflected the increasing anxiety and inability to articulate, the lines and stanzas decreasing in length until the final single word “Inside”.

A clear teaching point emerged from the marking of these answers, and it concerns enjambment. Students have often learned the name of this technique but are overwhelmingly unable to identify the effects of its usage. A large number of students commented that the child in this poem regarded him/herself as “dead bright” but was unable to use grammar correctly as they wrote “Them makes me cry”. A similar misunderstanding was apparent with the final rhetorical question which was frequently quoted as “Would people think I’m thick?” Students need to be taught to read poems using the punctuation to get the full sense of the lines and then to focus on the poet’s choice of enjambment to reflect movement or dislocation.

Overall then, there is much to celebrate in this latest series of Unit 2F and teachers are to be congratulated for preparing their students so well, particularly in terms of commenting on writer’s use of language. The challenge remains to maintain the focus on language while increasing performance on comparison to achieve a balance across all three assessment objectives, along with the move to increasing independence of candidate approaches and responses.
