



**General Certificate of Secondary Education**

**English Literature**

**Specification 4710**

**47104H – Approaching Shakespeare and the Literary  
Heritage**

**Report on the Examination**

*2012 Examination – June series*

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## GCSE English Literature 4710

### Principal Examiner's Report Unit 4 (47104H)

Despite a considerably increased entry for this unit in Summer 2012 over previous sessions, it is pleasing to be able to report that the improved standard of the responses noted in the January report was again evident. The whole range of texts was attempted, and the majority of students seemed to have been very well prepared and addressed the key assessment objectives with a clear focus. There was very little simple story-telling and senior examiners noted further improvements in students' ability to deal appropriately with language, structure and form; very few students failed to demonstrate some understanding of writers' methods and their effects, though a significant number still did not develop these points as fully as they might have done. At the other end of the attainment range, however, there was some truly exceptional writing about a whole range of texts, which evinced excellent, subtle understanding both of writerly technique and its impact on an audience/ reader, and also of a wide range of dramatic and contextual issues relevant to the tasks.

#### Section A

'**Macbeth**' was again a very popular text for the exam with question one the more popular choice. Students generally showed a good understanding of the Macbeth/ Lady Macbeth relationship in the play and most at least attempted some textual analysis to support their interpretation of it; better responses convincingly wove together content and language comments to notable effect and looked in detail at the dramatic effects of Shakespeare's language choices. Some students struggled because they used partial lines/ quotations and thus often misinterpreted the meanings of words and phrases used in their answers. For both questions, a wide range of suitable scenes was chosen for part (b).

There was a pleasing and significant number of responses to '**Much Ado About Nothing**' and almost all showed a high level of engagement with the text and the characters within it. The vast majority attempted question three about Benedick's attitude to women in two different parts of the play, and there was a great deal of thoughtful and penetrating analysis of his character and the audience's changing responses to him.

For '**Romeo and Juliet**', again the most popular choice of text, question five was the more popular question and examiners felt that Romeo's thoughts and feelings were explored confidently by most students, with comments on structure, language, character and theme often showing real insight and engagement. Interestingly, however, a significant number of responses addressed question six, which concerned the feelings of Juliet's parents; many of these responses showed great individuality and were all the better for it. There was a high level of engagement with the task and a really fascinating range of comments on the attitudes and behaviour of the two adults and their relationship with their teenage daughter, informed, no doubt, by at least a degree of fellow feeling.

'**Twelfth Night**' again seemed to inspire some very engaged and interesting responses, almost all of them dealing with question seven and the presentation of Orsino. The strongest responses were those in which the students were quite clearly weighing up the impact of Orsino's complex attitudes and behaviour as presented by Shakespeare in the given scene and elsewhere.

Though they were relatively few responses to '**Julius Caesar**', the standard of these responses was generally very high with a real rigour to the analysis and, again, a most pleasing

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engagement with the text, as well as a high incidence of originality of thought. They were, said one senior examiner, 'a joy to mark'. The analysis of the ruthlessness of the Octavius, Antony and Lepidus relationship was particularly impressively handled.

## Section B

'**Pride and Prejudice**' was quite a popular choice of text and students generally showed a good understanding of the text and often showed real knowledge and some skill when looking at the contextual element of the tasks. The majority of responses dealt with Mr and Mrs Bennet, though many seemed to feel that their marriage and relationship are shown by Austen to be deeply unhappy, a contentious point of view at best. The Darcy question elicited some extremely thoughtful responses which acknowledged the difficulties and subtleties of Darcy's position in the novel and showed real focus and depth.

Few students attempted '**Wuthering Heights**' but those who did generally opted for the Heathcliff question and showed a good understanding of his character in the novel and showed some ingenuity in addressing the contextual element of the task. '**Great Expectations**' also attracted few takers but there was a real range of responses, both in terms of quality and interpretative approaches. Contextual material was interestingly considered and only rarely unrelated to the tasks. Though it is clearly quite a long and complex narrative, 'Great Expectations' seems to elicit strongly personal responses from many students, particularly, in this instance, when answering the question about what Pip learns about friendship in the novel. **Hardy** responses were very limited in number, and those seen by the senior examiners perhaps seemed to engage some students less than other texts on the specification.

The most popular text in Section B was again '**Animal Farm**'. The Snowball question was by some way the more popular but the quality of the responses generally was impressively high, the contextual aspects of the tasks being particularly well handled with a real grasp of detail, and of social and historical reference and its relevance to the novel. The focus on Snowball as a character, a literary construct of Orwell's designed to have particular series of effects on the reader, was pleasing to note, and the story-telling which has been quite a large feature of writing on this text in previous sessions, was largely avoided.

In a small number of schools, it seemed clear that students has not been helpfully prepared for the exam in the area of contextual material; to reiterate, the assessment objective related to context is not tested in the Shakespeare questions, but is an important element of all Section B responses. Clearly, it is vitally important that students know which AOs to focus on in the different sections of the examination. Another bugbear, again in a limited number of schools, is whole groups of students who had clearly learned great chunks of material and who therefore produced very repetitive and formulaic responses. This sometimes restricted the performance of able students who were stifled by utilising certain rote responses. It seems obvious but the best answers were from students who understood the texts and answered the questions for themselves.

Similarly, some students seemed to feel that simply listing, sometimes rather ponderously, a series of 'semantic fields' in a text, for example, would be a suitable response; what is needed is an exploration of why Shakespeare or Austen or whoever may have used a technique and what might have been its intended or possible effect on the audience/ reader concerned. Finally, there was still a significant number of students placing enormous importance on the use of, say, a semi-colon in a particular passage of Shakespeare, for example; for reasons previously explained, this must always be contentious and is frequently actively misleading for students because they then neglect a really useful piece of text as a result of this focus on punctuation.

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Overall, senior examiners were extremely impressed by much of what they saw in the responses to the Shakespeare and English Literary Heritage paper. The vast majority of students seemed well prepared, knowledgeable about their texts and aware of the appropriate assessment objectives. More importantly, they seemed thoroughly engaged by the texts they had studied and their enjoyment of them was clear in the strength of the arguments put forward and in the range and quality of individual comments seen. This is, of course, at least in part, testimony to the lasting impact of the writers whose work is being studied; but it is also clearly a great tribute to the students' teachers for directing their students' efforts so skilfully and enthusiastically.

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