



General Certificate of Secondary Education

English Literature

Specification 4710

Unit 4710/2H (Poetry across time)

Report on the Examination

2011 Examination – June series

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GCSE English Literature 4710

Poetry across time

Principal Examiner's Report: 47102H June 2011

Although this was the first year of this examination and the majority of candidates taking the paper were in their first year of study for GCSE Literature, it was a pleasure to see so many interesting and illuminating responses to a new anthology of poetry. This was especially true of those candidates who were equipped with the ability to respond with confidence and independence to the poems themselves as well as to the actual process and demands of a poetry examination. The vast majority of candidates responded diligently to the requirements of the paper, although there were possibly a few more examples of rubric infringements than in previous years. For example there were a higher proportion of candidates not understanding the requirement to respond to one question only in Section A. However, it must be said that examples like this were still very much in the minority and were, as to be expected, from candidates at the lower end of the mark range. This may also be indicative of the fact that for some candidates, this was their first experience of a formal external examination and, due to time constraints in centres, they may not have had access to the process of a trial examination.

There was some confusion amongst a small number of centres as to the number of poems that should be studied for the Unit 2 Poetry exam. You are required to study for every unit of the English Literature specification, for poetry this should be a cluster of 15 poems. Whilst candidates should study the full amount there are 3 poems from each cluster that will not be named on a particular, meaning that there are 12 poems that could possibly be named on the examination paper for each cluster.

SECTION A

Character and Voice

This was a popular cluster and lots of candidates responded to both Question 1 and 2. The River God proved to be a sound comparative choice, working well with both poems but with My Last Duchess in particular, where some candidates focused on the relative empathy created to the voices in both poems. Most answers were rooted in the content, which is perhaps not unusual for candidates in Year 10, although there were some students, clearly very able, who would have benefited from further analysis of writer's purpose, particularly given the scope for political / social perspective offered by My Last Duchess. Whilst a treatise on the nature of power in Renaissance Italy is clearly not a requirement of this paper as AO4 is not assessed in this component, drawing students' attention to overall purpose and message enables a more conceptual approach which may be useful for those working at the upper end of the mark range.

There were some very engaging responses to Medusa, and this poem in particular allowed candidates to demonstrate their ability to analyse techniques in relation to purpose – something which was more tricky for those responding to My Last Duchess. Candidates wrote with enthusiasm about Duffy's use of the mythological figure as a device to explore ideas about women, which created some powerful and dynamic writing.

Place

Responses to this cluster were less in evidence in this first series. There were some high-quality comparisons between Wind and The Prelude as well as Storm in the Black Forest and Below the Green Corrie. There were also some very interesting responses to London, where candidates were able to make some striking analyses of the methods Blake uses to present his ideas about state control and the abuse of power.

Conflict

This cluster was also quite a popular choice. Candidates often compared Bayonet Charge with The Charge of the Light Brigade and Out of the Blue, producing some really fascinating responses focused in detail on the reality of war and the experience of war at an individual human level as opposed to the ideological. Belfast Confetti was compared very productively with The Yellow Palm in many cases, as well as once again Out of the Blue and Mametz Wood.

Relationships

Both The Manhunt and Nettles elicited some really thoughtful responses, and clearly this cluster was a very popular choice with centres. This appeared to be the cluster where candidates were more familiar with the total cluster, evidenced by the range of poems chosen for comparative purposes. Hour and Quickdraw were perhaps slightly more in evidence than others, but only marginally so.

However, it was also this cluster which drew particular attention to two facets of preparation that may not have been particularly helpful to candidates. The first is that there were quite a few candidates who responded to Question 8 with detailed notes about how Scannell's use of war imagery was fed and led from his experiences as a war correspondent – a point which in itself is fair enough, although it cannot be awarded any marks – however by expanding on this idea at length, candidates were drawn to take time away from demonstrating the skills which would have enabled them to make progress through the mark range: analysing the themes and ideas of the poem and linking these to techniques.

The second was a tendency to comment on what happens when we look at the shape of the poem, for example when we 'turn the poem on its side'. Examiners noticed that comments such as these appeared to be particularly prevalent with this cluster. It was regularly applied to The Manhunt, but also to Quickdraw, In Paris With You and several others, including Nettles, which was described by some candidates as 'looking like a nettle bed', and Hour, which was described by a few candidates as 'looking like a grassy ditch on the page'. One of the stems for this approach may have come from one of the Digital Anthology notes on Quickdraw, which makes a slight reference to the shape of the poem resembling a pistol, but which then points out that this is merely coincidental. The problem with this approach is that candidates struggled to develop their point: those who talked about shape clearly had grasped hold of the idea in principle, but didn't know how to apply it. This isn't really surprising as none of the poems in this anthology are concrete poems and therefore attempting to apply analyses such as these is going to be, in the main, rather limiting and unconvincing.

SECTION B

It was particularly interesting to see the way candidates responded to unseen poetry. It has to be said that, in the main, the responses were fresh, individual and very illuminating. The poem itself operated as an inherent discriminator of ability in terms of perspective; candidates at the lower end of marks tended to 'sympathise' with the child and feel that the 'speaker' was placing undue pressure on him to learn to read, whereas those at the other end of the mark range clearly empathised with the speaker's perspective and produced some very insightful responses. For example, there were some candidates who responded with fluent passion about the nature of the education system and how it stifles creativity. One examiner commented on how this Section tended to 'set some candidates free of the shackles of the comparative task ... to produce far more individual work in Section B. Some students had, of course, been schooled in approaches to unseen texts, but there was a refreshing eagerness in all quarters to engage with the text.'

General Points

- Where candidates had been well-prepared, this was demonstrated through their thorough engagement with ideas/themes and how the poet presents these through their work. Having a sound grasp of ideas enabled the most successful comparisons. Also, this enabled a comparative approach to the response itself, rather than the rather limiting 'Poem A + Poem B + final comparative paragraph' approach. It is worth highlighting to candidates that comparison is one of the key assessment objectives for Section A.
- Some of those candidates who had been taught to adopt a formulaic approach, such as acronyms to remember - Form / Purpose / Structure / Imagery (FPSI) is a popular method with some centres - focused on getting through the content of the acronym and rushing through some lovely ideas, leading to a tendency to produce undeveloped responses.
- There were also still some candidates whose interpretation of 'response' focused on telling the examiner which poem they liked / preferred. Sometimes these were the same candidates who wanted to 'mark' the poet – comments relating to the poet's 'cleverness' were still in evidence. As under previous specifications, it is worth pointing out to candidates that comments like these cannot be awarded any marks.
- Some candidates demonstrated difficulty with presenting a well-crafted comparative approach. For some also, there was a sense of under-confidence with exploring ideas. Perhaps some of these candidates would have benefited from entry in Year 11.
- Using technical detail as a framework and foundation for writing, rather than an aid to understanding meaning, limits candidate performance. Statements pointing out the use of enjambment for example, or the fact that a poem is written 'in free verse' or with 'a rhyme scheme', tended to lead to some rather generalised comments which offered very little in terms of developing understanding of ideas and themes. Language and technique is most successfully analysed when linked explicitly to themes and ideas rather than in isolation.

Overall, this was an extremely successful first examination and candidates performed very well to its demands. The examining team were impressed with the enthusiasm evidenced by the students and their teachers to the poems themselves as well as the diligent and thorough responses offered by the candidates.
