



**General Certificate of Secondary Education**

**English Literature**

**Specification 4710**

**Unit 4710/1H (Exploring modern texts)**

**Report on the Examination**

*2011 Examination – June series*

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## GCSE English Literature 4710

### Exploring Modern Texts – 47101H – June 2011

In this, the second sitting of 47101H, examiners have noted that a wider range of texts has been studied and there is some evidence that assessment objectives are being more precisely addressed, although this does remain an issue for some centres to address. More candidates were entered than in January but the entry is still not large and it must be remembered that comments on responses to the texts in this report may be based on the work of a relatively small number of candidates. This is not the case, however, for *An Inspector Calls* or *Of Mice and Men*, both of which were overwhelmingly popular.

#### Section A: Modern prose or drama

##### *Sunlight on the Grass*

Responses to both these questions seemed to suggest real engagement with this anthology of short stories. It would be fair to say that, in response to both questions, usually part (a) was done better than part (b).

##### Question 1

This was probably the more popular choice of task with its focus on *The Darkness Out There*; the best responses were a delight to mark, especially when candidates began to explore the ways in which the 'darkness' within was far more sinister than the childish fears of Packer's End. There was evidence of analysis of the way in which Lively overturns the stereotypes presented to us at the beginning of the story. Responses to the second half of the question and to the second story, however, were sometimes quite generalised and disappointing, adding nothing to the marks accrued from part (a).

Some of the more successful responses focused on *Anil* in part (b) and were able to write thoughtfully about the way in which the 'unpleasant experience' unfolded. A less successful choice seemed to be *Something Old, Something New*, a story which some candidates struggled with.

##### Question 2

Candidates also engaged well with *My Polish Teacher's Tie*, but were often not confident when analysing, or even appreciating or explaining, how the writer presents Carla. Too often, students lapsed into retelling the story. Students were more successful when they began to focus, for example, on the effect of the first person narration and the symbolism of the tie at the end of the story.

For part (b) *When the Wasps Drowned* seemed to be the most popular choice of story and this proved to be an appropriate choice, allowing candidates to engage with the ways in which this narrator foreshadows the later shocking events of the story with the crushing of the wasp's nest in the first paragraph. Students who were able to pick up on the way in which the narrator was 'hungry for conversation' and was positioned at the start of the story within the 'confining' garden walls also tended to do well.

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**Golding: Lord of the Flies**

This text is one which, on the legacy specification, elicited some truly outstanding responses but, on the evidence seen in response to this paper, candidates have not been as confident when handling the text. It was felt that, in response to both questions, candidates tended to focus on plot and character rather than the ways in which Golding had crafted the novel. In **Question 3**, some candidates wrote about a series of violent events without any consideration of their purpose or how Golding presented them. In **Question 4**, weaker responses failed to consider Golding's quote at all and others missed the key dimension of Piggy's relationship with Ralph.

**Brooks: Martyn Pig**

Senior examiners saw no responses to this text.

**Hill: The Woman in Black**

**Question 8** was the overwhelmingly popular choice and responses usually focussed on the woman's appearance, both physical and in terms of the locations she is seen. One script gave a very personal account of the effect the woman's appearance had had on her as she read the book – when precisely her skin had 'tingled', when she had 'held her breath', when she could 'hardly bear to read the next bit'. I'm sure Susan Hill would be delighted that her novel retains that power – the woman in black is 'one scary woman' apparently. Unfortunately, as an answer it was limited to a series of vignettes rather than an analysis of the text but nice to see a student 'enjoying' (if that's the word) reading. Certainly, the majority of candidates had engaged with the text and the best responses showed evidence of some thoughtful structural and literary points about the ways in which Hill successfully creates tension in the novel.

**Simpson: Touching the Void**

Senior examiners saw few responses to this text and those seen were ones to **Question 9**. Candidates struggled to achieve precision in their discussion of Simpson's choice of language; they were able to discuss when Simon shows guilt but usually not how that was demonstrated.

**Thomas: Under Milk Wood**

There was limited evidence of candidates having studied this text and most of those who did chose **Question 11**, focussing almost exclusively on Polly Garter as well as love viewed by different age groups. Very little commentary on Thomas's language was evident in the responses seen.

**Miller: The Crucible**

This is proving to be quite a popular text, **Question 14** eliciting the most responses. The quality of these responses varied considerably. Weaker candidates wrote about Abigail as if she were a real person and provided no more than a character study of her, including what she does and why; in most of these responses, Miller's methods were not addressed in any way. Better responses considered – sometimes evaluated – how Miller elicits both sympathy and condemnation for her from an audience.

Although **Question 13** was less popular responses were often more successful and better candidates were able to analyse very precisely the opening of the play in terms of how hysteria and tension are created – links were then made to the rest of the play.

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It is worth noting that some senior examiners observed that some candidates would benefit from understanding the idea that this is a play, written essentially to be performed.

### **Samuel: Kindertransport**

Very few responses to this text were seen by senior examiners and all those were to **Question 15**. Many responses were limited to an explained or sustained response to the narrative of mother/daughter relationship with little about Samuel's use of language or the idea of the text as a play. There was a sense that candidates had grasped the tale but not the manner or significance of its telling. The best responses considered, for example, the symbolism of the endless dusting, representing a need to wipe away the past and exert some form of control.

### **Priestley: An Inspector Calls**

This was a very popular choice and a very wide range in the quality of responses was evident; however, candidates certainly seem to enjoy and engage with this text, despite some of them making rather sweeping generalisations about socialism and capitalism. It is certainly true that there is much more sense that candidates understand that this a play to be performed: many refer to stage directions/lighting/setting and their significance.

**Question 17** was less popular which is a shame because it produced some excellent responses; perhaps candidates perceive 'character led' tasks in some way easier. This question encouraged candidates to think structurally about the play and made it, perhaps, more straightforward for them to pick up marks on the 'language, structure, form' strand. Many interesting contrasts were identified – old/young; male/female; socialist/capitalist; before and after the Inspector's visit; open to change/ resistant to change. Some candidates who attempted this question were able to produce conceptualised responses about the ideas in the play.

**Question 18** was overwhelmingly the more popular choice. Candidates had obviously engaged with the play very well and understood the ideas Priestley was trying to convey. Many of them were able to appreciate the didactic nature of the text and could see that Sheila was a construct used by Priestley to put forward his messages. Nearly all candidates were able to see that Sheila's attitudes change from the beginning to the end of the play and many were able to select details of her speech and actions to support their comments about change. Some picked out the difference in the way she spoke, using words like 'mummy' at the start of the play and speaking in a much more serious, adult tone by the end. Some were able to identify the way she gradually became more like the Inspector, challenging and questioning her family as the evening went on.

However, the engaging plot of the play proved a distraction to some candidates and there was a tendency to retell the story at times, outlining the stages of Sheila's transformation but making few comments about how the change is shown or why she changes.

Better candidates were able to see the text as a drama and commented on stage directions, lighting and other dramatic devices, making reference to the effect on the audience (rather than the reader) to show that they had a real sense of the text as a performance.

### **Kelly: DNA**

This is proving to be quite a popular choice and candidates do engage with its issues which, in some way, are relevant to their lives. There were some fresh and experimental ideas offered, even in lower band responses, suggesting that this is an accessible text.

**Question 17**, the settings question, in particular, led students to think about the dramatic effects of, e.g., the wood or the street. Moreover, this was also a text which students clearly understood as a play to be performed rather than as a book to be read. Many candidates were able to see the significance of the different settings and their association with different

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characters and actions. Although to **Question 18** some candidates offered no more than an explained response, there also seemed to be an appreciation among others of the ways in which Cathy is used as a structural device. One insightful answer, for example, talked of the way in which the presentation of Cathy presented “a chilling insight into the mind of a dangerous teenager”.

### **Section B: Exploring other cultures**

On the whole Section B did not produce responses which were as good as those in Section A.

#### **Steinbeck: Of Mice and Men**

##### **Question 21**

It would be fair to say that candidates usually fared better on part (a) than on part (b) and, perhaps unusually for this text, there were some misunderstandings of it – but these were in a minority of responses and usually came as a result of candidates taking a word or phrase and giving various suggestions as to what it may ‘connote’ – many of which were not connected to a writer’s intentions or purpose.

When asked to select and comment on details in part (a) of the question, many candidates merely provided a ‘gloss’ on the passage, explaining what was going on and maybe adding a few comments. Some candidates merely wrote about the meaning of the details rather than Steinbeck’s methods; some candidates tried to find meanings that simply weren’t there. The best candidates, however, picked up on the more subtle nuances of the relationship between George and Lennie and the prolepsis in the references to Andy Cushman who had got into trouble because of a woman.

In part (b) most candidates had been prepared to write about contexts. The problem was that they did not link their knowledge of contexts to the text clearly enough, resulting in unsupported comments with few details. Most candidates could write about the Depression, the American Dream and the plight of itinerant workers but this tended to be through generalisations which were not rooted in the text. The very best candidates wrote about an interesting range of contexts, for example identifying the role of Aunt Clara in George and Lennie’s friendship and then contrasting the presentation of Aunt Clara as an idealised portrayal of a homemaker, who makes cakes and shows concern for the childlike Lennie’s welfare, with that of Curley’s wife and coming to the conclusion that women were viewed as either selfless domestic goddesses or tarts.

#### **Adichie: Purple Hibiscus**

##### **Question 22**

It was pleasing to see centres using *Purple Hibiscus* and one marker suggested that candidates who had studied this text seemed “much more engaged” than those who were answering on the other Section B texts. There were some thoughtful answers to Part (a) of this question, with one student analysing the idea of Father Almadi as a beacon of light in the novel. In Part (b), however, there was a tendency to reduce the presentation of religion down to some generalised comments about Eugene and the opportunity to explore the writer’s presentation of different approaches to faith was largely missed.

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**Jones: Mr Pip****Question 23**

The few responses seen by senior examiners tended to attempt to recount the novel's whole narrative rather than concentrating on the question's parameters – some mention was made of Matilda's feelings but the whole felt rather superficial.

**Lee: To Kill A Mockingbird****Question 24**

The quality of responses to part (a) varied considerably. Weaker candidates were inclined to recount or to paraphrase. Better candidates analysed the linguistic choices Lee made in order to create tension. Part (b) invited students to demonstrate their contextual understanding by focusing on another incident of injustice within the novel. Some students, however, still managed to forget to comment explicitly on issues of social and historical context and simply wrote about what happens in another incident which demonstrates injustice.

This exam is still in its infancy and we will learn from each sitting of it. The following thoughts will, one hopes, help teachers as they prepare candidates for the exam next year:

- Undoubtedly all centres engage in examination practice; some candidates did, however, struggle with the time allowed on this paper, especially on the two part tasks. Some pointers to students would be helpful here, e.g. avoidance of unnecessary introductions before focus on the task begins.
  - Preparedness for the exam is a consideration for centres and it was felt that some candidates did not have the confidence – maybe the maturity – to handle a literature exam in Year 10. Others, of course, coped with remarkable confidence and they showed insight into their texts.
  - Tier of entry is also a consideration for centres and it was felt that some candidates would have been better served by the foundation tier paper.
  - The skills required for each section are, to some extent, different in that Section B requires homing in on a particular passage and examining the writer's methods therein; then candidates are required to move out to the rest of the novel. However, in Section A, the focus is usually rather less precise although, of course, a short extract may be part of the task here too but in a rather different way. Candidates need to see a paper and spend some time seeing what questions 'look' like and learning what different ones require.
  - Both sections require candidates to address assessment objectives 1 and 2, but, of course, assessment objective 4 is tested in Section B. Candidates obviously have fewer problems addressing AO1, but AO2 is still sometimes not addressed, especially in Section B. The quality of response to contexts varies markedly: a few candidates ignore contexts completely, some write very generally about them without any reference to details from the text [the key phrase is, of course, 'relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts'] and others reach the higher mark bands by, for example, an 'exploratory response to context[s]' and 'exploration of telling details to support response to context[s]' (Band 5)
  - A few candidates seem to think that commenting on a writer's language is simply selecting a word and saying what it means or what it 'connotes'. This word is appearing more frequently and is not really used appropriately.
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- Many examiners reported that candidates had clearly engaged with the texts they had studied and, quite simply, what could be a better starting point for preparing for the exam? It was good to see a wide range of texts being studied; many centres are trying something new, something previous students would not have studied. Indeed, over the two sittings of this paper, there has been evidence of responses to all the texts on the specification.

It's pleasing to note that many centres are continuing to offer English Literature to the full range of candidates, enabling them to experience all that novels and plays have to offer. One hopes that this report will enable centres to move forward in some way in preparing their students for the next exams; that is certainly the spirit in which it is offered.

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