



General Certificate of Secondary Education

English Literature
Specification 4710

Unit 4710/2F (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: 47102F June 2011

This was the first incarnation of this examination and the first time an unseen poem has been included. The format of the questions in Section A would be familiar to centres accustomed to preparing candidates for Paper 2 of English in the legacy specification but the paper also brought new challenges for centres and candidates in terms of approaching the unseen poem. It was also apparent that the entry for this unit came from Year 10, whose skills are still in development. In general, Section A was done much more effectively than Section B and at this early stage of the new specification, this was not entirely unexpected. This indicates that when candidates feel confident with the content of poems, many of them can write well about meanings and writers' craft. It was also evident that teachers are focusing well on comparison, with a substantial number of candidates achieving "structured comments on similarities and differences" (Band 4). The challenge is clearly to equip candidates with the confidence and skill to comment quickly and effectively when confronted with a poem for the first time.

A further feature of this first examination of Unit 2F was the large number of rubric errors: many candidates answered 2, 3 or 4 questions from Section A; many others failed to attempt Section B at all – whether owing to lack of confidence or unfamiliarity with the rubric is unclear. It is imperative that candidates are made aware of the requirements of the paper and to this end, a mock examination would seem to be highly desirable. This would also assist candidates in dealing with the timing requirements of the paper.

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

The most popular clusters here were *Conflict* and *Relationships*. Very few responses on *Place* were seen and these were largely by candidates who had misinterpreted the rubric and attempted more than one question on Section A.

Character & voice

Q1: A number of responses were seen, very few of which dealt with 'Singh Song!' well in terms of understanding the humour of the poem, although some candidates engaged very enthusiastically with the central character and his relationship with his wife. It was gratifying to see some candidates writing well about the use of phonetic language and making effective comparisons with the method in 'Checkin Out Me History'. It is worth remembering that AO3 (comparison) can gain marks for commenting on similarities and differences in method as well as content.

Q2: This question was a popular choice, with many candidates responding empathetically and sympathetically to the character of Brendon Gallacher and his relationship with the narrator. Some candidates were unaware of Brendon's status as an imaginary friend but were nevertheless able to make relevant points about feelings and relationship. Centres should note that candidates on this tier can get into Band 4 with relative ease by showing "understanding of feelings". However, even when the question directs candidates towards commenting on feelings, this does not mean that methods and writer can be ignored.

Place

Q 3: As mentioned earlier, very few responses on this cluster were seen. Candidates who attempted this question seemed to do so largely when confused by the rubric requirements and showed very little understanding of 'London'.

Q4: Examiners did not report any adequate responses to this question

Conflict

One Team Leader commented that the *Conflict* poems were "a popular choice and handled well, often with a clear understanding of the harsh circumstances and an appreciation of the imagery involved. There is still a great fascination with war, unfortunately".

Q5: This was a popular choice with many candidates writing well about the poet's use of metaphor to present death in 'Mametz Wood'. Effective comparisons were made with 'Charge of the Light Brigade', about which, writing was often enthusiastic with a good understanding of the background and themes of honourable death but wasted lives.

Q6: This was much less popular than Q5, perhaps because candidates seemed to struggle with the dense nature of 'Bayonet Charge' and were often unsure about the meaning of the hare in this poem. Poor choices of the poem to compare were sometimes seen, perhaps reflecting insufficient coverage of the cluster as a whole or thematic links between poems.

Relationships

Q7: This was overwhelmingly the most popular question on the paper with many candidates producing excellent answers focussing on the painful memories in 'Brothers' and speculating on the effects on the 6 year old. Insightful comparisons were often made with 'Sister Maude', which produced a number of interesting responses speculating that Maude had killed the secret lover of the sister. It is one of the pleasures of marking poetry that unexpected and unusual interpretations are seen in responses: these will always gain credit if they can be justified by evidence in the poem and it is hoped that, during the course of study, students will be encouraged to find their own meanings. 'Nettles' also provided a fruitful comparator in terms of family relationships.

Q8 This again produced some perceptive responses, the best of which showed good understanding of the damage to the farmer as well as his bride. One senior examiner reported that "There was some perceptive and mature exploration of 'Manhunt' and 'In Paris with You' was surprisingly well understood by several candidates, who picked up on the cynical tone and sleazy setting rather well." It was particularly pleasing to see this comment in the light of concerns about the relative difficulty of approaching these poems in Year 10 and teachers are to be commended for bringing out such responses in their students.

SECTION B

In general, responses to the unseen poem were disappointing, although there were a few which shone with insight and individual flair and one Team Leader commented that the better responses were often produced by boys. The poem itself was well received by teachers and centres and many candidates seemed to grasp and appreciate the meaning. One (male) candidate suggested that the poem "stereotyped girls and may cause offence", which is precisely the kind of individual response which is likely to gain top marks. Other delightful responses were seen, some speculating that the parent giving the advice was speaking from their own experience and such comments generally placed the candidates in at least Band 4 for AO1. Sadly, such responses were in the minority and many candidates failed to write more than a very simple response to the poem, even fewer recognising the use of the extended metaphor, military language or alliteration. This was particularly surprising when seen in responses by candidates who, only a few minutes earlier, had handled the military imagery of 'Nettles' with competent understanding. The humour and bathos of the final line were universally lost. Far too many candidates failed to attempt Q9 at all, though whether this was owing to lack of understanding of the rubric, mismanagement of time or lack of confidence is unclear. What is clear is that the skills demonstrated in Section A, particularly on AO2, very

rarely made an appearance in Section B and this is an obvious target for teachers preparing candidates for this paper.

General guidance:

- Section A has three equally weighted assessment objectives. Therefore, if candidates fail to tackle one of these, they will lose marks. It is very sad to see candidates achieving Band 4 on AO1 for response but failing to mention method or writer (AO2). It is particularly damaging for candidates to offer no comparison as this is worth 2 marks in every band. Teachers would do well to familiarise themselves and their candidates with the mark scheme in order to minimise these failings.
- It became apparent as the marking progressed that a significant number of responses, having written well about the named poem then seemed to “stall” as they moved onto the second poem, sometimes failing to achieve any further marks because they were only demonstrating the same level of skill on the second poem. An approach to counteract this might be to teach candidates to do something different with the second poem – perhaps try to achieve the AO3 band here by linking what they say on the second poem back to the first.
- Where candidates write about the two poems in an integrated way, alternating comments on each poem, the thought processes involved in comparison are demonstrated, and these **may be** enhanced by the use of appropriate connectives. **However**, sprinkling these connectives around without meaningful comparative comment is to be discouraged.
- AO2 requires comment on method/writer’s choice of language. Naming of techniques in itself is only rewarded at Band 2 or Band 3 but in order to do well on this assessment objective, candidates need to demonstrate some awareness of **why** a writer has chosen particular words, techniques, form or structure. Candidates should be encouraged to focus on two or three short quotations which are fruitful in terms of what the writer wants to do with these words and work to the “saying a lot about a little” idea.
- Whilst the PEE technique provides some structure for candidates, it can also be quite limiting. It is recommended that this is used as a starting point for learning how to write about poems with candidates being encouraged to move beyond this and learn to dip into poems wherever they choose. Writing about a poem chronologically is unhelpful as it inevitably leads to a narrative response which is unlikely to achieve above Band 2.
- It has been extremely encouraging to see how well candidates in many centres have been prepared to write about Section A. The challenge now is to prepare candidates equally well for Section B. It was felt by the majority of examiners that one of the main areas of concern here was lack of reading of the poem. Candidates should be encouraged, through exposure to unseen poems in class, to read the poem through several times before attempting a detailed written response. Reading aloud is essential to fully appreciate rhyme and rhythm, alliteration etc and it would be helpful if candidates were taught how to achieve this in exam conditions. Whilst individual unique responses are desirable and highly rewarded, when such responses bear no relation to the meaning of the poem, it is generally because they have been too hastily arrived at.

Finally, it has been a most enjoyable experience for the examining team to be part of this new paper and we trust that candidates and teachers will find it increasingly so as familiarity with, and skills of response to, this paper develop.
