



**General Certificate of Secondary Education**

**English Literature**

**Specification 4710**

**Unit 47102H/2F (Poetry across time)**

**Higher and Foundation tiers**

**Report on the Examination**

*2012 Examination – January series*

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## GCSE English Literature 4710

### Poetry across time

#### Principal Examiner's Report: 47102H January 2012

In this second series of Unit 2, the freshness and originality with which students approached the examination generally did both them, and their teachers, credit. Rubric infringements were far less in evidence than June, and the majority of students used their time well. Schools generally appear to be focusing their study on one or two clusters, with Relationships still the most popular and Place the least. In terms of tier of entry, some students did struggle with the demands of some of the Higher tier questions although the

#### SECTION A

##### Character and voice

Responses to *The Clown Punk* were generally confident and purposeful, with students demonstrating clear understanding of the themes and ideas. Often *Give* was used as a comparison, and there were some very successful uses of *The Hunchback in the Park* and *Checkin' Out Me History*, especially where students focused on how the respective poets demonstrated their ideas about outsiders in society.

Some of the most successful responses in the series were using Question 2, where students explored the two narrative voices of child and adult poet. Although a challenging poem, it produced some outstanding examples of students accessing high bands particularly for AO2 due to their detailed approaches to some of the language and imagery as well as ideas.

A note about AO3 from one senior examiner:

'Students still need to be reminded of the importance of comparison: a notable number of responses were excellent on individual poems but only added a couple of structured comparison points and were therefore not achieving the marks they deserved. There were however lots of responses that made convincing comparisons for example; between *The Clown Punk* and *Medusa* both obsessed with appearance and *Give* and *The Hunchback in the Park* both referring to locks and chains to reflect how they were trapped in their situation.'

##### Place

Question 3 was the more popular choice from this cluster. *Below the Green Corrie* is clearly a poem which students are confident about and can say some interesting things about. However, the students who struggled with this cluster in particular were notably those who found it difficult to move beyond the literal into the wider meaning and tended to focus on the intimidating nature of the mountains, rather than seeing the mountains as metaphor for humanity's relationship with the earth / nature more holistically. Question 4 was also a discriminator, this time between those students who were comfortable and familiar with the Assessment Objectives and understood that an explicit focus on 'language' in the question does not mean that the AO1 elements of the assessment are to be ignored.

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**Conflict**

Once again this cluster was a very popular choice. In spite of Question 5 also having a 'language' focus to the question, this time students were not impeded by this as they understood that it is the relationship between the 'how' and the 'why' that they are investigating and exploring. There were some very moving, thoughtful comparisons between Poppies and Mametz Wood in particular, with interesting parallels drawn between the personal and the universal condemnation of the effects of conflict. Question 6 similarly drew students towards Mametz Wood, as well as next to of course god America i.

**Relationships**

This was the most popular cluster by far. Question 7, however, proved to be a very strong discriminator. The question asked students to compare how poets use structure to develop their ideas – the first part of this question seemed to provide the focus for those students who presented lots of statements, sometimes quite limited, about what a sonnet is and how many lines it has. What was interesting is that those students who responded to the 'language' questions in other parts of the paper were able to link AO2 to AO1, however this did appear to cause more problems for some students when it came to structure – and in particular, the sense that there might be some confusion about the difference between structure and form. However, those students who saw beyond the word 'structure' in its narrowest sense produced some enthusiastic, detailed comparisons between the sonnets in the cluster.

Responses to Question 8 were in the main answered with sensitivity, appreciating and exploring the poetic voice in Harmonium and providing some thoughtful analysis of the relationship between father and son. This question appeared to cause more confusion of understanding than others however, with lots of students not grasping the extended metaphor and not mentioning the father at all – which predictably led to some rather limited responses. Nettles was by far the most popular choice of comparison and worked extremely well; also In Paris With You, where students had rooted their comparison in an exploration of the inability to communicate true feeling, produced outstanding responses.

**SECTION B****Unseen poem**

Once again the responses to the unseen poem were delightfully engaging and enthusiastic. Although the title of the poem was difficult, as soon as students read the question, and then the poem, they generally had a very clear understanding of the point the poet was making. Interestingly, they made better comments about the use of form and structure in this Section than in Section A. As last series, the poem acted as an inherent discriminator of ability and students explored its ideas at a variety of different levels.

Apart from those students who did not leave enough time to respond to this question, there was general parity of performance between sections and, interestingly, there were frequent examples of better performance on Section B than Section A, which is extremely encouraging and hopefully reassuring to those schools who have concerns about the demands of unseen poetry.

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## General Points

- Where students 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 students that comparison is one of the key assessment objectives for Section A. Lack of quality comparison could impede some students who are otherwise accessing higher mark bands.
- Introductions and conclusions tended to be rather redundant: they may enable a student to just 'start writing' which is useful, but don't often lead to many marks. It might be better to start with answering the question and end with a comparative point that is more than 'the poem I preferred was'.
- A key discriminator for Band 3 was the awareness of a writer and more of a focus on what the poet was doing, linked to the effects.
- Those students who attempt to write about every line of the poem, or in other words give a blow-by-blow account, don't generally perform as well as they might. It is impossible in the time to provide a detailed analysis of the whole poem, so students would be better linking analysis of two or three key moments / words / images to the overall thesis.
- As in the summer, using technical detail as a framework and foundation for writing, rather than an aid to understanding meaning, limits student 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.

Once again, this has been a very successful examination with large numbers of students responding with enthusiasm and confidence to the poems themselves and to the question they have chosen.

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## **GCSE English Literature 4710**

### **Poetry across time**

#### **Principal Examiner's Report: 47102F January 2012**

##### **GENERAL**

This was the second series of this examination and it was gratifying to see that many schools had taken careful note of the comments in the report following the summer 2011 series and incorporated much of the advice therein. Although there was a considerable discrepancy in the level of performance seen across the country, there was clear evidence of many students being better prepared for both sections and having undergone the valuable process of mock examination in this unit. It was particularly pleasing to see far fewer rubric errors, indicating that students were well prepared for (and had remembered!) the requirements of the paper. Sadly, there were still a number of students attempting one question on each of the four clusters in Section A and more than one unfortunate student attempted all 9 questions. It was also apparent that students handled the timing of the paper better, so that Section B received more attention. Teachers are to be commended for their valiant efforts in giving their students the best possible chance of success in this unit.

There was also less reliance on acronyms, though some were still appearing. The ubiquitous PEE technique can provide a secure framework for weaker students but it also proves to be a straitjacket for many and teachers would be wise to start encouraging their students to remove this scaffold well before the examination.

##### **AO1**

'Response' is the first assessment objective tested and improvements in this strand have been widely seen. Students, who can identify, discuss and wrestle with the feelings/attitudes/ideas in the poems can achieve Bands 4 and 5 with relative ease – and many did in this series. It may be worthwhile to encourage students to begin by writing a sentence or two summarising what the poem is about in terms of themes and ideas, which should immediately be achieving in at least Band 3 and have the added benefit of discouraging a narrative response. Whilst students need to be well prepared for Section A, teaching should focus on developing the skills of responding individually and thus improving confidence to write freely in Section A, whatever the question. Such approaches will also have benefits for students' performance in Section B.

##### **AO2**

There is widespread variation in students' ability to deal with "the writer" in this unit. One senior examiner commented that dealing with AO2 remains the stumbling block for many, the majority of F tier students continuing to feature spot". Sadly, a large number of students on this tier continue to write about the poems, characters and events as though they are real, lacking any evidence that they understand the texts to have been constructed by someone, from which understanding should naturally follow the notion that choices have been made in the construction (Band 3). The ability to try to say why some of these choices have been made lies at the heart of achievement in this strand and relates in the first instance to words: devices, rhyme schemes, form, number of stanzas etc are all worthy of comment but it is the words the poets use which should come first. A strategy of choosing a few details (quotations) from each poem and grappling with what the poet was trying to say/suggest/imply would pay dividends: even if the interpretation is somewhat debatable, the student should be accessing the Band 4 descriptor which relates to "Identification of effect(s) of writers' choices of language and/or structure and/or form intended/achieved". The more detailed the grappling with the chosen details, the more likely it is that the response will move into Band 5 or even Band 6.

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“The poet uses war metaphors because it shows the father believes he has to defend his son. So the war metaphors make it all seem more serious because he could have just said “the nettles behind the shed” but he calls them “a regiment of spite” as though they are an army out to get his son. He’s used personification to make the nettles seem more scary like they’ve got a mind of their own.

One minor gripe on AO2 is that many students do not seem to know the difference between “imagery” and “images” or that alliteration is about sound, this latter leading to many students commenting on the alliteration in “giant and grey” in *The Sea*. Perhaps an opportunity for a couple of lesson starters?

### **AO3**

It is worth reminding students that this descriptor carries 2 marks within each band of the mark scheme. Sadly, this remains the least well done among large sections of the candidature. The starting point for a fruitful comparison is the choice of second poem and in order to do this, students need to know the rest of the poems in the cluster well. Examiners saw many instances where students wrote well about each of the poems individually but struggled to make meaningful comparisons owing to a poor choice of second text, thus limiting their chances of achieving well on this strand from the outset. However, there were mercifully few occurrences of students only writing about one poem.

The descriptor for this strand reads “comments, not comment(s)” and this clearly indicates that more than one comparative comment must be made in order to access Band 3 and higher here. It was gratifying to note that a substantial number of students in this series had clearly been taught that the best way to access a good AO3 mark was to begin their answer by comparing. This is not to say that comparison **must** be done throughout (although this was seen more frequently than in the previous series), but a simple strategy of informing the examiner of the second choice of poem and the reasons why in terms which compare it to the named poem is likely to produce an opening paragraph which is already accessing Band 3 at least. If this strategy is linked to that suggested in AO1 above i.e. a comparison of the two poems in terms of themes/ideas, the student is well on the way to climbing the ladder of the mark scheme.

## **SECTION A**

It was interesting that there was a very close spread of students across three of the clusters, with Relationships just the most popular, closely followed (300 fewer) by Conflict then Character & voice (400 fewer than Conflict). Once again, Place was the poor relative with fewer than 1000 students choosing this cluster.

### **CHARACTER & VOICE**

**Q1** This was overwhelmingly the more popular choice in this cluster, with many students writing sympathetically about the clown punk and his situation, sometimes showing good understanding of irony and knowledge of the background. The most productive comparisons were made with *Hunchback in the Park*, where both characters were seen as outsiders who are mocked by society, and *Give*. In linking with the latter poem, a large number of students stated quite categorically that the clown punk was also homeless, despite there being no clear evidence in the poem.

**Q2** This was far less popular, presumably owing to the relative difficulty of the concept of a “speaker”. However, the cluster is entitled ‘Character & voice’ so the idea of a speaker should be familiar to students and may well recur. Students who chose this question sometimes wrote masterfully about the arrogance of the Duke and the ways in which punctuation and syntax were used to create this character. Weaker students tended to make points about character rather than characterisation and despite such points being valid and interesting, achievement

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was limited by writing about what the character was doing rather than about what the poet was doing with the character. Successful comparisons were made with *The River God* and *Medusa*, (power and jealousy) while a few students looked at the contrasting theme of power in *Ozymandias*.

## PLACE

This cluster remains the least popular and very few responses to either question were seen.

**Q3** Answers on this were often descriptive and narrative with very little understanding of the more abstract ideas about the nature of memory. The most popular comparison was with *Crossing the Loch*, which again encouraged narrative responses, or *Price We Pay For The Sun*, which was often fruitful in terms of writer's craft but students struggled to link it with *Cold Knap Lake*. The question gave options to write about both memories and the places themselves, but did not engender the depth of response hoped for.

**Q4** Although a slightly more popular choice of question, writing about *Wind* also produced fairly low level responses, again largely descriptive or attempting to emulate the style of the poem. This was almost inevitably compared to *Storm in the Black Forest*, but there was virtually no engagement on any deeper level and the opportunity to compare with *Price We Pay For The Sun* was totally neglected.

It is becoming apparent that this cluster needs particularly careful preparation in terms of appropriate comparative texts and thematic links.

## CONFLICT

**Q5** Overwhelmingly the more popular choice in this cluster, *Flag* elicited a wide range of responses, often at a very good level. Whilst all senior examiners commented at length on performance in this question, quoting the following in its entirety should be informative and helpful. "*Flag* was a popular choice with lots of suitable selection of other poems, in particular *Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Bayonet Charge*, *Mametz Wood*, *Futility* and *The Falling Leaves*. Naturally, such pairings provided fertile ground for students to compare themes/feelings/thoughts/attitudes and writers' craft – links and differences. The very best students used the patriotism/jingoism/idealism/realism comparisons and contrasts as a springboard to interweave their comments with explanations of the writers' techniques in a range of sustained comparisons – thus hitting all 3 AO "birds" with one stone. Techniques such as the repetition of key thematic lines (*it's just a piece of cloth*) were usefully explained by many students. It was noticeable that a number of students transferred this understanding of technique to the use of repetition in the unseen poem in Section B".

The most popular choice for comparison was *Charge of the Light Brigade* – fast becoming a favourite with F tier students, who seem to engage well with the ideas, the background and the rhythmic structure. Some impassioned responses were seen to this poem, with one student blaming the "*blundering of some fat-assed general*" and declaring that had he been told "*not to question why*" he would not have obeyed! Good understanding of the bitter tone and feelings in the poem was often demonstrated, indicating some very good teaching of this poem. One examiner also saw some good comparisons with *next to of course god america i*, indicating that students on this tier are still able to deal with challenging texts.

Sadly, despite the plethora of fruitful comparative poems, some less appropriate choices were made, with *Out of the Blue* proving quite popular because of the reference to "*flagging*". Needless to say, avenues for comparison here were strictly limited and soon exhausted.

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**Q6** This was a much less popular choice which elicited a vastly varying degree of achievement. One examiner noted that “students seemed unable to pick out significant detail from the poem to write about, in particular lacking the ability to comment on the different uses of the word “chain””. Most students dealt with this poem on a surface level and were unable to deal with the irony or the child’s point of view, relying on their knowledge of the history of the conflict and poet rather than dealing with the themes and ideas. Conversely, some successful answers were seen with one examiner commenting on the “sympathy directed towards the family, old and young; clear appreciation of the simple style and a vivid response to the sadly ridiculous chain dividing the two identical countries”.

Good teaching rules in this cluster apparently.

## RELATIONSHIPS

As stated above, this cluster was just the winner in terms of popularity though there was a clear division between the two questions.

**Q7** Again, there was a clear variation in the quality of answers seen on this poem, surely reflecting the teaching students receive. *Sonnet 43* is not an easy poem and when compared with *Sonnet 116*, the level of difficulty dramatically increases, and this was evident in the efforts of some students who could not rise to the complexity of dealing with two Shakespeare texts. On the other hand, there was evidence of some excellent teaching on literary heritage texts, with some students dealing well with a comparison of the two sonnets and making profitable comparisons with *To His Coy Mistress*. Other students chose poems which were not particularly romantic – a very sensible strategy, in which *In Paris With You* worked well. One examiner commented on interesting comparisons made between *Sonnet 43* and *The Manhunt*, focusing on strength of feeling and the contrast between archaic religious language and the more modern imagery of suffering and fragility. There were a few unwise choices of texts which contain family relationships rather than romantic ones and this would seem to indicate a student writing about poems they want to write about rather than poems which answer the question and compare well to the named poem.

**Q8** This was the most popular question in Section A and most students dealt very well with the ideas of protection and feelings of guilt evident in the poem. Many opening paragraphs were already accessing Band 4 on this basis and students were often able to go beyond the idea of literal protection and comment on the significance of the final line. The military imagery in *Nettles* was well handled by a substantial number of students, possibly partly because they had used last summer’s unseen poem for mock examination and/or teaching purposes and so were well versed in the use of extended military metaphors. Some students cleverly linked this to the weaponry imagery in *Quickdraw*, although it is debatable whether this poem can be classed as a family relationship. *Sister Maude* was a popular choice for contrasting ideas of love and protection; hate and revenge, while *Praise Song For My Mother* also worked well. Some high level responses were seen when students chose *Harmonium* as their comparative poem and one examiner saw excellent cross references between the final line of *Nettles* and those of *Harmonium*, particularly the impact of “starved of breath”. Once again, the results of quality teaching resulting in engaged, often perceptive responses were seen in this question.

## SECTION B

*The Sea* proved a very popular and worthwhile choice of poem and it is to be hoped that this was at least partly responsible for the significant rise in achievement on this question. It was clear that many students were much better prepared to deal with an unseen poem and that schools and teachers had acted on the advice and guidance in the summer 2011 report. Timing, which had been such an issue last summer, was much better handled and as a result, responses were longer, more detailed and more perceptive. The extended metaphor of the “hungry dog” was seen and explored in a variety of interesting ways and the best students were

able to link the dog's behaviour to the changing seasonal mood of the sea, offering a wide range of perceptive comments on the visual images created by the poet's choice of words and structure. A number of sharks were noted, along with a couple of seals and werewolves, and the odd sea monster! Despite these odd interpretations where students had clearly not noticed the word "dog"!, these responses remained delightfully engaged and students were always credited with the attempt to respond.

It was interesting to note the difference between Section A and Section B. Sometimes, students who used a formulaic over-taught approach to Section A achieved much better in Section B because they were free to express their own ideas in their own way and this was particularly noticeable with a few weak students. This was clearly exemplified by a student who achieved a very poor mark in Section A with an answer which contained five paragraphs all beginning and ending with the same (clearly taught) sentences. In Section B, the same student wrote "giant and grey which makes it sound massive and mysterious and gives the reader feelings of being scared and worried what's going to happen" – a Band 4/5 comment which this student was capable of once freed from the constraints of Section A. Conversely, some more able students sometimes seemed to stall a little in Section B, apparently unable to go beyond the identification of the extended metaphor and run with the way this was used to generate different pictures of the sea. They appeared to lack the confidence to explore their own ideas in any depth.

The key to doing well on Section B is to **read the poem several times** and this was clearly shown by one answer which began to write a rather unusual response to the poem. The student then wrote "*When I first read this poem, I thought it was about a sea monster but **now that I have read it again**, I can see that the poet is comparing the sea to a dog.*" The student then went on to explore the different pictures of the sea this comparison created and achieved a very respectable mark.

It is worth reminding students that the question is divided into two parts, which is designed to help them. The first part asks about "what (AO1)" and the second part about "how (AO2)" and it is acknowledged that this is a somewhat artificial division. Students often integrated their answers and then part (b) of their answer tended to repeat what they had already said. It should be understood that the question is marked holistically so that students are rewarded for AO2 comments even if they appear in part (a) and vice versa. If teachers wish to teach students to write one integrated answer, students will not be penalised in any way for this and, indeed, may find it more natural to write this way.

Overall, the performance in this series of Unit 2F has seen a significant improvement and teachers are to be commended for preparing their students so effectively for this unit. It is hoped that such improvements will continue, not just so that students receive better results, but so that the teaching and learning of poetry will become a much more enjoyable process, as has the reading and marking of students' responses.

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