



**AQA Certificates
June 2012**

**English Literature
(Specification 8710)**

8710/1H

Report on the Examination

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Certificate in English Literature

Principal Examiner's Report - 8710 / 1H - June 2012

The responses to this, the first examination of this paper, were extremely pleasing, demonstrating that students and teachers have comprehensively explored the possibilities of this new specification. The entry was relatively small, not surprising at the end of the first year of a course designed to be taught over two years, but it was encouraging to note that all texts on the paper had been studied. Inevitably, some texts – such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *A View from the Bridge* – were more popular than others. This report will focus on the more popular texts as comments based on very small numbers of responses may not prove especially helpful.

Section A: Unseen Poetry

The poem, 'The Last Mystery' by Jon Stallworthy, proved highly accessible to the vast majority of students on this tier. The specification clearly states that the examination aims to reward 'freshness and originality' and the students who produced the best responses were those who had been taught to approach poetry with an open mind and a genuine sense of exploration; those students who had been given a checklist of features to identify – and who often advertised this fact by writing the acronym they had been taught in their plan – were sometimes hindered by their determination to write about features on their list – even if these were not in the poem!

A wide range of interpretations was offered, varying in complexity. Most students understood that the sailor had been brought up beside the sea, and that it was the crucial factor in his life. Most were able to distinguish between the narrator and the central character and many students discussed the attitude of the narrator to the sailor as laudatory, some seeing the poem as a form of valedictory address, or as a eulogy on his life. Students in Band 6 treated the poem as evidence of the creation of an heroic myth, 'the sort of myth that sailors would discuss in the tavern'.

Responses to the sailor differed in complexity. All students understood that he was 'good at his job'; some interpreted stanzas 1 and 2 as suggesting a lonely and deprived childhood, where neglectful parents forced his close bond with the sea. There were a number of different responses to his death; a considerable number of students blamed alcohol for an error of judgement, 'lugged from his ale'; others said that he had become arrogant and overconfident and these qualities led to his final misjudgement. The best students saw him as a great mythical hero who finally became one with the sea, discovering in his death the nature of the 'last mystery'.

Most students were able to explore the language and imagery of the poem. Students, for example, referenced the image of the 'veins of his hand'; then the sea shanty as a childhood lullaby. The animal imagery suggesting the violence of the wave (line 14) was picked up by most students and was incorporated by better students as part of a new marine myth. Similarly the reference to lemmings was considered (although sometimes interpreted literally and sometimes misunderstood – a sizeable minority thought that the sailor befriended suicidal rodents!). The phrase 'pearl-dazzled' differentiated between students with only the very best understanding the ideas in the final stanza.

Some students were less successful in writing about form and structure, especially those students who brought preconceived ideas about poetic devices and their effects to the examination. Those students who saw every punctuation mark as a caesura (the effect of which is always to 'make the reader stop and think') or who said every example of enjambment was 'to make the poem flow' (sometimes with 'like the sea' triumphantly appended) did not demonstrate a genuine response to the poem but rather a grim determination to spot a technique and then try to invent an effect. There were also some wild guesses about iambic pentameter. Better students tended to be more specific in their comments, perhaps choosing one example of a technique such as enjambment ('I declare he fell/ Like a pearl dazzled diver' for example) and talking about the ways in which meanings are created in this particular line by the use of this device.

Section B: Set Texts

The fact that every text on the paper had been studied demonstrated the accessibility of all the chosen texts and showed that teachers had really embraced the concepts of freedom and choice embedded in the specification, choosing texts which they felt would interest and challenge their students. It was extremely encouraging to note the wide and varied readings of the texts, without much evidence of 'taught' responses. The mark scheme, with its emphasis on personal readings, supported and rewarded the students' efforts.

Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*

Question 2

Most students saw Eddie as responsible for the tragedy, citing his illicit sexual feelings for Catherine, his jealousy of Rodolpho and failure of loyalty to his wife. Some considered Catherine largely to blame for fuelling Eddie's desires and yet others were critical of Alfieri because of his lack of intervention. There were sympathetic responses, however, to Eddie, who clearly suffered for breaking the 'omerta', the bond between brothers of Sicilian society.

Many students discussed the play appropriately as conforming to the structure of Greek tragedy in every aspect: the hero with a fatal flaw, the looming catastrophe, the reversal and recognition of Eddie's hopes. Of course, such students understood Alfieri's choric role, so there were discussions of how he helped shape audience response and sympathies.

Question 3

This was the less popular of the two tasks. However, students who did attempt it produced some thoughtful work, enhanced by the linguistic possibilities inherent in the title. The title was seen by some as literal, the wealthier areas overlooking the little colony of Red Hook. Others claimed that the bridge was the union between two cultures, or that Alfieri himself was the bridge between two cultures, American and Italian. More abstractly, Alfieri was seen as the bridge between the audience and the characters in the drama and good students considered the ways he was seen to sway the audience's interpretations of the play. Better students included several or all of these possibilities.

Henrik Ibsen: *A Doll's House*

Question 4

This was the more popular of the questions on this text. Interestingly, some students were sympathetic to Torvald although the majority were not. They wrote convincingly about Torvald's use of demeaning language towards his wife (such as 'little squirrel') and cited his cruelty in dismissing the dying Dr Rank so easily and his harsh treatment of Krogstad as proof of his significant failure in human sympathies. The Christmas tree, at first beautiful and perfect, but losing its perfection over time, was seen as a symbol of the failing marriage.

Question 5

Very few responses to this question were seen. However, students who attempted it addressed the conclusion of events in terms of the issues of the play, tracking dramatic developments and discussing plot, language and devices.

RC Sherriff: *Journey's End*

Question 6

This was the less popular of the two questions on this text. Students who attempted it had a good understanding of the text as drama and were able to refer to a range of techniques. Many made reference to productions they had seen and these comments were readily accepted as a valid response to this task.

Question 7

Although a few students were critical of Stanhope's addiction to whiskey, feeling that he had 'let his men down', the majority recognised his drinking as a response to the horrors of war. Heroism was best when considered in abstract terms, as the men in the dugout represent a collection of 'everyman' figures who all finally achieve heroic status. Students wrote effectively about Stanhope's flawed response to Raleigh's letters, his honesty in admitting his fear to Hibbert and his final response to Raleigh's death.

William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*

Although there were some outstanding responses to *Romeo and Juliet*, this text also produced more weak answers than any other text on the paper. These less successful responses usually took a chronological, narrative approach and although students demonstrated an excellent understanding of the plot and the characters, their answers would have addressed themes and Shakespeare's techniques much more effectively by being more selective and choosing perhaps two or three sections of the play to explore in detail and to use as evidence to construct a tight argument.

Question 8

Students tended to move chronologically through the play, assessing moments of impulsiveness and caution on the part of both Romeo and Juliet. Each was seen as exhibiting aspects of both characteristics, although in conclusion most felt that overall Juliet was wiser and more cautious. Students cited Romeo's rapidly changed love, his folly in fighting Tybalt and his suicide as evidence of his impulsiveness. Juliet was seen as more logical in her handling of her father and in her eventual suicide. The best students considered the often powerful dramatic language with its use of imagery and use of the soliloquy; the variety of settings was also considered.

Question 9

This question was handled similarly in generally chronological terms. The dominant conclusion was that in Romeo and Juliet's bond of love the long-standing hostilities were ended.

Very few students attempted Questions 10 – 15

Kazuo Ishiguro: *Never Let Me Go*

It was pleasing to see so many excellent responses to this text. Students responded very well to the ideas in the novel and showed a mature level of sympathy for Kathy and her situation. Question 17 was overwhelmingly the more popular and better responses engaged appropriately with the actual task which was to consider Kathy as the narrator. Students at this level were adept at discussing the effects of delayed revelation in the narrative, the matter-of-fact language which contrasted with the shocking events in the narrative itself and Kathy's ignorance and innocence.

Very few students attempted Question 16.

Mark Haddon: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Question 18

This was the minority task. Weaker students tended to list incidents that were amusing. Examples were the strange responses of Chris to the police officer, his attitude and approach to strangers and the sheer inappropriateness of his response to situations. Better students discussed the discrepancy between Chris's perception of events and those of the reader, such as the near-farcical episodes on the train journey. Some students went on to discuss the purposes of humour as 'sweetening the pill of a distinct learning curve for the readers of this novel'.

Question 19

There were many extremely thoughtful and sensitive responses to this task. The great majority were completely shocked at the hardships Chris's parents had to face. There were few moral judgements on his mother who, ill-educated and not very articulate, simply cannot cope with her son. Chris's father drew warm support, despite his outburst of temper and lies; it was felt that he did not merit his son's hostility.

All examiners involved in marking this paper commented on the range and quality of students' responses at all levels of ability. It is evident that teachers and students have approached the course with enthusiasm and dedication. As one experienced examiner said: 'It never ceases to amaze me what 16 year olds can produce in examination conditions and to read their varied and imaginative responses to these exciting texts was a real privilege.'