



GCSE

ENGLISH LITERATURE

8702/1P Poetry anthology
Report on the Examination

8702
June 2022

Version: 1.0

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Introduction

There can be no doubt that the pandemic presented students and teachers alike with unprecedented challenges as they prepared for this year's examination series. Thus, the significant achievements demonstrated in responses to this paper cannot be overstated: for teachers to ensure that their students were ready to sit this examination is a remarkable feat indeed. This particular paper had the lowest entry of the options offered but there was nonetheless a significant and, inevitably, varied entry.

This report aims to provide useful feedback for teachers whilst simultaneously offering them some ways forward for future exams. This report will:

- offer some general thoughts resulting from marking the examination
- offer specific comments about each question
- offer a consideration of the assessment objectives and how they were addressed and assessed on this paper
- offer some advice and ideas for students which may help them in the future.

General Overview

Question 2 was the significantly more popular choice but the following general comments apply to both questions equally.

- There appeared to be few timing issues and the vast majority of students produced responses which were clearly complete.
- There were very few rubric infringements.
- There was clear evidence of a sense of organisation in responses, sometimes resulting from a plan and sometimes not. Thus most students approached responses with a sense of purpose and, in general, a sense of focus.
- Less in evidence in this paper were acronyms at the start of responses which often shackle the student and result in a response which is too forced. Planning often took the form of mini mind maps or bullet points / numbered lists which are far more useful.
- A trend noticed by examiners was the use of an introduction which established the 'agenda' of the response and included the focus of the question. Often, this kept the student on track and on focus. Such introductions need not be long but can be effective as the student 'sets their stall out'.
- Knowledge and understanding of the poems was usually very good and, interestingly, it was felt that the response to the poem chosen for comparison was often as confident and engaged as the response to the named poem.
- Similarly, the use of quotations / references from both poems was often equally matched. Students are clearly learning how to select appropriately and to integrate references. Of course, it should always be remembered that the word 'quotations' is not in the mark scheme; rather it is 'references'. 'References' may be quotations but, equally, may not be, and what we reward is how they have been used.

Question 1

The most popular choices for comparison were *Love's Philosophy*, *Neutral Tones*, *When We Two Parted*, *Porphyria's Lover* and *The Farmer's Bride*. All of these worked well and the last two especially seemed to engage the students, perhaps because of their narrative nature. *Winter Swans* was a less popular choice but was often sensitively handled. A minority of students selected some of the other poems, such as *Follower*, *Mother*, *any distance* and *Eden Rock*, but these did not usually work as well and may have been selected because the students knew them well so wrote about them without considering their appropriateness.

The named poem *Sonnet 29 – 'I think of thee!'* seemed to be accessible to students across the ability range. Most wrote, with varying levels of success, about the extended metaphor of the vines and were often able to relate their comments to the focus of the power of love, often in relation to the speaker's obsession with and suffocating passion for her lover.

There was some difference of opinion over the final line of *Sonnet 29*, some recognising that the reality of the lover's presence was superior to any amount of reflection, dwelling or fantasising about him. Others regarded this as Browning having "gone off" her lover in his absence or seeing a poorer reality than the fantasy generated.

Many responses focused on structure, particularly unpicking the sonnet form and the unusual placing of the volta, a structural point which sometimes worked well. There usually followed some comment on the ABBA rhyme scheme which was sometimes compared to the ABAB of *Love's Philosophy* and its structure. There is a risk of comments on poetic construction becoming rather descriptive and offering only limited potential to move up the mark scheme because they interrupt a student's focus on examining words, ideas and meanings.

Students are increasingly willing to take the focus of the task – in this case the power of love – and make it central to their response in some way whilst not forgetting to root their considerations in the poems. AO3 is much more appropriately addressed by focusing on ideas such as the power of love to make someone obsessive, very unhappy, grief-stricken, unbalanced, etc than writing about, for example, Browning's father's attitude, the sonnet written in Portuguese or Browning's illness. Pursuing such avenues in response to this or any other poems often causes a student to lose focus on both questions and poems.

Question 2

The most popular choices for comparison were *Remains*, *Exposure*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and *Kamikaze*, all of which worked well. Obviously the 'ideas about conflict' were based on war in the aforementioned poems but other students used, for example, *Storm on the Island*, *Checking Out Me History*, *London* or *Ozymandias* which were arguably a little more challenging in terms of focus and comparison, although examiners saw some really empathic responses to the Agard poem.

Once again the named poem *Bayonet Charge* was accessible to the majority of students. The vast majority of candidates began their responses with references to 'in media res' and the adverb 'suddenly' which were productive avenues for at least Level 3 AO2. Discussing the nuances of 'raw' was also fruitful territory. There was much focus on the 'sweating' with some thoughtful ideas about the 'centre of his chest' relating to the heart and linking this with the 'patriotic tear' and rejection of 'king, honour...' later in the poem.

Many students saw a link between conflict with nature in *Exposure* and in *Bayonet Charge*. The former is clear but the consideration of ‘bullets smacking the belly out of the air’ and ‘towards the green hedge’ as attacks on nature were less confident.

Dealing with the ‘cold clockwork of the stars and the nations’ produced a huge range of ideas: the soldier’s heart had become cold; the soldier was the hand pointing out the futility of war; the stars and nations were referencing patriotism. Particularly successful interpretations were those where the soldier was becoming a robotic, unthinking weapon of war and this was further supported by the rifle ‘numb as a smashed arm’ simply being so much a part of him that it had replaced his arm.

Other ideas about the rifle reference pursued the idea that the soldier was refusing to fight any longer, sometimes linked to ‘lugged’, suggesting a metaphorical reluctance to carry the weight. The other image which students wrestled with was the ‘yellow hare’. Some saw the hare as a symbol of nature and thus further evidence of the war on nature and its destruction. Some perceptive students went on to link this to the ‘shot-slashed furrows’ identifying the difference between ploughed fields and those savaged by the bullets. Some students saw the hare as a symbol of death, supported by the gruesome description of the open mouth and staring eyes. More literal responses simply saw the hare as a victim of the war, indicating that it’s not just humans who suffer.

The focus on ‘ideas about conflict’ was quite straightforward. Patriotism, violence, death, inner conflict and PTSD amongst others were appropriate considerations for AO3 but paragraphs about, for example, Owen’s war experiences, Hughes’ father as a soldier or extraneous information about Guardsman Tromans were not useful if they meant the student lost sight of the poem.

As with Question 1, comments on poetic construction could be limiting. When discussing *Bayonet Charge*, for example, there were frequent references to enjambment and caesura. This is not per se ‘wrong’ but a mere observation of the techniques or even a vague comment about ‘flow’ and ‘pace’ will not achieve above Level 2 AO2 if it is not tied to meaning.

Assessment Objectives

AO1: response to task and use of supporting references

- Whilst comparison is not an assessment objective, it does have a part to play in the assessment of AO1, as per the ‘typical features’ section of the mark scheme. Students approach comparison in many ways but choosing a poem which ‘works’ well with the named poem is likely to help a student fare better on the first strand of AO1.
- It is impressive when students are able to cite well chosen, precise references to compare and comment on, and thus their choices will be judged as ‘apt’ or ‘judicious’.
- Increasingly, students are able to integrate references into their line of discussion which works so much better than ‘tacked on’ references. Some students simply ‘go through’ the poems with a comment / reference approach – almost like a list – which will be unlikely to achieve above Level 2 AO1.
- A brief but focussed introduction often helps sustain focus on the task, like a setting of an agenda.
- The key words for Level 4 are ‘clear understanding’. Students who allow their response to wander into extraneous personal views / background of poets frequently lose sight of the task and text, thus ‘clear understanding’ suffers.
- Many students remember references and quotations exceptionally well, seemingly born of familiarity with the poems, rather than learning by rote.

AO2: the use of methods to create meanings

- Most students now understand the need to address AO2 in their responses but the ways in which they do so vary tremendously.
- What is useful is when students structure their responses around the focus of the task in each paragraph and then address AO2 in service of their ideas, and there were some outstanding examples of this technique. However, often paragraphs began something like, ‘The poet uses metaphors and similes in *Bayonet Charge*’ and followed with examples of these methods, sometimes divorced from the focus of the task and/or from meaning and/or from the whole poem.
- As previously mentioned, consideration of structure can be an issue. Often, it is the last thing the student addresses – almost like they feel they should – and often nothing is added to what has already been achieved in the response. Lists of structural features and their technical names, often merely described rather than related to meaning or without precise reference to the poem, are not the best use of time. That said, discussion of some structural features can achieve highly, for instance, the effects of openings and last lines. However, the observation of a rhyme scheme [ABAB] is best avoided.
- It was interesting to read responses which took a different approach to AO2 in *Bayonet Charge* and *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. These responses examined / explored how Hughes had used an anonymous individual soldier to convey his ideas whereas Tennyson had focused on the anonymity of the ‘six hundred’, and the implications and effects of the choices the poets made.

AO3: ideas, perspectives, contextual factors

- Increasingly, students are moving away from the addressing of AO3 via social / historical ideas which is most welcome and enables them to write in a way which is so much more engaged with poets’ ideas. There were many passionate responses to, for example, the ideas about conflict being suggested by Hughes and Armitage with the poem at the forefront of the discussion. And, at 16 years old, many students understood the power of love to affect your whole being – it’s a universal thing and so much more interesting than historical facts about the poets.
- Focus on the main thrust of the question is key to success and should be the central idea in a response. Through this AO3 will be addressed. It was evident that this idea is becoming more prevalent year on year.

Advice for students

- Look carefully at the question and its focus, and think about what poem you choose to write about alongside the named poem. Think about which one would be best rather than simply choosing one you know well and then setting off, later discovering it may not have been such a wise choice. Obviously, examination preparation is key here in becoming very familiar with all the poems in the cluster you are studying.
- Don’t worry if you can’t remember exact quotations. It’s fine to pinpoint parts of a poem and it’s also understandable if you slightly misquote because the examiner will get the idea.
- Some of you plan and some of you don’t. It’s your choice so do what’s right for you. If you plan, make it useful and focused on the question. For example, the focus of a question this year was ‘the power of love’ and your plan could list an idea about that for each paragraph so you have a starting point for each paragraph when you begin to write. A plan must be helpful, otherwise writing it wastes time.
- Think about your opening paragraph. It shouldn’t be too long but it may be a good idea to reference your two poems in relation to a comparison between them and to the main idea in the question.

- You have to write about the methods used by poets to enable you to understand their ideas. You don't have to write about poetic construction but of course you can if you wish. If you do, try to avoid a list of observations about rhyme, rhythm, stanzas, enjambment, caesura, etc. A consideration of a structural device, if used, should be in support of a discussion about a particular aspect of the question focus, should link closely to the poem and should consider the effect on meaning. It is unlikely that you will write a whole paragraph about nothing but various structural devices.
- It may be interesting for you to know the background to poets and their poems but writing about these in your exam without any links to the poems won't help your response. Answer the question and discuss the ideas to which it refers.
- Above all, prepare well, practise responses and enjoy the poems.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.