



ASSESSMENT and  
QUALIFICATIONS  
ALLIANCE

**5741/6741  
NEWSLETTER**

**AS/A2 ENGLISH LITERATURE  
SPECIFICATION A**

**Information for the attention of  
the Head of English**

**February 2003**



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*Introductory letter from the Chief Examiner*

Dear Colleagues

Here is the next edition of our newsletter. Its focus is Unit Four of the specification. AS is now bedded down and support for LA5C is provided through the standardisation materials. We know from what you tell us that it is LTA4 where you need more guidance and support. This last autumn we devised a full day's presentation for teachers and delivered it up and down the country. We were glad that so many of you managed to attend. As part of the day we ran two workshops on LTA4. The first asked teachers present to identify as many debates as possible about their chosen text in Section A. The second asked the teachers to identify as many contexts as possible arising from their chosen text in Section B. The Principal Examiner for LTA4, has collated the many teacher responses and these form the body of this newsletter. I am sure you will find them to be a very useful teaching aid.

Also enclosed in the newsletter is a summary of the rationale behind questions set in Section B.

We will be offering half-day workshops for teachers in the summer term. These will focus on LTA6. More information about these workshops will be sent to centres in early March. Again we hope to feed the outcomes of these sessions into the next newsletter.

Please do write to us with comments, suggestions and ideas:

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## LTA4

### Section B

#### Advice to teachers from the Principal Examiner

With Blake and *Women Romantic Poets* there is an obvious historical, social, cultural context, but this does not apply easily to Wordsworth and Keats.

In the case of all four poets, teachers should begin with the text and then evaluate context as it arises from the poetry. What I do not want are screeds on irrelevant context to the detriment of a close study of the poetry.

I shall concentrate on what I perceive to be the main worries of teachers who have chosen Wordsworth – *Prelude, Books 1 and 2* and Keats *Selections* (Barnard).

- **Context**

Wordsworth:

The main context is Wordsworth as a romantic poet – how far does he meet the various criteria of a Romantic. Then there is the way *The Prelude* was received by his contemporaries, and finally there are his views on poetry and particularly how he saw *The Prelude* in relation to similar great works of the past.

Keats:

The main context is Keats as a romantic poet – how does his poetry fit in with definitions of Romantic. Then there are those letters where he writes about his poetry and the way it was received by the critics (often hostile) of his day.

- **Volume to study**

Wordsworth:

After a complete reading of both books, teachers and students should select three of the most interesting incidents in each Book with the accompanying ‘philosophy’ and master these in detail, the teacher providing relevant context when necessary. It is far better to be able to know these areas in detail with the necessary short quotations and, if possible, analysis than to take a jog-trot through vaguely known large areas.

Keats:

Do not attempt to study all the poems in the *Selection*. Instead choose one of the longer poems – *Lamia, Endymion, Hyperion*, plus the Odes, *Eve of St Agnes* and one or two of other mutual favourites. Again master the detail, learn key, short quotations, try to analyse the poetry and be able to see it in the contexts described above.

## Section A – Different interpretations (AO4)

### Debating *Othello*

- 1 The only way to understand the play is to see Othello only as a soldier, lover and husband.

#### **Versus**

Othello's colour is the key to the understanding of his tragedy.

#### **Versus**

Othello's lack of self-knowledge results in his tragedy.

- 2 Iago's homosexuality is the key to understanding Shakespeare's characterisation.

#### **Versus**

Shakespeare has presented in Iago a character whose only motive is evil for its own sake.

#### **Versus**

Shakespeare teases his audience with the ambiguity of the kind of relationship which exists between Othello and Iago.

- 3 Is Shakespeare's Othello a bombastic, self-pitying egotist or a noble hero?

- 4 Desdemona fades as a credible character as the play develops from Act 1 through to Acts 4 and 5.

#### **Versus**

It is only in the final scenes of the play that Desdemona truly wins the hearts of her audience.

- 5 Shakespeare does not allow any subplot distract him from his unrelenting pursuit of the tragedy of his protagonists.

#### **Versus**

The incidental sub-plots, for example, the abortive Turkish threat, Roderigo and Bianca too often interrupt the main purpose of the play.

6 Which is more important in the play—the domestic tragedy or the politics of Venice and its empire?

7 By its response to Iago's soliloquies, the audience is a willing accomplice in his villainy.

**Versus**

The audience is appalled at the inevitability of Iago's triumph over Othello.

8 The play is about self-deception: even without Iago, Othello would have murdered Desdemona.

**Versus**

Shakespeare ensures that the audience understands that Iago has to be blessed by chance before he can succeed in getting Othello to murder Desdemona.

9 It strains credibility that Emilia is surprised that her husband could act so treacherously to ruin the Moor and Desdemona.

**Versus**

Emilia and Iago form a dramatic device only to enable an audience to compare their marriage with that of Desdemona and Othello.

10 Desdemona too naïve and trusting?

**Versus**

Desdemona true and virtuous?

11 Venetian society rotten and manipulative.

**Versus**

Venetian society representing the ideals of civilised living.

12 Othello—the tragic hero.

**Versus**

Othello—the simple soldier and the failed lover.

13 Are Desdemona and Emilia passive acceptors of fate **or** can they be seen as heroic in their tragedy?

14 Is the ending of the play satisfactory or unsatisfactory in the light of what has gone before?

15. Desdemona is mainly responsible for her own downfall.

**Versus**

Desdemona is the victim of the machinations of an all-powerful male society.

16. Desdemona fails in her duty both to her father and her husband.

**Versus**

Desdemona's tragedy is to have a father and husband who are bungling and insensitive.

17. Cassio is only a stereotype of the young, handsome Italian who is the envy of men who feel inferior and who is irresistible to women.

**Versus**

Cassio is essential to the plot which Shakespeare contrives.

18. One of the fascinations of *Othello* is its portrayal of war and soldiery.

**Versus**

Venetian politics dominate the public action of the play.

19. Iago provides most of the comedy in *Othello*.

**Versus**

It is difficult to find a villain like Iago amusing.

20 Shakespeare wishes to explore most of all the appearance and reality of honesty in the play.

**Versus**

Shakespeare is mainly concerned with honesty as a device of dramatic irony.

21 It is only through a study of Othello's language in key parts of the play that one can understand his tragedy.

**Versus**

Othello's tragedy springs from his inability to understand the motives of other people.

22 The 'willow scene' is the most moving in the play.

**Versus**

The 'willow scene' holds up for too long the denouement of the play.

23 Cyprus, away from the civilised Venice, causes the change in Othello from Venetian to barbaric behaviour.

**Versus**

Iago changes Othello from man to monster.

24 Success of Iago due to his skill **OR** Othello's weaknesses **OR** luck.

25 Iago's motivation **racism Or jealousy?**

26 Shakespeare's Iago is a one-dimensional villain.

**Versus**

Shakespeare has created in Iago a complex character, a gift to the psychoanalyst.

27 Othello is a victim of his self-narrative.

**Versus**

Othello's tragedy is that of a soldier who should never have fallen in love.

28 The time-lapse between the events in Venice and in Cyprus weakens the structure of the play.

**Versus**

The contrast between life in Venice and in Cyprus is what gives meaning to the tragedy.

**Versus**

The only way to understand the structure of the play is by studying Shakespeare's use of public spaces and interiors culminating in the bedroom.

29 Sexual urges, longings and disappointments drive the play.

**Versus**

The male protagonists are motivated by a lust for power and position.

- 30 The play is simply a morality play in which jealousy, one of the seven deadly sins, is shown to bring about the tragedy of the character it inhabits.

**Versus**

The play shows a complexity of character and motivation which deters the most ardent moralist from making a glib assertion about the 'moral' of the play.

## ***Henry IV Part 2 Debates***

- 1 The play is an exploration of the legitimacy of monarchy in opposition to those who challenge the right of a usurper to rule.

### **Versus**

The play is an intimate revelation of the relationships within a royal family.

- 2 Shakespeare's revelation of the royal and just Henry V in Act Five is utterly unconvincing in the light of what he has been in the previous scenes of the play.

### **Versus**

Throughout the play the audience becomes increasingly aware that Henry will by its end sweep away the rottenness and moral disease which plagued his father's reign.

- 3 One is left with the impression throughout the play of men exploiting women and those acting in the King's name exploiting the weak and powerless.

### **Versus**

The scenes in the Boar's Head Tavern and in Gloucestershire are the funniest scenes in the play.

- 4 Attitudes of men towards the Hostess and Doll Tearsheet show contempt for women as well as a desire to exploit their weaknesses.

### **Versus**

Shakespeare has set out to engage the audience's admiration for the survival qualities of Doll and Mistress Quickly.

## ***The Merchant of Venice Debates***

1 Is *The Merchant of Venice* a comedy or a tragedy?

2 The play explores the extent of the dominance of female wisdom over male folly.

### **Versus**

The play is about the difficulty experienced by women of surviving in a male-dominated world.

3 The language used by most of the characters in the play shows that Shakespeare was reflecting the nasty racist attitudes of his day.

### **Versus**

There is much in the language which Shakespeare gives to Shylock to indicate that he intended to leave the audience to judge the rights and wrongs between Jew and Christian.

4 Shylock – villain **or** victim?

5 The Casket scenes are boring and predictable.

### **Versus**

Shakespeare has cleverly contrived the Casket so that each is different in its variations of form and structure, presentation, exploration of characters and moral values.

6 Launcelot Gobbo has no real dramatic importance in the play.

### **Versus**

Launcelot Gobbo is more than just a comic character in the play.

7 Act 5 seems like the start of a second play because the first one finished too soon.

### **Versus**

Act 5 successfully rounds off the themes and concerns which Shakespeare has developed throughout the play.

8 Belmont represents in the play love and freedom.

**Versus**

Belmont represents in the play prejudice and suspicion.

9 Venice represents in the play business enterprise and affluence.

**Versus**

Venice represents in the play the cut-throat business world, jealousy and racial hatred.

10 The play is an enticement to racial hatred: it should be banned from the stage.

**Versus**

The play is cleverly contrived so that an audience may test its own attitudes to race.

11 Jessica is a simple, uncomplicated character: merely an abused daughter who runs away from a tyrannical father.

**Versus**

Every line which Jessica speaks gives the audience a clue to the complicated character which Shakespeare has produced.

12 Is the play a study of the nature of love or the nature of evil?

13 Shylock and Antonio are portrayed by Shakespeare as mirror-images of each other.

**Versus**

The success of Shakespeare's play depends on the continuous contrast of the characters of Antonio and Shylock.

14 The play would be just as successful if Nerissa were left out of it.

**Versus**

Nerissa plays an important role in the play.

- 15 In a play which is supposed to be about justice and mercy, there is neither justice or mercy.

**Versus**

The satisfying outcome of the play is that all characters get their just reward or punishment.

- 16 Who is the hero of this play: Antonio? Shylock? Portia?

- 17 The progress of the play is constantly being held up by useless digressions about values, about melancholy, about music and about atmosphere.

**Versus**

Forget about the plot – just enjoy the education, the culture and the sensitivity of Shakespeare’s mind as shown through the mouths of so many characters in the play.

- 18 Shakespeare uses disguise as a means for women to show their true worth in a male-dominated society.

**Versus**

Shakespeare’s characters who use disguise in *The Merchant of Venice* use it to cheat and deceive.

- 19 Antonio is sad because he is about to lose the man he loves to Portia.

**Versus**

Antonio’s love for Bassanio is like that of many men for each other in earlier times: it is noble, selfless and generous without sexual motive.

## ***The Duchess of Malfi Debates***

1 Act 1 is chaotic and pointless.

### **Versus**

Act 1 is a cleverly contrived introduction to the play.

2 In Act 2 Scene 1 the Duchess is enhanced as a human being.

### **Versus**

In Act 2 Scene 1 the Duchess is diminished by her disregard for her public duty.

3 Who is the more important character in the play—Bosola **or** the Duchess?

4 The Duchess is responsible for her own downfall.

### **Versus**

The downfall of the Duchess is entirely the responsibility of her evil brothers aided by the murderous Bosola.

5 The play is weak in structure, strong in characterisation.

### **Versus**

The play's strength is in its structure but few critics take the trouble to understand its cleverness. Its weakness lies in the one dimensional characters who inhabit the play.

6 Webster's purpose in writing the play was to titillate the audience's fascination with sexual and violent perversions.

### **Versus**

Webster's purpose in writing this play was to disgust his audience at the wickedness they see in the play and to promote morality.

7 Julia is so unnecessary to the play that many productions cut her part.

### **Versus**

Julia is crucial to our understanding of the Cardinal and all he represents in Webster's aim in the play to show the perceived wickedness of the catholic Church.

8 Whereas the Duchess is the moral centre of the play, Bosola is its dramatic centre.

9 Webster creates more comedy than horror in the play.

**Versus**

The play is nothing more than a wax-work chamber of horrors.

10 Webster has produced a play of gratuitous cruelty and violence.

**Versus**

Webster clearly shows in his play the triumph of good over evil.

11 Webster is able to produce the most thought-provoking language and imagery, but he has been unable to produce a coherent play.

12 The main purpose of the play is to show the conflict between the old aristocracy represented by men like Ferdinand and aspiring middle-class bureaucrats like Antonio.

**Versus**

The main purpose of the play is to show that an intelligent, independent woman like the Duchess cannot survive in a world dominated by powerful male rulers and their agents.

13 Is *The Duchess of Malfi* any more than a revenge tragedy?

## ***Volpone* Debates**

1 Jonson's aim in writing *Volpone* was to amuse and entertain his audience.

### **Versus**

Jonson's purpose in writing *Volpone* was to expose wickedness and to promote moral virtues in his audience.

2 Celia and Lady Politic Would-be are two stereotypes, not credible women.

### **Versus**

Both Celia and Lady Politic Would-Be play important roles in the play.

3 Volpone and Mosca are such attractive characters that they undermine the moral purpose of the play which is to expose wickedness and vice.

### **Versus**

An audience must be repelled by the immorality of both Volpone and Mosca.

4 The sub-plot of the play is redundant to the play as a whole.

### **Versus**

The antics of Sir Politic Would-be and his wife enhance our appreciation of *Volpone*.

5 Soliloquies and asides are undramatic and slow down the impetus of the play.

### **Versus**

Soliloquies and asides provide us with an important insight into the thoughts and motives of the characters who speak directly to us.

6 Mosca is clever and witty and delights audiences.

### **Versus**

Mosca's degeneracy and immorality and at the end his treachery appal an audience.

7 It is hard to have any sympathy with Jonson's Celia.

### **Versus**

Celia is wronged by a cruel husband, prostituted by Mosca and narrowly escapes rape by Volpone. She demands our serious consideration.

## **Section B – Context (AO5ii)**

### ***Women Romantic Poets***

#### **Context: the celebration of rural life**

- 1 How do the women poets show their delight in the natural settings and the relationships in village life?

#### **Context: attitudes to radicalism and revolution**

- 2 How do the women poets show their admiration for those who endure poverty and misfortune without turning to revolution and violence?

#### **Context: attitudes to love and romance**

- 3 How do the women poets show their attitude to love and romance?

## ***Prelude 1 and 2 Contexts***

### **Context: Nature**

- 1 How does Wordsworth show his joy in Nature as a teacher?
- 2 How does Wordsworth emphasise the importance of Nature as a teacher?
- 3 How does Wordsworth present Nature as a force of liberation?
- 4 How does Wordsworth stress the importance of Nature in the education of a child?
- 5 How does Wordsworth reveal his vision of God in Nature?

### **Context: Solitude**

- 6 How does Wordsworth present the need for solitude in an ever-increasingly urbanised world?

### **Context : Childhood and Innocence**

- 7 How does Wordsworth in *Prelude 1 and 2* reveal his ideas of the importance of childhood?
- 8 How does Wordsworth present his ideas on the education of children?
- 9 How does Wordsworth show the effect of disturbing experience on the innocence of childhood?

### **Context: Religion**

- 10 How do Wordsworth's ideas about religion surface in *Prelude 1 and 2*?

### **Context : Wordsworth consciousness of a poetic tradition**

- 11 How does Wordsworth in the first two books of *The Prelude* reveal his anxiety about his poetic endeavour in relationship to the great poets of the past?

## **Blake *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* Context**

### **Context: The political establishment**

How does Blake raise the reader's resentment against the ills of the society to which he belonged?

### **Context: Blake's religious philosophy**

What impression do we receive from the style and tone of Blake's *Songs* of his own religious beliefs?

### **Context: The religious establishment**

How does Blake evoke a response from his readers for what he sees as the responsibility of the established church for the miseries of people living at his time?

### **Context: The Industrial Revolution**

How does Blake persuade his readers about the evil effects of the Industrial Revolution?

### **Context: The Agrarian Revolution**

How does Blake in his *Songs* persuade his readers about the lost joys of the former country life?

### **Context: Nature**

How does Blake show his delight in Nature and the countryside in his *Songs*?

### **Context: Relationship of the sexes**

How does Blake in his *Songs* set out his ideas of the kind of sexual relationships that should exist between human beings ?

### **Context: Social Evils**

How does Blake show his anger at the social evils he identifies in his *Songs*?

**Context: The influence on Blake of what he read**

How important was the influence of the Bible, Rousseau and Tom Paine on his *Songs*?

**Context: The influence of the French Revolution on Blake**

How does Blake in his *Songs* reveal the influence of revolutionary ideas on his thinking and attitudes?

The slogan of the French Revolution was Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. How does Blake in his poetry persuade his readers of the necessity of these ideals?

**Context: Education**

How convincingly does Blake set out his ideas about education in his *Songs*?

**Context: Parents and Children**

How does Blake expound his views on the relationships between parents and their children?

**Context: The Romantic movement**

How far can it be claimed that Blake is a typical Romantic poet?

**Context: The views of his contemporaries on Blake**

How far would you agree with each of the following descriptions of Blake:

**Genius**

**Prophet**

**Madman      ???**

## **Keats *Selection* Contexts**

### **Context: Keats' Insecurity**

How does Keats in the *Selection* demonstrate his uncertainty as to his merits as a poet?

### **Context: Family Deaths**

How does Keats show his obsession with death in his poetry?

### **Context: Attitude to Women**

How does Keats' portrayal of women in his poems reveal his attitude to them?

### **Context: Myth**

What evidence is there in Keats' poetry of his fascination with myth?

How skilfully does Keats in his poetry exploit classical myth?

### **Context: The Romantics**

Make a list of all the characteristics of Romanticism which are exhibited in Keats' poetry.

### **Context: Attitude to the time he lived**

How does Keats reveal in his poetry a desperate desire to escape from the harsh reality of the times in which he lived?

### **Context: Ill-health**

How does Keats show in his poetry his obsession with illness?

### **Context: Negative capability**

Illustrate the poetic effects achieved by Keats when he employs his theory of negative capability.

**Context: Personal Experience**

Examine the use made by Keats of each of the following aspects of his personal experience

**Medical training**

**Art**

**Music**

**Religion.**

**Context: The Medieval World**

How does Keats by means of language, form and structure bring to life the medieval world in this *Selection*?

**Context: Imagination**

How convincing are Keats' poems of the imagination?

**Context: Sex and Love**

How does Keats in his poetry show his personal fascination with sex and love?