

Candidate Style Answers

OCR GCSE English

Unit A641 Reading Literary Texts: Controlled Assessment Task

This Support Material booklet is designed to accompany the OCR GCSE English specification for teaching from September 2010.

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Introduction

OCR has produced these candidate style answers to support teachers in interpreting the assessment criteria for the new GCSE specifications and to bridge the gap between new specification release and availability of exemplar candidate work.

This content has been produced by subject experts, with the input of Chairs of Examiners, to illustrate how the sample assessment questions might be answered and provide some commentary on what factors contribute to an overall grading. The candidate style answers are not written in a way that is intended to replicate student work but to demonstrate what a “good” or “excellent” response might include, supported by examiner commentary and conclusions.

As these responses have not been through full moderation and do not replicate student work, they have not been graded and are instead, banded “middle” or “high” to give an indication of the level of each response.

Please note that this resource is provided for advice and guidance only and does not in any way constitute an indication of grade boundaries or endorsed answers.

Unit A641 Reading Literary Texts — English

Controlled Assessment Task

Question

How does Carol-Ann Duffy present memories in her poems 'In Mrs Tilscher's Class' and 'Before You Were Mine'?

Candidate A

I really enjoyed both these poems, although I found "Before You Were Mine" the more difficult of the two. "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" sounded just like the things my Mum says about her Primary School in the days before computers and whiteboards, when teachers used blackboards with coloured chalk:

"chalky pyramids rubbed into dust".

Our teacher had to explain "A window opened with a long pole". Apparently it refers to the days when the windows were set above the reach of the pupils. The memories Carol Ann Duffy has here are very accurate and detailed. School must have meant a lot to her. In the second verse she makes some statements that are very short and direct:

"Enthralling books.... Sugar Paper". These simple sentences perhaps show how simple and straightforward the lessons were and that was made them so enjoyable and memorable. She goes on to suggest not only the sights of school but also the sounds, smell and taste:

"scent of a pencil slowly...shaved"/ "a xylophone's nonsense "/ "tasted of electricity."

People say that memories can be aroused by tastes and smells as much as sights and sounds and this is what happens here.

In the third verse Carol Ann uses an extended metaphor: the tadpoles that become frogs are supposed to be the students growing from little children into young adults. As this happens she reminds us that we tend to learn the facts of life from other students, not from teachers, despite all the sex education we have in PSE lessons. And then you see your parents in a different way:

"stared/ at your parents, appalled....."

This was something I remember at about the same age. Neither they nor the teachers can really talk about sex, at least not on your wavelength.

"Mrs. Tilscher smiled/ then turned away."

Then the metaphor changes: it becomes a comparison between a thunderstorm:

"feverish July/ untidy, hot, fractious.... heavy sexy sky."

and the beginning of puberty, which reaches a climax at the end of the poem:

“split open into a thunderstorm.”

Then the end of term arrives:

“Reports were handed out”.

One chapter in the children’s lives closes and another is about to open. Now they are “impatient to be grown”.

I found “Before You Were Mine” more difficult than this, at least until you understand that Carol Ann is looking at a photograph of her mother and her friends when they were much younger, single and unmarried. Before she was born: before “you were mine”. You can tell it was in the fifties (when my grandmother was growing up) because of the references to “polka dot dresses” “Marilyn” (Monroe, an actress) and “Ballrooms”. Carol Ann really wants to know, almost to have her mother as she then was. Having her as a daughter perhaps wasn’t enough for her. She certainly must love her mother a lot:

“You’d teach me the steps on the way back from Mass”.

Most of the language in the poem is simple, like this.

“The decade was the best one, eh?” is typical of the chatty way the poem develops. There’s also the sense in which the generations of women, child, mother, grandmother are remembered:

“your Ma stands at the Close/ with a hiding for the late one.”

and the poem seems to be a reaction to the way women take on roles in life one after the other. Like “Mrs. Tilscher’s Class” this poem appeals to our senses:

“small bites on your neck” (love bites from a boyfriend);

“till I see you, clear as scent”.

This suggests that the picture of her mother arouses the smell of a scent she was wearing at the time, perhaps when she met the boy (her father?) who gave her the love bites.

Carol Ann refers to owning or possessing her mother in each of the four verses of the poem: she must be very proud of her. The ending is very positive:

“That glamorous love lasts
where you sparkle and waltz and laugh.....”

She really believes that the “glamorous” love, the love she has for her mother in her (mother’s) youth survives that stage of their lives.

So where “In Mrs. Tilscher’s Class” is all about growing up and growing out of Primary School, “Before You Were Mine” is about memories of her mother and what she was like before she was born.

Commentary

This answer provides a personal and critical response, which is relevant to the task throughout. There is a good deal of explanation of the meaning of each poem and the ways the meanings are conveyed. There is a simple analysis of the structure of each poem. There is plenty of quotation which supports, although does not always develop what is said, and there is plenty of detail which sets each piece of writing in its social, cultural and historical context. (A sound middle response).

Candidate B

Both poems deal with memories. "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" the memories are those of the school year in which the writer grew from a girl to a young woman: in "Before You Were Mine" the memories are of what the writer knows of her mother's experiences as a young woman before she married and had her first child. They are sparked off by photograph of her mother with her friends. The poems are linked, therefore, by the feelings that emerge from looking back on the past. Although Carol Ann Duffy uses many of the same writing techniques in each, the poems are very different in what they say. "In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" is a confident presentation of a moment in time we all (or at any rate all girls) experience in which the writer talks directly to the reader. "Before You Were Mine" is much more complicated. This poem is a direct address by the writer to her mother, which we are invited to share. It appears to be just as self confident as "Mrs. Tilscher" but is actually full of doubt. The final assertion:

"That glamorous love lasts/ where you sparkle and waltz...."

is very brave but completely wrong: a piece of self-conscious make-believe. Actually I think the poem is about the inevitable passing of time and the different experiences women have in their lives which cannot be "put on hold" or re-visited as the this conclusion suggests they might be.

Both poems are set at specific moments in history: this gives them both an authentic real life context, which is very convincing and adds to the impact each poem makes. "Mrs. Tilscher" is set (probably) in 1966/67 when Carol Ann Duffy was 11 rising 12 and started at St. Joseph's Convent School in Stafford. The references to "Brady and Hindley" the notorious "moors murderers" would have been in the press throughout that year and to an 11 year old would have been exactly:

"the faint, uneasy smudge of a mistake"

something you saw and rubbed out of your mind because it was too much to take in at that age. This is an effective and understated metaphor. It is one of many very convincing allusions to childhood innocence in the first two stanzas of the poem. Memories of the opacity and imaginative power of children are also evoked by:

"You could travel up the Blue Nile"/ "This was better than home".

The first stanza charts a morning in School and the meticulous attention to the time scale ends with the final day of the summer term when:

“Reports were handed out”.

“Before You Were Mine” is set in the present, as the writer muses on the photograph of her mother and her friends but the age she evokes is clearly the ten years before Carol Ann Duffy’s birth, 1945 to 1955:

“The decade ahead of my loud possessive yell”

in Scotland, at the height of the “Big Band” era of “Pallys” “Palais de Dance”: Dance Halls. Although her mother’s family came from Glasgow a night out in Portobello, a suburb of Edinburgh:

“somewhere in Scotland”

would have been very exciting, even in (or perhaps because of) those bleak years of post war austerity. It is the thrill of a long gone age that the writer creates in much of the poem: she is anxious to possess her mother as she imagines she was then, not just as she recalls her from her childhood. In reality she is asking for the impossible: hence the two sides to the poem. Not only is there a succession of images of the supposed glamour of the era:

“the fizzy, movie tomorrows/ the right walk home could bring”

“”the bold girl winking”

“shriek at the pavement/ your polka dot dress blows round your legs”

(a reference to a provocative photograph of Marilyn Monroe).

There are also some lines in which a very powerful “dance” rhythm is created:

“Cha cha cha!”

“You’d teach me the steps on the way home from Mass”

“somewhere in Scotland, before I was born”.

The latter two lines are marked out by the punctuation and sentence structure and have a pattern that repeats the rhythm of the first five syllables in the second five.

Memories of the onset of puberty inform the latter two stanzas of “Mrs. Tilscher”. Just as the tadpoles develop into frogs and outgrow the confines of the classroom, so, metaphorically, the children outgrow Mrs. Tilscher’s limitations as a teacher:

“A rough boy/ told you how you were born”

“”Mrs. Tilscher smiled,/ then turned away.”

Although there is a less obviously powerful internal rhythm in these lines there is an equally clear emphasis created by a similar attention to the detail of the tension between the line lengths, word order and syntax:

“A tangible alarm made you always untidy/hot/
fractious under the heavy/sexy sky.]”

The “lesson” metaphor has gone from Geography to Biology and is dropped in favour of some literal and metaphorical Meteorology as the writer charts the path leading to the final onset of puberty:

“... the sky split open into a thunderstorm”.

The tone and mood of “Before You Were Mine” is much less certain than this and much less certain than it seems to be in the sections which suggest the excitement of a young woman’s life before she takes on the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood. It is less certain because there is at least a suggestion that it is all unreal, just as insubstantial as the faded black and white

photograph. The writer's memories are (obviously) of her mother as she knew her as a child and what her mother told her at that time:

"high heeled red shoes, relics..."

The search for the memory of her mother as she was when the writer was "ten years away" is doomed to failure. All there is, is a sense of unreality: "fizzy movie tomorrows" and Marilyn Monroe comparisons. In fact the poem records the inevitability of time moving on in an era in which the roles of women seemed changeless: a brief period of superficial fun, followed by the routine of marriage and motherhood: "on the way home from Mass"/ "with a hiding for the late one" and on towards death: "your ghost clatters". And even then there is uncertainty and insecurity about what her mother really felt and thought about it all:

"the best one, eh?" as if the writer is seeking reassurance from a mother who is no longer there to provide it.

"In Mrs. Tilscher's Class" presents memories of a personal experience which stands for something all readers can share: "Before You Were Mine" is open to a much wider variety of interpretations of memory and the ways in which it works.

Commentary

This is a consistently relevant response, which delves into the detail of each poem and provides much well supported personal commentary and analysis. The analysis of the rhythm of each poem, especially in "Before You Were Mine" is high order work. There is a clear sense of alternative interpretations and due consideration is given the structure and development of each piece. Apt quotations are used to support what is said and the opening and closing comparisons between the poems work well. There is a strong and well-informed sense of the social, cultural and historical background of each poem. (A good higher response).