Poetry: Section B

Carol Ann Duffy and Philip Larkin
### Assessment Objectives and weighting

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1 hour (of 2 hour exam)
Explore the titles

Mean Time
What are the various connotations?

Whitsun Weddings
What are the various connotations?
Exemplar questions – identify the AOs in this question

1. How far would you agree that “Duffy and Larkin are alike in creating characters to hide from or confront issues”? You must analyse in detail 2 poems from each of the set texts

2. “Poetry makes something strange, takes you beyond the ordinary.” In response to this view, explore connections between the ways in which Larkin and Duffy write about the ordinary in everyday life. You must analyse in detail 2 poems from each of the set texts
What kind of poet is Duffy?

- Poet of many voices
- Poet of memory
- Poet of intricacy of words
- Poet of intertextuality
- Poet of love and desire
- Poet of topicality
STYLE - DUFFY

• Shock tactics and humour for effect
• Slang, jargon and taboo language
• Inter-textual references
• Idiomatic, conversational speech
• Ellipsis and inferred meaning
• Alliteration, internal rhyme, enjambment, caesura, dramatic juxtaposition
• Dramatic monologue
Read Mean Time,

- Subject & themes
- Analyse S,F,L
Mean Time

The clocks slid back an hour
and stole light from my life
as I walked through the wrong part of
town,
mourning our love.

And, of course, unmendable rain
fell to the bleak streets
where I felt my heart gnaw
at all our mistakes.

If the darkening sky could lift
more than one hour from this
day
there are words I would never
have said
nor heard you say.

But we will be dead, as we know,
beyond all light.
These are the shortened days
and the endless nights.
Duffy’s THEMES

• SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES
• TIME AND THE EFFECTS OF TIME ON PEOPLE
• CHANGE
• NATURE
• NARRATIVE/STORIES
• THE PAST / CHILDHOOD / MEMORY
• EDUCATION
• LOVE, DESIRE AND RELATIONSHIPS
• STRONG CHARACTERS
• WOMEN AND WOMEN’S ISSUES
• REGRET
‘Poetry, above all, is a series of intense moments—its power is not in narrative. I’m not dealing with facts, I’m dealing with emotions.’ Duffy

‘unholy prayers’ Duffy

‘Poems are just moments, so the poet isn’t obliged to say what happens next, she is obliged to catch the moment, of intense feeling.’
Afterthought

• ‘Well, I’m kind of old-fashioned about this. In terms of love, I’ve just fallen for someone and it hasn’t really mattered if it was a man or a woman. I don’t think it’s a different kind of love either. Not in my experience anyway. It’s the same, the same butterflies and whatever.’ Telegraph interview
Notes on Mean Time

• TIME/ AGEING/ REGRET: Notes on “Meantime” The poem begins in a straightforward lament for a passing relationship or friendship. Duffy plays with the turning back of the clocks every autumn and the seeming theft of “light from my life”. This is an easy enough metaphor with the light representing happiness. This does not seem a million miles from the sense of regret in some of her other poems about poems about childhood.

• However, in this instance she is writing as an adult about adult life. She is “mourning our love”. The notion of loss is heightened by the connotations of death in this line, giving the end of a relationship equal status with the loss of a life.

• In the second stanza the downbeat tone continues as she talks of “unmendable rain” – the word playing on two levels: the first indicating that this is a sadness/rain she can do nothing about, she is powerless against it; the second plays on the idea of “broken rain”, spells of rain broken by relief. In this case, the rain is unending, unbroken and cannot be fixed.

• The streets she describes are “bleak” and her “heart gnaw(s)/ at all our mistakes“. The personification gives a sense of her heart unable to leave the relationship, instead returning again and again to revisit the mistakes that have led to this point. Duffy continues, overcome with regret (again, not unlike her childhood poems) wishing for a different chain of events (where the stolen time/darkness/ sadness did not occur) and she could make different decision :“there are words I would never have said/ nor have heard you say”. At this point, the poem becomes broader (indicated by “But” at the start of the line) in its thematic approach, switching from the intimate and personal to the philosophical, albeit with little let up in the fatalistic tone. She tries to come to terms with life’s inevitable process of loss. “we will be dead, as we know,/ beyond all light.” The parenthetical information shows that we all understand that life is brief and nothing can remain within our grasp forever. This leads back to her metaphor of light and dark, and that death takes us all beyond light. (This seems ironic considering the Catholic content of her other poems, suggesting the poet no longer believes in an afterlife, of light after death.)

• As soon as this is understood, Duffy marks every living day as “shortened” and every night as “endless”. This has echoes of Nabokov’s idea that, “common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness".
Philip Larkin

- Philip Larkin was born in 1922 August 9 in the place Coventry.
- Philip Larkin is a major British poet and typical representative of a new movement in English poetry.
- His early poems show the influence of W.B. Yeats.
- Larkin and other poets of the new movement repeat the intellectual poetry of Ezra Pound and W.H. Auden.
- Larkin’s poetry is distinguished for its final sense of form, clarity of expression, intelligent craftsmanship, and thoughtful realism.
- His notable works include “The Whitsun Weddings (1964), High Windows (1974)” etc.
That Whitsun, I was late getting away:

Not till about

One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday

Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,

All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense

Of being in a hurry gone. We ran

Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street

Of blinding windscreens, smelt the fish-dock; thence

The river’s level drifting breadth began,

Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet.
All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept

   For miles inland,

A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.

Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and

Canals with floatings of industrial froth;

A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped

And rose: and now and then a smell of grass

Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth

Until the next town, new and nondescript,

Approached with acres of dismantled cars.
At first, I didn’t notice what a noise

    The weddings made

Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys

The interest of what’s happening in the shade,

And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls

I took for porters larking with the mails,

And went on reading. Once we started, though,

We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls

In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,

All posed irresolutely, watching us go,
As if out on the end of an event
  Waving goodbye
To something that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms:
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that
Marked off the girls unreally from the rest.

Yes, from cafés

And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed

Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days

Were coming to an end. All down the line

Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;

The last confetti and advice were thrown,

And, as we moved, each face seemed to define

Just what it saw departing: children frowned

At something dull; fathers had never known
Success so huge and wholly farcical;

The women shared

The secret like a happy funeral;

While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared

At a religious wounding. Free at last,

And loaded with the sum of all they saw,

We hurried towards London, shuffling gouts of steam.

Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast

Long shadows over major roads, and for

Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem
Just long enough to settle hats and say

\[ \text{I nearly died,} \]

A dozen marriages got under way.

They watched the landscape, sitting side by side

—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,

And someone running up to bowl—and none

Thought of the others they would never meet

Or how their lives would all contain this hour.

I thought of London spread out in the sun,

Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:
There we were aimed. And as we raced across

   Bright knots of rail

Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss

Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail

Travelling coincidence; and what it held

Stood ready to be loosed with all the power

That being changed can give. We slowed again,

And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled

A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower

Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain.
‘The Whitsun Weddings’ is technically perfect.

The poem takes us through the English countryside to the urban landscapes.

The very movement is that of a leisurely journey, the lines frequently pausing as if at so many stations.

Just as a train halts and proceeds the verse also shows enjoyment, the continuation of sense without a pause beyond the end of the line.

The rhyme scheme is *ab ab cde cde*.

The rhyming scheme helps to link beginnings to end and end to beginnings, suggesting the jaults and movement of a slow train.

After the first two stanzas the poem proceeds through interconnected stanzas, just like the compartments of a train.

The descriptions are highly realistic, there is a logical development of ideas and a regular stanza structure.
About the poem

- Larkin describes a stopping-train journey southwards from Paragon Station, Kingston upon Hull, where Larkin was a librarian at the university, on a hot Whitsun Saturday afternoon.

- It has always been supposed the poem was based on an actual train journey Larkin made in 1955 on Whitsun Saturday, a day which was popular for weddings at that time though since there was a rail strike on that weekend Larkin scholar John Osborne now thinks the journey an unlikely one to have taken place.

- Larkin's letters mention two journeys, one to Grantham (not at Whit, some weddings), and one to London (not at Whit, no weddings), that may have been conflated in the poem.
Theme and Language of the Poem

Thematically also the poem is important. The three most important aspects of human life are birth, population and death according to T.S. Eliot. The poet invests the railway journey with importance by peopling it with marriage parties. A marriage can be successful or a total failure. Whatever the outcome the participants are changed forever. While the couples are totally absorbed in the landscape, Larkin sits looking at them thinking about the future of their married life. Then the train stops and a sense of decline and doom comes to the poet. There is the inevitable sense of falling as arrows fall. The rain means dampness and cold. The images of arrows and rain also suggest the vigor of the couples. Rain is the symbol of fertility also. That life is a progression, toward decay and destruction is recurring theme in Larkin’s poem. Here, it is mixed with happiness and the sense of doom, the sense of alienation is also brought out well in the poem. The poems greatness lies in the way in which seeing and understanding the actions of the different couples harmonizes their various experiences into a unified impression.
The description in the poem is graphic as is always the case with the imagery in Larkin’s poems. The poet saw the backs of the houses on the way, the rivers broad and level, wide farms, the cattle casting shadows on the ground canals with ‘industrial froth’ and ‘acres of dismantled cars’. The poem also contains a graphic description of the people on the railway platforms and the people getting into the train. The girls are described as ‘pomaded’, the fathers with ‘seamy foreheads’, the mothers ‘loud and fat’ and an uncle ‘shouting's smut’. The references to the newly married couples are also interesting. The poem is full of chronological and satirical phrases. Marriage described not only as a joyful occasion but also as a ‘happy funeral’ and a ‘religious wounding’.

When the train finally stops, there is a sense of decline and doom to the poet. Like the train which stops at the terminus, with passengers lacking bonds of love, going their separate ways, there is the note of inevitable dissolution. The poem ends on a note of happiness and the sense of doom on the part of the poet. The speeding arrow symbolizes the train. It falls somewhere, there is rain germination, energy of life. When the train comes to a halt, life also grinds to a halt. There is the inevitable sense of falling and dissolution both in the train’s journey and in life. Thus the sense of alienation in the modern world. It is also brought out well in the poem.
Read Whitsun Weddings

• Subject & themes
• Analyse S,F,L
Writing on poems

• Explore the title and what it sets up
• Content [occasion, title, theme]
• Structure
• Imagery
• Lexis
• Connections with topic/question.
Plurality: ways of showing readings

• **One interpretation..but another could be ....**
• A feminist critic might... Considering the poems from another perspective may...
• This image is ambiguous; it could mean or it may...
• Use the tentative voice of a literary critic: perhaps, maybe, this could, arguably...
Prayer

- Duffy warms to the broader idea but it is tinged with optimism. While people may not be religious (or believe in an after life), she contends that we can find “prayers” in everyday situation. Prayer here is used in a loose interpretation, a sound that evokes hope and solace in the person praying. However, Duffy sees “prayers” in sounds rather than words. “Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer/ utters itself.” The world around us is offering its own reassurances, unbidden. A woman in the park, holding her head in “the sieve of her hands” (a succinct image conveying the idea that her hands cannot contain what is falling through them – her tears; she is grieving) can find respite in “the minimssung by a tree”. Here, the personification of the tree carries connotations of a choir, or a religious reassurance, although this is metaphorical, the “song” being either birdsong, or the sound of the leaves. The natural world offers up its own solace to the woman. The sixth stanza again addresses the idea of solace to those who are not religious: “although we are faithless/ the truth enters our hearts”. This ties directly to the opening lines of the previous stanza, as Duffy continues to argue that the non-religious can find ceremony and faith outwith a traditional concept of “God”. In this instance, like Proust’s Madeleine, a man hears “the Latin chanting of a train” (piling on the religious imagery through the personification and onomatopoetic similarities between the rhythm of the train and those of a Latin mass) and then is drawn sharply back to “hear(ing) his youth”. Duffy employs similar devices in her childhood poems to contrast the pleasure of youthful optimism and the “small familiar pain” brought by the adult sense of a finite existence. The power of memory is extended into the penultimate stanza where “the lodger looks out across/ a Midlands town”. The idea of a lodger in this instance is effective as it has connotations of isolation and loneliness; a person with no home of their own. While the lodger can find consolation in “Grade I piano scales”, their ageing condemns them to pangs of sadness as in the “dusk” (again, the withdrawal of light), “someone calls/ a child’s name as though they named their loss”. The recollection of a child being called by a parent reminds the lodger that their childhood is passed, and the child’s naming (as both “Madeleine” and metaphor) makes explicit the lost optimism of youth. The final stanza, half as long as the others, finds a bittersweet tone. Where there is “ Darkness outside”, loss and grief in waiting, “Inside”, where there is light, a listener finds their “prayer” in the hushed, regular tones of the radio shipping forecast. The final line follows the traditional reeling off of the shipping regions, but Duffy carefully finishes with “Finisterre” – land’s end, which carries connotations of finality and with it, finity.
The poets who influenced Philip Larkin

Thomas Hardy

William Butler Yeats