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Examiner's Report Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2017

Pearson Edexcel IAL
In English Literature (WET04)
Unit 4: Shakespeare and Pre-1900 Poetry

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Literature (WET04) Unit 4: Shakespeare and Pre-1900 Poetry

Introduction

This was the first sitting of this unit and there were several excellent responses, especially on *Hamlet* in Section A and the Romantic Poets in Section B.

Context was, on the whole, handled well: this is important as there is significant weighting for AO3 ("demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received").

The paper is divided into two equally weighted sections. Section A offers students a choice of a Shakespeare play (*Measure for Measure*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*.) In Section B students choose from one of three anthologies (*Metaphysical Poetry*, *English Romantic Verse* and *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*).

Although the same assessment objectives apply for each section (AO1, 2, 3 and 5) the format of questions in the two sections is different: Section A offers a comment in inverted commas, which the student needs to take into account when answering the question. The assessment objective AO5 is about the exploration of literary texts "informed by different interpretations" and the given comment can act as a trigger for this response - for example, one of the *Hamlet* questions put forward the idea that the play "shows the inevitable futility and failure of revenge". A possible line of argument lies in challenging the "inevitability" of the failure, arguing instead that the fault lies with the protagonist himself. In Section B a particular poem is given, leaving students free to explore the question further with a poem of their own choosing. This poem may deal with a similar theme, but questions need not be restricted to themes alone - there are many ways in which poems can be explored (the question might ask about structure, for example). It should be noted that AO4, the assessment objective that looks for "connections across literary texts" is not explicitly addressed in the marking of this answer; therefore

the essay does not have to be a “comparison essay” from the start (unlike the poetry comparison question in Unit 1 for example, where students are advised to begin their work by linking the poems that they have chosen from the very beginning of their essays and to keep making points about similarities and differences throughout.)

Section A : Shakespeare

Questions 1 & 2 : *Measure for Measure*

This fascinating play yielded some strong responses, especially on the claim that Shakespeare exposes a society “where women are treated brutally.”

“What would a pregnant and unmarried woman do with her life?” asks one student:

She would be looked down on by society, a society in which promiscuity is punished by law. This means that men can be in control of their lives and leave their fiancée if they wish, as Angelo does. This creates a community of inequality which Shakespeare represents in sixteenth century Vienna. Even the Duke, who saves Isabella from sexual abuse, feels entitled to own her sexually by the end of the play. The duke instrumentalises Isabella in order to reward himself for the good deed he has done.

In marking these responses one was reminded how clearly the play and its complex issues speak to us today.

The alternative question, on Angelo’s use of authority and abuse of power, also led to some engaged and textually supported discussion.

Questions 3 & 4: *The Taming of the Shrew*

The statement that the plays shows "transformation is always a possibility" led, predictably, to discussion about Katherina's shrewishness. For example:

Katherina's transformation from a "shrew" to an obedient wife can be portrayed as either an act of love or a forced behaviour because of Petruchio's abusive nature. Hortensio states "Her name is Katherina Minola, / Renowned in Padua for her scolding tongue." The negative connotations of "scolding tongue" highlight that Katherina has been labelled as a "shrew" by society and completely frowned upon for her actions. Her shrewish behavior is seen when she states, "If I be waspish, best beware my sting." The plosive alliteration of "best beware" highlights that she is a strong and rebellious woman who will not conform to man's demands. This is contrasted with Katherina's final speech when she states, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy keeper / Thy head, thy sovereign."

Many answers saw the final speech as ironic.

There were fewer responses to the alternative question which was on the idea of conformity in the play; there were however some interesting explorations of Bianca's character, and the extent to which she conforms to some sort of feminine ideal, particularly taking her behaviour at the end of the play into account.

Questions 5 & 6: *Hamlet*

Both questions used the word "Hamlet" in the opening comment. Question 5 had the word in italics meaning, of course, the play: "*Hamlet* shows the inevitable futility and failure of revenge". The alternative question was about Hamlet the man – "Hamlet is a character struggling to find an identity in a corrupt and deeply flawed world". Both attracted some good answers; however, the first question is the more abstract - positing the notion that the play itself has the ability to "show" something, whereas the second is straightforwardly about a character. The second is not, however, an easier option. Some answers tended to treat Hamlet as a fascinating person, but made their response too much of a character study. What follows illustrates this tendency:

He is most interesting if you take into account his conflicting personalities - and perhaps this is where his struggle to find his

own true identity can be seen in a broad light. Hamlet constantly turns over words in his mind, thinking things through to the point of obsession, exploring every nuance and aspect of what a thing could be and yet he is rash and reckless with his action.

All this is undoubtedly true and accurately observed, but, continued over several pages, it is too involved with trying to sort out the person rather than address what Shakespeare himself is doing in presenting the polarities of the struggling individual against the corruptions of the world. The injunction itself (as with all the questions on the paper) directs students to explore “*Shakespeare’s* presentation of Hamlet’s struggle”. The point here is about the dangers of looking at characters as real people rather than as constructs.

There were some superb answers to both questions with students clearly having been thoroughly prepared. As a result they were fully engaged with the play.

Questions 7 & 8: *King Lear*

Question 7 gave students the comment that the ending of *King Lear* “confirms the play’s bleak and terrifying vision of injustice.”

The best answers were the ones picking up on the words “bleak and terrifying” rather than responding only to the injunction’s “explore Shakespeare’s presentation of injustice.”

What is terrifying about *King Lear* is that the good are also killed - Lear and the portrayals of grace, purity, loyalty and truthfulness. Cordelia is dead by the end of the play as represented through Gloucester’s amorphism “As flies to wanton boys, are we to th’ gods, They kill us for their sport.”

The alternative question asked students to write about Shakespeare’s presentation of weakness and flawed judgement in the play. This was well answered on the whole, although there was a tendency in less successful answers to work their way through the play, listing characters and explaining where their judgments were at fault:

Lear is the play’s protagonist and aging king of Britain. Lear is used to enjoying and exercising absolute power and to being

flattered. He does not respond harmoniously to being contradicted or challenged. Gloucester is an earl and the first we thing we learn about him is that he is an adulterer.

Clearly this character by character approach, if continued through the whole essay, is unlikely to be successful.

Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry

Questions 9 & 10: Metaphysical Poetry

The relationship between an individual and God (Question 9) was addressed by looking at the given poem, Donne's *Batter my Heart* and a poem of the student's own choice. Herbert's *Love III* was the most popular choice. Other sonnets by Donne or other poems by Herbert were also successfully used. Less confident answers did not always grasp the ideas in Donne's conceits - the trope of the besieged town, or his need of a divorce from Satan, or come to terms with the eroticism that runs through the given sonnet, nor did some answers fully realise the significance of the Holy Communion references in *Love III* where the poet feels unworthy to approach the offered food at the Lord's table.

Question 12, using Katherine Phillip's poem *To Lucasia* as a starting point, asked about the presentation of lasting affection. Donne's *The Good Morrow* made an interesting companion piece:

Both express the feeling of passivity, nonexistence, before they met their counterparts. In *The Good Morrow* the speaker in a moment of pensiveness and utmost adulation wonders about the passivity of his former life... unaware of the surroundings as if he were asleep and snorting in the seven sleepers' den. The sibilance here creates a melodious effect of a lullaby sustaining the mood of passivity. He feels if he ever did dream of something beautiful it must have been a dream of his beloved.

Questions 11 & 12: English Romantic Verse

There were some excellent answers in this section. The two starting point poems offered were Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*. Students were asked to consider Keats' poem, plus one other, as "an examination of the poets' inner self and their place in the world." Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*, Byron's *Thirty Sixth Year*, as well as other odes by Keats, were all popular choices.

The alternative question, starting with Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, asked students to explore the ways in which poets have presented hope for a better world.

Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* is politically revolutionary in nature, as it was written at a time of ubiquitous protest against the monarchy which resulted in many deaths. Death in itself is thus a prevalent theme in the poem and by its emphasis reinforces the urgent hope for a better world. This idea can be seen in lines such as "each like a corpse within its grave" and heavy dark imagery expressed in "dark wintery bed" and "pestilence-stricken multitudes."

This essay linked Shelley's poem with Bronte's *To a Wreath of Snow*. Other, more frequent links were with Blake, and Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*.

Questions 13 & 14: *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*

"The dead man touch'd me from the past" was an often quoted line from the given *In Memoriam* extract when writing about the ways in which memory is presented. Companion poems most frequently used were Rossetti's *Remember*, Browning's *My Last Duchess* and other poems by Tennyson. The best answers were often the ones which explored the tone of the poems most successfully; they understood the complexity of the mix of feelings in the Tennyson and Rossetti poems for example, and did not just label them as "morbid" or "depressing", or they explored the developing intensity of the speaker's feelings in *My Last Duchess* where the memory of small detail has become part of an obsession. The alternative question was about the significance of place, with Browning's *Home-Thoughts, from Abroad* given as a starting point. Less successful answers tended to approach the subject on a surface level, simply describing the places depicted in the poems; again, sensitivity to tone was a good differentiator and there were some close readings of Browning's *Love in a Life* which, while seeing the poem as a celebration of

love, also noted the urgency of the speaker's quest to be with the person he loves:

In neither poem does Browning seem to be totally happy with the places he finds himself in. The first stanza of *Home-Thoughts* is a single sentence starting off with the exclamatory "Oh" and ending with the exclamatory "now!" After the short bursts of nostalgic memories with their abrupt line endings the second stanza moves into a more flowing rhythm with the polysyndeton of the repeated "and" linking a series of reflective subordinate clauses – "And after April, when May follows, / And the whitethroat builds, and all the swallows!" The absence of a main verb (therefore, technically, this is not a "proper sentence") emphasises a stream of consciousness feel as the poet pours out all his nostalgic feelings for a place that he misses. *Love in a Life* appears on the surface to be purely celebrating the togetherness of married life - it reads like a fun game of hide and seek, using a place, the house, as an extended metaphor for their mutual adventures - until we reach the end when suddenly the mood changes - "But 'tis twilight, you see" and the heavy repetition of "such" shows the endlessness of the quest, whilst the twilight reminds us that the day (perhaps representing life itself) will not last forever - "with such suites to explore, / Such closets to search, such alcoves to importune!"

Paper Summary

Future students are offered the following advice:

- Address the assessment objectives which are the same across both sections of the paper.
- Remember that context is not simply writing about history but can relate to a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, intellectual, etc – that influence both the writer and the reader, including of course yourself as a reader, looking at something that may have been written in very different times from the present.
- In Section A look carefully at the starting point assertion (the comment in inverted commas) and the injunction which follows it (the actual task you are being set) and make sure your answer

does not simply latch on to part of the question only. Often, the assertion will help you with AO5 (“exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations”).

- In Section B make sure you extend the argument by choosing an appropriate additional poem, not just the one you happen to know best from the anthology.
- Enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner.