



Examiners' Report Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2019

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

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WET04_01_1901_ER

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Introduction

Understandably there was a very small entry for this paper – invariably numbers increase considerably in the June sitting. There were some responses which struggled to engage satisfactorily with the paper: Keats was described as a drunkard and incapable of coherent thoughts when he heard the nightingale and Wordsworth's *Intimations of Mortality* mysteriously became *Imitations of Morality*. However there were some superb answers written by well prepared candidates and extracts from some of this work on *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Metaphysical Poetry* are given later in this report. These responses show clear recognition of the assessment objectives involved in this paper: AO1 (the ability to write a good essay), AO2 (close scrutiny of the text), AO3 (awareness of context) and AO5 (recognising the possibility of different interpretations). It should be noted that AO4 (explore connections) is not assessed on this paper, so that in Section B, where one poem is set and the candidate is free to select a second one, the priority does not have to lie in choosing two poems which will compare and contrast particularly well. Occasionally answers were forced into a treatment of the poems which artificially engineered this comparison whereas it would be better to consider the second poem as extending the argument. Having made this point, one should add that answers are not penalised for making connections – indeed it is natural to do this and if it helps the argument credit can always be given under AO1. However, a comparison essay is not being looked for.

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 prescribed anthologies (*Metaphysical Poetry* edited by Colin Burrow, *English Romantic Verse* edited by David Wright and *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* edited by Christopher Ricks).

Section A : Shakespeare

Questions 1 & 2 : *Measure for Measure*

There were no answers on this text.

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

The answers were on question 3 which asserted that 'what this play says about women is frankly unacceptable.' This opened up possibilities for writing about context, recognising that, if one takes Katherina's final speech at face value, this poses serious problems for a modern audience. Since AO5 is a major assessment objective in the marking of this answer, recognition of different readings of the play gained credit.

Questions 5 & 6: *Hamlet*

Question 5 asked about the damage a father figure can cause. Answers wrote about Claudius, Polonius and the Ghost. There was an argument that Old Hamlet sets his son an impossible task in killing his uncle while not upsetting his mother. Interestingly, there were different views of

Polonius – one answer saw him as kind and caring, though most recognised that his treatment of his son was very different from that of his daughter.

Question 6 took a version of Laurence Olivier's rather simplified description of Hamlet from his 1948 film as a starting point statement – Hamlet's problem is that 'he just can't make up his mind'. Candidates were asked about the extent to which Shakespeare presents indecisiveness as a key to understanding the character of Hamlet. The following extract provides an example of a candidate who disagrees with the proposition:

Critics have accredited Hamlet's lack of action to indecisiveness. But when we look at his soliloquies when Shakespeare deliberately steers us into the inner mind of the philosophical nature of Hamlet, we find that indecisiveness becomes an act of deliberation. Hamlet intends to enact the right kind of justice in a world that is demanding and cruel.

When we first meet Hamlet and he tells his mother 'I know not "seems"' this comes as Shakespeare's preliminary warning that Hamlet is a character of immense contradictions and that what is outwardly a point of indecisiveness is the work of an inner philosopher and profound thinker.

Questions 7 & 8: *King Lear*

Most candidates chose question 8 which asked about rejection as a main theme in the play. There were plenty of examples to choose from and the best answers supported their arguments with judicious use of the text. The plight of Kent who, even at the end, is not acknowledged was seen as especially poignant. Consideration of Edmund's rejection, on account of his illegitimacy, led to useful contextual points.

Question 7 began with a statement which said that the changes in Edgar throughout the play make him difficult to understand. The best answers dealt with the apparent contradictions in Edgar's character rather than simply supplying a character study of Edgar. Here is an extract from a successful answer which sees Edgar's role in the play as a whole:

Given that Edgar is the clearest example of a non-static character whose behaviour oscillates as the plot moves forward, we begin to see his inner self when he forgives Gloucester and takes care of him, preventing his suicide. At this stage his assertiveness is pre-shadowed, preparing the audience for his heroic intervention in Act 5. We can also establish parallels between him and Cordelia, both being innocent victims of the child-parent conflict and both forgiving their parents.

Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry

Questions 9 & 10: Metaphysical Poetry

Question 9 gave candidates Donne's *The Flea* as a starting point, asking them to explore the ways in which a witty argument is presented. The best answers had a secure understanding of what metaphysical wit might involve, beyond being simply amusing. Here is an answer which clearly has that understanding. The second poem here is Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*.

This poem playfully follows the conventions of medieval romance poetry, given that the speaker employs courtly language in trying to woo his lady, plays the subservient role of the poet and idealises the woman to whom the poem is addressed. Through the use of witty hyperbole he emphasises that he would love her 'ten years before the flood' and references 'the Indian Ganges' and 'rubies', which symbolise exotic qualities and high value, and as a consequence convey how much she means to him. The reference to the Indian Ganges also shows the Renaissance's growing interest in world discoveries. Nevertheless, the poem's conceit is that of Time being a 'winged chariot' hurrying and overtaking the lovers, reinforcing the main message which is, wittily, that the lady's reluctance to engage in sex, far from being a virtue, is a 'crime'. It is worth mentioning that it is shocking for a Christian poet to represent the afterlife as a 'desert' instead of an utopia. This is done partly as an example of metaphysical wit being outrageous and also to emphasise the contrast between the past, present and future, signified in the three stanzas. His mistress' attention should logically be focused on the present, as she should seize the day, given that, though 'they cannot make the sun stand still, they will make him run.'

Question 10 asked candidates to write about how a change of mind is presented in Herbert's *Love III* and one other poem. Possibly because this question directed candidates to investigate the argument of the poems particularly closely, there were some excellent answers which scored very well within the criteria of AO2.

Questions 11 & 12: *English Romantic Verse*

Question 11 asked about the way the mysterious is presented in Shelley's *The Question* and one other poem. There was consideration of the ways in which poetry of the romantic era explores the natural world in a way that goes beyond ordinary mortal comprehension: Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* was used as another example as was Blake's *The Tyger*, with one answer saying that Blake is indeed describing the beauty and power of the tiger, and recognisably so, but the poem moves beyond this to consider the mysteries of creation. As a result the tiger itself becomes mysterious.

Question 12 asked about the ways in which change is presented, but this was a less popular question, possibly because candidates were deterred by the sheer length of the given poem – Wordsworth's *Intimations of Immortality*. There is of course considerable variation in the length of poems in this anthology but candidates do not of course have to explore the whole of a long poem in their answers. The skills of selecting and making points relevant to the questions are paramount throughout the paper.

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

There were not enough responses to this text to justify commentary here.

Paper Summary (repeated from previous reports)

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.