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Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

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

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Introduction

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). In Section A, candidates are invited to explore a statement about the play and consider contextual factors in their response. For the poetry questions, candidates are presented with one poem from their collection and are asked to choose an additional poem with which to explore the question and consider relevant contextual factors.

It was clear that candidates at all levels had engaged with their chosen texts and that centres continue to prepare candidates for the exam in a way that enables them to respond analytically and with genuine insight. There is potential to develop responses further, through closer exploration of the specific demands of the question, as well as through a clearer focus on context and different interpretations of the texts.

Section A: Shakespeare

At all levels, candidates appeared able to make confident comments about meaning in the plays, discussing elements of Shakespeare's craft and, at the higher levels, illustrating their points with relevant examples and terminology. At the higher levels, responses were expressed more fluently and some candidates demonstrated an impressive level of sophistication and flair in their expression and analysis. However, achievement at AO3 and AO5 was significantly less consistent and centres could focus on context and interpretations of texts as a priority for future exams. The achievement of some candidates was limited by a complete lack of any discussion of AO3 or AO5, despite their ability to demonstrate understanding of concepts and the shaping of meaning.

At the lower levels, discussion of literary techniques covered a narrow range and tended to focus on individual words or on imagery. At all levels, candidates could include more discussion of dramatic techniques and make more careful consideration of the texts as plays to be performed, rather than as texts to be read. If candidates gained more knowledge of the performance of the plays, in Elizabethan or Jacobean theatres and onwards to modern productions, this should also provide them with a broader range of contextual points to explore for AO3. Interpretations made by productions and the critical responses of reviewers and audiences could then aid AO5 discussion.

As in previous series, a discriminator of success for questions in this section was the extent to which candidates made use of the comment to construct their argument. At the higher levels, candidates used the specific ideas or assertions in the initial statement, rather than limiting their exploration to the broader instruction in the rest of the question. The quoted comment is intended to stimulate an argument and help the candidates to find an interesting hook for their own ideas.

Hamlet and King Lear were the most popular choices of texts for this section of the paper, with no candidates attempting the questions on Measure for Measure and only one response on Question 3 for The Taming of the Shrew.

For Hamlet, candidates responded to both questions and with varying levels of success in both cases. For the questions on Shakespeare's presentation of family drama in the play, few candidates responded with more than a general discussion of Hamlet's relationship with Gertrude or a simple outline of Polonius's controlling behaviour towards his children. Centres could continue to work with candidates on exploring the relationships between characters for this type of question, considering how Shakespeare uses these relationships to examine key themes and ideas in the play. The other Hamlet question asked candidates to consider the significance of Laertes and to explore the ways in which Shakespeare uses the character in the play. This question elicited a few more insightful responses where candidates evaluated the statement and question in detail, exploring Laertes as a foil to the character of Hamlet and making relevant points about the contrasts in their attitudes towards revenge, love and honour.

King Lear was an equally popular text, and the majority of candidates responded to the question on Shakespeare's presentation of greed in the play. At the higher levels, candidates were able to develop a strong argument in response to the suggestion in the statement that greed leads to ruin, with some interesting discussion about the causation relationship between ruin and greed. There were some insightful comments on modern and contemporary attitudes to ambition, materialism and the thirst for power and how these ideas are conveyed in productions of the play. Lower level responses on this question tended to rely on a descriptive approach, outlining examples of Edmund, Goneril or Regan's greed and ambition with limited analysis or links to context.

Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry

As in the previous section, many candidates had engaged with their texts and seemed confident in their exploration of meaning and the poet's craft. Again, achievement at AO3 and AO5 was less successful and an area for development at all levels. There was an over-reliance on lengthy biographical details for the poets, not always successfully linked to content or method, rather than literary context or the influence of social change, for example.

At the lower levels, candidates seemed to have knowledge of only a limited number of poetic techniques and few analytical methods to apply to the texts, although they demonstrated understanding of meaning and effect. The range and relevance of technical methods and terminology explored were often a discriminator between the lower and higher levels. Candidates need a toolkit of a range of literary terminology and poetic techniques to discuss and this is an area where centres should continue to develop their candidates' knowledge.

Again, a discriminator of success for this section was the extent to which candidates made use of the precise question to choose their second poem and then construct their

response. At the higher levels, candidates chose an additional poem with clear links to the theme or idea described in the question and then used both poems to illustrate their exploration. The choice of the second poem is important and can be a significant factor in the success of the response. Candidates with a confident understanding of many of the poems in the list were able to choose a poem relevant to the question. However, in some responses the question was ignored entirely, perhaps because candidates chose a poem that had little connection to the theme just because their knowledge of it was more secure.

In some cases, responses tended to become a straightforward comparison of the two poems, rather than a targeted exploration of the question. This task does not require the candidates to compare; indeed, comparison tends to make the task more difficult than necessary.

The collection of Romantic poetry was the most popular text for this section, and responses for both questions demonstrated secure knowledge of the poems. The largest number of candidates opted to respond to the question on the presentation of a sense of fear with William Blake's "The Tyger" as a starting point. Candidates found a number of relevant ways to approach this question, encompassing a range of techniques such as tone, metre, religious imagery and, in the best examples, insightful AO5. Many seemed secure in structuring an argument around the topic and were able to integrate relevant social and historical context into their comments on method and meaning, more successfully than for any other question. Perhaps this was because context is such an integral factor in understanding Blake's writing. Most candidates chose a second Blake poem with which to further their discussion, with "London" and "Holy Thursday" proving productive choices and enabling insightful exploration of the question. Although not as popular a question, there were some impressive responses on the presentation of the passage of time in Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey" particularly when paired with Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn".

The Metaphysical poets were the other popular choice; for this collection Andrew Marvell's "The Nymph Complaining for the Death of her Fawn" and the topic of unfairness prompted the majority of responses. Candidates tended to adopt a narrative approach to this question, providing a literal description of the events of the poem with limited analysis or links to context and interpretations. For their second poem, these candidates also appeared to struggle when choosing a suitable companion poem, seemingly due to a lack of familiarity with the poems in their collection. The exploration of contrasts within Katherine Philips's "Orinda to Lucasia" alongside John Donne's "A Nocturnal Upon St Lucy's Day" as a second poem proved to be a much more successful choice for the limited number of students who attempted that question.

Paper Summary

Future students are offered the following advice:

- address all the assessment objectives, which are the same across both sections of the paper; AO3 (the significance and influence of context; links between text and context)

and AO5 (different interpretations and alternative readings) are just as important as techniques, concepts and shaping of meaning (AO1 and AO2)

- context can relate to a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, historical, intellectual, literary, biographical – that influence both the writer and the audience (context of production and context of reception)
- 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 the second part of the question only. Often, the assertion will help you with AO5 (“exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations”)
- remember that the text in Section A is a play and was written to be performed; you can consider how the play may be interpreted and performed in different productions, as well as how audiences and critics respond
- 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
- remember that the texts in Section B are poems and to explore the form and poetic techniques used by the writers
- develop a flexible “toolkit” of technical knowledge that can be applied to drama and poetry, along with a range of literary terminology
- enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner

Thank you,

Principal Examiner
(IAL English Literature WET04_01)
January 2020

Grade Boundaries

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