



Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2023

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced
Level in English Literature (WET03)

Paper 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 chosen collection and asked to choose an additional poem with which to explore the question and consider relevant contextual factors.

The number of candidates in January 2023 was very small. However, those who entered were mainly capable of engaging with their chosen texts at least on some level and centres continue to prepare students for the exam in a way that enables many them to access the middle and higher attainment strands. Relatively few candidates seemed to have significant difficulties with exam technique, although it does seem that there may be a tendency to over-write in Section A, thereby squeezing the time available for Section B.

The role of textual reference deserves mentioning. The Assessment Objective grid states that a Band 3 answer (for example) will offer 'a clear response using relevant textual examples'. Whilst many candidates embed their references in a sophisticated, even elegant way, a reasonable portion do not quote at all. As this is an open book exam, there should be fewer problems in managing this important aspect of the assessment.

As stated previously, critical interpretation has to figure in any response for it to be effective because two of the bullet points in the Assessment Objective grid address it:

- Offers clear understanding of different interpretations and alternative readings of texts.
- Explores different interpretations in support or contrast to own argument.
(Band 3: 11-15 marks out of 25)

Especially in answers on the Poetry texts, this key element is overlooked.

Further, two other bullet points in the Mark Scheme focus on context:

- Demonstrates a clear exploration of the significance and influence of contextual factors.
- Develops relevant links between texts and contexts.
(Band 3: 11-15 marks out of 25)

This is more consistently addressed across the exam, though not always as strongly in Section B.

Candidates are once again advised to make sure that they spell Shakespeare at least as it appears on the cover of the text which they have with them. This would also apply for names of characters in the plays and the poets about whom they write in Section B.

Section A: Shakespeare

Hamlet was by far the most popular choice of text, though there were some answers on *King Lear*. Significantly fewer candidates attempted the questions on *Measure for Measure* or *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Q1

This question on appearances in *Measure for Measure* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q2

This question on imagery and symbolism in *Measure for Measure* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q3

This question on morality in *The Taming of the Shrew* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q4

This response to the task on contrast in *The Taming of the Shrew* begins well. The answer sustained its quality throughout and scored highly.

Throughout the entirety of 'The Taming of the Shrew' we see Shakespeare weave in contrasts, not just between characters, but between ideologies, of what is expected versus the reality - and this essentially is what makes this comedy so delightfully amusing.

To begin with, the more obvious contrast used within the play is that between Katharina and Bianca. Katharina is presented as a headstrong, arrogant woman with a lack of affinity toward conforming to traditional female roles. Her 'shrewishness' is evident in her harsh language, which connotes violence as she threatens the men before her, '... her case should be / comb your noddle / paint your

face... use you like a fool'. Her exclamatory, sarcastic speech as she shouts 'A pretty peat!' and 'What!' further paints her as an impatient, 'wild' woman throwing tantrums. Shakespeare, however, cleverly juxtaposes this 'froward' attitude of Katharina next to Bianca's sweeter nature. Her gentleness provides a stark contrast to the roughness of Katharina just witnessed by the audience, evident in her soft speech as she demurely says, 'to your pleasure I humbly subscribe' and the commentary of onlookers such as Lucentio who commends her 'mild behaviour and sobriety'.

Q5

This question on the minor characters in *Hamlet* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q6

Here, writing about the presentation of self-interest in *Hamlet*, the candidate seems to be wheeling away from the core of the question, but the first and final sentences keep things on track and serve as a useful reminder that effective responses keep their eye on the terms of the task.

Firstly, self interest ~~is~~ ~~heavily~~ becomes the primary obstacle to Hamlet's revenge. As a revenge tragedy, Hamlet did not follow its conventions. According to Critic Laura Mulvey, Revenge plays were typically forms of sadistic media, where audiences derive pleasure from seeing the avenger, in this case our titular character Hamlet, succeed in getting back at those who wronged him, namely Claudius. Yet Shakespeare sends Hamlet into a tumultuous internal dilemma between his ^{emotional} self interest of making Claudius suffer, and his duty as the prince of Denmark to punish treason. As Denmark's prince, Hamlet has the duty to enact retributive justice; while as the son of old Hamlet, he has the emotional ~~duty~~ burden of vengeance for a father's murder. This can be framed under Critic Wynn's theory for the distinction between retribution and revenge. Retribution, especially in the perspective of legality, is impersonal, disinterested, and proportionate. While revenge on

This is an interesting opening to an answer to the same task.

Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' is, written in 1601, is an archetypal revenge tragedy where the multifaceted nature of self-interest is explored. The audience are entertained because they are asked to "see, feel, and understand a little more about the hidden springs of action," according to Shakespearean scholar Peter Alexander. As such, the contemporary Elizabethan audience ~~emphas~~ empathise with the "hidden springs of action" within the play's ~~atmosphere~~ ^{plot} driven by characters' ~~narcissic~~ narcissism. ~~owing~~ ^{This owes} to the ~~contextual~~ uncertainty surrounding Queen Elizabeth I's successor and coups ~~made~~ crafted by her own cabinet. Hence, Shakespeare's ~~presents~~ ^{presentation of} self-interest hinges on ~~three~~ ^{two} key areas: the political sphere, ~~patriarchal society~~, ^{the} as well as the ~~emotional~~ ^{internalisation of duty} ~~harmit~~; and so, so, is indicative of the play's dichotomy between self-interest and putting others before themselves.

Q7

This question on masculinity in *King Lear* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q8

This answer, responding to the question on tragic form in *King Lear* does not provide a perfect argument perhaps, but it does at least focus on the language and tries to relate that to the question through the prism of the character.

Furthermore due to her virtue her death causes a shockwave in the play and to the audience. The final scene King Lear repeats the word "howl" as he comes to terms ~~the~~ with Cordelia's passing. "Howl" ^{has connotations} ~~fits~~ to the animalistic grieving process of wolves which suggests to the audience that ~~king's~~ King Lear's grief has brought him back to the brutality of human nature. ~~He references~~ He exclaims that ~~his~~ the other characters are "...men of stone..." the metaphor illustrates how cold and unforgiving the world is and that the harshness of life can be directed to good and bad people. The playwright illustrates the tragic form of a character filled with virtue.

Quite often in Section B answers, there is a delineation of rhyme schemes or description of versification without any real purpose. We might not totally agree with the point being made by this candidate, responding to a task on relationships in *Song: To Lucasta, Going to the Wars*, but at least this kind of technically specific discussion is going somewhere as opposed to just showing that the candidate knows some terminology.

Moving on, in 'Song: To Lucasta', we also see Lovelace employing a ballad format that gives it the quality of a war song, rather than a love poem - a significant distinction that mirrors the importance of romantic relationships in the speaker's perspective. This song-like quality presents itself in the regular abab rhyme scheme of the three quatrains, giving it an almost jaunty tone. Furthermore, the way each line alternates from iambic tetrameter to iambic trimeter effectively brings out the joyful tone through this fast rhythmic pace. This has the effect of portraying how

Q10

This question on voice in *A Dialogue of Friendship Multiplied* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q11

Writing about change in 'The cold earth slept below' this candidate 'feature spots' (and comments on punctuation) without any real sense of how meaning is being created in respect of the theme of change.

a crack" while the six lined stanzas, end stopped lines, etc are consistent, the lines ~~between~~ of each stanzas have ~~inconsistent~~ inconsistent punctuation, with commas and full stops being absent. There is rhyme present on single lines too, such as "The birds did rest on the bare thorn's breast."

Answering the same question, this is quite a good paragraph on biographical context, focusing on changes in the poets' lives (and therefore connected to the task) whilst introducing the choice of second text neatly.

In the context of Shelley's life, this poem was published a year after his death and ~~it~~ was written after the suicide of his first wife, Harriet, with an immense amount of grief and guilt for her death, Shelley's life quickly shifted, inspiring him to write this poem. Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" was written in two periods: the first four stanzas being written first and the rest of the poem written years later. ~~The~~ The time period in between is reflected in the poem as ~~the~~ the speaker's ideas change significantly.

This is a measured and thoughtful introduction.

Both Shelley and ~~Wordsworth~~ Wordsworth contemplate, broadly, the transcendence of life and nature. After the suicide of his ^{pregnant} wife Harriet, Shelley's poetry can be characterised as personal introspections, particularly 'The Cold earth is slept below' seeking to glorify death paint the fear of death through a pantheistic lens. Wordsworth embodies the Romantic Stereotype of ^{a Romantic's} the poet's incompatibility with society and finding his muse in nature. 'Lines Written in Early Spring' reflects on the glorification of nature against the background of a fallen ^{and corrupted} society. Shelley and Wordsworth present a change in man; however, Shelley presents it more spiritually, as a change from life to death, while Wordsworth takes a more figurative approach, the change ^{from romanticised nature} into a corruption.

Q12

Responding to a task on imagery and symbolism in *The Sick Rose*, this candidate produces a good paragraph contextualising *Holy Thursday* (which the candidate had chosen as a companion to the other Blake poem).

¶ The poem HT belongs to Blake's collection "Songs of Innocence", while SR is in "Songs of Experience", which explains the choices behind their respective imageries and themes. ~~From~~ Critic Kimura has compared "Songs of Innocence," which deals with childlike perception in a pastoral environment set against a benevolent God, to the Garden of Eden. Its sister volume, "Songs of Experience", highlights a fallen world capable of jealousy and sexual repression by hypocritical religious institutions, akin to the state after the Fall of Man. Therefore, while both poems use flowers as an imagery, the connotations could not be more different.

Here, the candidate deals neatly with context.

Written in 1817 and published posthumously in "Letters and Journals of Lord Byron" (1830), Lord Byron's "So Well 'Tis No More a ^{Roving} Roving" has endured as one of his most popular short poems. A reworking of an old Scottish ballad, it's a farewell to youthful wildness by a poet whose youth was scandalously wild. The "we" of the poem pledge to stop partying all night long, but the pledge sounds wistful - and maybe halfhearted. The poem is not set in a specific physical location. The ~~rover~~ "roving" it refers to presumably ~~to~~ takes place in a setting of fun social activity - "out ^{on} the town," so to speak.

The poem is also set during the nighttime hours. It portrays "roving" as an activity of the night, illuminated by a big, bright, romantic moon. While the poem ~~does~~ does not specify a time of year, Byron originally enclosed it in a letter to a friend, ~~pre~~ prefaced by a note in which he explained that "sitting up late o' nights" during "Carnival" (the festive season before Lent), had tired him out a little. In

Q13

This question on self-reflection in *From In Memoriam XCV: 'By night we linger'd on the lawn'* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q14

This question on strong opinions in *'Died...'* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Paper Summary

Future students are offered the following advice:

- address all four 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) need to be a focus
- context covers 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, candidates should carefully consider the starting point assertion (the comment in inverted commas) and the injunction which follows it (the actual task being set). Answers should not deal with the second part of the question only. Often, the assertion is intended to help with AO5 (“exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations”)
- candidates should remember that the play in Section A was written to be performed and consider how the play may be interpreted and performed in different productions, as well as how audiences and critics respond
- in Section B, candidates should make sure they extend the argument by choosing an appropriate additional poem, not just the one they happen to know best from the anthology
- candidates should develop a flexible “toolkit” of technical knowledge that can be applied to drama and poetry, along with a range of literary terminology which they must attempt to use relevantly.

Thank you,

Principal Examiner (IAL English Literature WET04_01)

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