



Examiners' Report

June 2023

International Advanced Level English Literature WET04 01

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Introduction

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 entries in June 2023 was 512. Those who sat 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 of 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.

Question 1

This candidate is answering a question about *Measure for Measure*, dealing with the suggestion that 'The most impressive thing about (the play) is its use of irony.'

The most impressive thing about Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* is the irony it carries all throughout the play. It be through dialogue, characters or actions it always shows certain layers of irony.

Measure for Measure is a play that takes place during the Elizabethan era and is set in Vienna, this is as to set it in a city similar enough to London to make Shakespeare's points clear and to not be trivial if the play were to offend monarchs or the people of England.



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These two opening paragraphs are fairly generic. There is nothing particularly bad about them but they are not especially effective either. They are fairly typical of mid-profile achievement.



The candidate could have made it clear that they understood that there are different types of irony (dramatic, verbal, situational, for example) and that these are in evidence at key moments in the play as a significant aspect of its form. This could have been expanded into contextual commentary on the role of irony in the tragi-comic nature of the play, for instance.

The second paragraph is a little more specific, but still too general – there is room for, at least, touching on why Vienna (as opposed to another European city) might be an interesting locus for the action and how irony might be developed through this choice.

Other markers of middling attainment include misspellings such as 'dialoge' (it isn't a major issue but it creates an impression) and the lack of standard punctuation for the play's title. Most telling, however, is 'Shakespear's' – as stated previously, candidates really ought to be getting that spelling right by the end of an A-level course in Literature. Cumulatively, these errors are already heading towards 'frequent' (from the AO1 Band descriptor) and undermining performance.

Finally, whilst the candidate is more than entitled to agree with the proposition, stronger answers to this question tended to acknowledge that there might be other factors also contributing to the impressiveness of the play.

Question 2

Here the candidate is answering the question on the presentation of love in *Measure for Measure*.

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare seems to explore the consequences of repressing love ^{and sexual desire}. We can see this through the character of 'Angelo' as his ~~best~~ blood is seen as 'snow-broth' and has a semantic field of coldness and 'precision' he is described as 'Precise'. This allows the

audience to see how 'Angelo' has repressed his feelings, ~~as~~ as the play progresses, he gives his 'sensual race the rein'. This could be seen in the ~~RCS~~ RSC 2019 production as Angelo tightens his corset belt showing his repression and his puritanism. ~~the~~ This allows the audience to see Angelo as a representation of the hypocrisy of the puritans, as Angelo is called 'preuse' and at the time puritans were called -previsionists, ~~in~~ addition. Therefore, through Angelo Shakespeare seems to be ^{criticising} exploring the hypocrisy of puritans, as at the time there was a lot of religious turmoil. Angelo can be seen as a dramatic vehicle, that Shakespeare uses to present the extremes, and what happens if we remove love and sexual desire from our lives.



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The focus on language use, supported by quotation and the reference to a specific performance version of the play are both strengths of this response.



Ideally, candidates would remember to put the title of the play in quotation marks. Returning to the focus of the task, as the candidate does here during the course of the essay is always a good idea.

Question 3

In response to the prompt 'This is a play that prioritises the power of the spoken word' this candidate wrote a very organised and interesting response about *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Throughout "The Taming of the Shrew", Shakespeare also uses the power of speech to ~~critique~~ critique the ~~structures~~ ~~of~~ ~~class~~ ~~and~~ ~~surrounding~~ ~~education~~ that was present within the Elizabethan era. In his works, Shakespeare often uses the distinction between blank verse and prose to indicate a character's position in the social hierarchy, with those in the upper class often speaking in blank verse. In "The Taming of the Shrew", however, Franco, who is Lucentio's servant, also speaks in blank verse, despite his ~~lower~~ class status. By doing this, Shakespeare is able to subtly ^{strengthen} ~~emphasise~~ his characterisation of Franco as smarter than Lucentio (further supported by Lucentio's dependency on Franco for ideas). This is paralleled by Christopher Sly's ~~transition~~ transition to blank verse in the induction ~~by~~ as he begins to believe he is a lord. Through these alterations in speech, Shakespeare is able to subtly argue ~~that~~ ~~the~~ ~~intelligence~~ the redundancy of associating ~~class~~ social class with intelligence.



The blending of technical analysis, the possible purpose of the language technique being considered and a general contextual awareness of Shakespeare's use of form is a notable feature of this excerpt.



Candidates should make their discussions of specific language features (the use of prose and blank verse in this case) as pertinent as possible, as opposed to simply feature-spotting.

Question 4

This is an extract from an answer responding to the prompt that the actions of the characters in *The Taming of the Shrew* are 'purely selfish'.

~~This~~ The comedic element of the play which ~~is~~ title Katherine a 'Shrew' and tames her through degradation and abuse could have been much more relatable at the time it was written than it is now. The feminist movement has grown to the extent that Michael Billington says the play is 'totally offensive to our age and society.' In the Elizabethan Era women were expected to marry and had no prospects other than the marriage that their father would arrange for them. Whereupon, they would then become their husband's property. ~~It is~~ For example, ~~in the~~ Baptista is incredibly selfish in his motives for marrying off his daughter. Not only does he insist that Kate be married before Bianca, totally ignoring Bianca's happiness but he cares for the money in the marriage, not the presence of love. ~~He~~ ~~Persepolis~~



The candidate ties up a number of elements successfully enough here – the play's genre, some (understandably generalised) context, a specific critical response and a focus on character motivation. The language used suggests a very secure personal response and good information. The clear signposting of relevance to the question in 'incredibly selfish' is helpful.



The candidate is linking text and context well. They are developing an 'exploration of different interpretations and alternative readings' and the discussion is controlled, as it moves towards the development of a critical position. The last third of this excerpt might have been strengthened by embedded quotation from the play.

Question 5

The question on the significance of the 'unnatural' in *Hamlet* led to many strong answers, as here.

Furthermore, Shakespeare largely explores the ~~the~~ unnatural throughout the play through ~~the~~ ^{characters'} descent into madness. This is striking presented through both Hamlet and Ophelia, however, Ophelia's madness appears to ^{have} ~~been~~ received over time by critics with more certainty of her condition and through and obsession with her mystical and fantastical death. ~~It~~ Particularly for feminist critics Ophelia's madness has been a fascination element of exploration in the play particularly ~~it~~ during Act 4 Scene 5 in which she ~~she~~ gives flowers to Laertes, Gertrude and Claudius. While giving flowers to the king she states "There's fennel for you, and columbines". ~~This~~ An Elizabethan would've been aware of the meaning of these plants, thus knowing that "fennel" symbolised marital infidelity and "columbines" symbolised ~~cutting~~ ^{based on these} meanings critics highlight this moment as conveying how Ophelia's madness is evidence of Ophelia at her most subterranean in which she is indicating that ~~she~~ she has been silenced and infantilised by the men around her she has remained hyper aware of the corruption of the court, shaming Claudius for his adulterous and transgressive relationship with his brother's wife. ~~It~~ Upon understanding this ^{somewhat} ~~disagree~~ with the feminist understanding pointed out by Elaine Showalter that "For many feminist critics the madwoman is a heroine, a powerful figure who defies the family and social order". However, ~~it~~ disagree with the notion of Ophelia as a powerful figure as, Shakespeare appears to insert through the use of floral imagery, Ophelia's weakness, as flowers

~~was~~ would've been interpreted by an Elizabethan audience as a symbol of femininity in their delicate and fragile nature. On top of this, the idea that the flowers have been picked from the ground and ~~will~~ soon wilt and die, subtly foreshadows the death of Ophelia. Another possible interpretation is that Ophelia's madness through the floral imagery is directly linked to her treatment from men such as Laertes, Polonius and Hamlet in the play as ~~is~~. For example, Laertes uses imagery of flowers when referring to Hamlet's love as "a violet in the youth of primy nature" inherently linking femininity to weakness and inferiority. The use of the adjective "primy" is also poignant in its suggestion of the fickle, superficial nature of young male love, referring to the way in which young men may carelessly strip young women of their virginity without a care for the harm it would cause to their reputation as men's reputations remain untouched due to society's double standard. Therefore, Shakespeare can be seen to present the unnatural ~~is~~ once again as a product of the action of men, however in this case leading to the decline of women.



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This extract combines tight focus on language and technique with a good understanding of contextual and critical concepts. It carefully and thoughtfully develops a line of interpretation which is tied to the question throughout, but this linkage is sensibly emphasised at the end. The use of quotation is successful and this is a strong example of how to sustain an argument.



Candidates might be encouraged to avoid using first person pronouns, although that does indicate a level of personal response indicative of full engagement with the text and ideas about it.

Question 6

The prompt under discussion here is whether or not the use of contrast in *Hamlet* is 'outstanding'. This was also a very commonly answered question.

The question regarding the genuineness of the ghost has been introduced from the very beginning of the play. The setting of late at night, or "the witching hour" underlines the ambiguous nature of the ghost, since without the sun illuminating everything, and so it is difficult to place a justified judgement. Hamlet too, calls out his inquiry "Be thou a spirit from heaven, or goblin damn'd", yet this was never directly answered. Upon hearing the ghost's explanation, Hamlet instantly of "that incestuous, that adulterate beast", Hamlet immediately vows "I will with wings as swift... fly to your revenge". This may seem puzzling to Shakespeare's contemporary audience, since Protestants believe ghosts to be malevolent phantoms who seek to bring chaos and destruction upon the living world, while in Catholic's eyes ghosts are merely spirits who linger behind due to unfulfilled wishes. Greenblatt

refers to this as "a distinctly Protestant temperament haunted by a distinctly Catholic ghost", since Hamlet went to the University of Wittenburg, the founding place of the Protestant Reformation. The story would have been highly different if Hamlet did not choose to believe in the ghost. C. Rodney argues that "Hamlet's prompt trust in the ghost is more to do with his own self-interests rather than the following of his father's bidding", not caring that the revenge was more what Hamlet deemed righteous.



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Here, the candidate integrates and sustains an informed and relevant awareness of context into their argument.



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Examiner Tip

Although the relevance to the question is implicit (contrasts between night and day, natural and unnatural and belief systems are all considered), the candidate might have improved this answer by making more use of terminology and discussing the symbolic aspect of the contrasts under analysis, for instance.

Question 7

The question on violence in *King Lear* drew plenty of answers, many of which covered the following points

- The violence of the storm, and the language and imagery used in its presentation
- Gloucester's blinding – Jacobean taste for horror
- Lear's violent discourse in relation to his daughters, often with some consideration of gender concept readings
- Edmund as the instigator, rather than the perpetrator, of violence
- The play's setting in more bloody, pagan times
- Lear's violence against himself in his madness

Weaker responses tended to look at individual violent acts; stronger responses were more discriminating; looking at details of language, imagery and tone in the presentation of violence.

Question 8

There were not as many answers on imagery and symbolism in *King Lear*.

Responses covered:

- The storm, seen as symbolic of Lear's breakdown and more universally the rupture to the kingdom.
- Animal imagery used throughout, especially with regard to Goneril and Regan
- The significance of Lear's flower crown
- The motif of seeing and blindness
- The role of 'Nothing'
- There were some gender concept readings in relation to imagery surrounding the female characters
- Much of the contextual focus linked to James I and kingship
- There was some reference to critical commentary on Gloucester's blinding.

Weaker responses tended to function at word-level and to ignore AOs 3 and 5; stronger responses looked at patterns of imagery and symbolism, linking these to the play's contexts and to Shakespeare's overall purpose.

Question 9

This is part of an answer on the question relating to the presentation of 'female characteristics' in Andrew Marvell's *To His Coy Mistress*. In this case, that poem was compared with John Donne's *Elegy: To his Mistress Going to Bed*.

Visual imagery links with the theme of ownership to show female qualities. Marvell's poetry often shows "the inability of innocence to survive in a corrupt world" (R. Elliot) and this poem signifies that. The visual imagery of "worms" and "in thy marble ~~mat~~ vault" emphasises the poet's idea of purity being useless to one in death. This is ~~emph~~ highlighted by the Biblical allusion in "as your quaint honour turn to dust" "And into ashes all my lust". The use of "quaint" shows Marvell's rejection of the strict Puritan ideals that surrounded social ~~et~~ etiquette of relationships. Moreover, the hyperbole in "Two hundred to adore each breast" uses

visual imagery to objectify and reveal the beauty of Marvell's lover. Reference to such sexual ~~aspects~~ aspects of a relationship would be uncommon in the strict Puritan society of the Metaphysicals, yet ~~that~~ these aspects reflect on Marvell's status as a typical cavalier poet. As a supporter of the ~~the~~ king, he would have been supported in his poetic endeavours, and this gives him the freedom to detail the characteristics of his lover and create ethos.



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Although it contains some broad stroke assertions, this excerpt clearly shows that it is possible for candidates writing about poetry to involve critical reference and alternative interpretations as effectively as in Section A.



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Examiner Tip

Whilst it is difficult in an exam situation, sometimes candidates might do well to hedge where they are going to generalise. For instance, it would have been safer for this answer to pursue an approach such as 'one interpretation of Marvell's reference to such sexual aspects of a relationship might be that as a typical "Cavalier poet" and supporter of the King...'

Question 10

This task on *Metaphysical Poetry* centred on representations of faith in Henry Vaughan's *The World* and another poem of the candidate's choice (here, John Donne's 'Batter My Heart').

In the poem "The World" by Henry Vaughan and in the poem "Batter My Heart" by John Donne, the poets make exceptional use of language to portray quite contrasting representations of faith. Vaughan's poem criticizes materialism and the way religion can be manipulated in to favour politicians while Donne's poem is quite confessional and explores an individual's journey in enhancing their faith by willingly drawing back from worldly pleasures and Satan.



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Examiner Comments

Previous Reports have recommended that introductory paragraphs have a clear purpose. This is a good example of that in action.



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Examiner Tip

There is a very clear sense of establishing a line of argument and making an interesting, informed choice of second poem in this opening.

Question 11

Here, a candidate writes about *English Romantic Verse* in response to the prompt 'Explore the ways in which the idea of renewal is presented in *Lines Written in Early Spring* by William Wordsworth and one other poem from the selection.' The choice made in this case was *Songs of Experience: London* by William Blake.

Blake was known particularly for his radical sentiments. He publicly supported the French revolution which deposed the ruling class and was apart of the London Corresponding Society that linked radicals. ~~He~~ He wrote at the same time as Thomas Paine who produced 'The Rights of Man' which promoted the government to release a proclamation against seditious writings. This illustrated that radical beliefs and writings, like Blake's, made him a danger to the establishment and therefore he was not appreciated in his time but instead seen as a radical. ~~As support~~ Occurrences like the Peterloo Massacre made the government very wary of these people. However, much like those in the Peterloo Massacre, Blake continued fighting for the rights of the working classes.



Answers need to focus on context to some extent if they are to succeed. This excerpt makes it very clear that the writer knows about the historical and social background of the poems.



It is essential that whatever contextual material is used is made relevant to the question. Here, the candidate might have said, for example, "Both poets lived during a time of social upheaval, when communities were undergoing a form of 'renewal' which was of intense interest to Blake, who was known..." At some point in the exemplified paragraph, there probably should have been some direct reference to the poem *London* itself.

Question 12

This question on mood and tone in John Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* and one other poem, was the second most popular on the paper in this series. Here, the candidate chooses *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* by William Wordsworth to compare with it.

In conclusion, although *Nightingale* and *Intimations* each have starkly different mood and tone, one passionate to the point of aggressive, the other calm and contemplative, there is a common melancholy over the inevitable mortality faced by all human beings. While Keats chooses to achieve immortality through his work, Wordsworth accepts both the mortality of men ~~but~~^{and} also the fact that as we grow older we do gradually lose our innocence. Both of the poets find, in their own ways, methods to cope with the harsh realities of this world.



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Besides introductions, conclusions are of great importance in this exam and candidates are strongly encouraged to ensure that their responses finish as strongly as possible. This response achieves that.



This might have been further strengthened by adding a last clause to the final sentence along the lines of 'which is reflected in their use of language and the mood and tone created thereby.'

Question 13

Addressing *Victorian Verse*, this candidate is writing about the presentation of 'the powers of imagination' in *The Visionary* by Emily **Bronte and** *The Autumn Day – its course has run-the Autumn Evening falls* by Charlotte Brontë.

Beginning, with *The Visionary* by Emily Brontë, and Charlotte Brontë. The title, itself, depicts an illustration, that the poem, is based on what we see and view as we read the poem, thus what we imagine as readers. The first stanza, sets in a rather eerie and dark mood, with diction such as, "silent" "wildering drift" "groaning". As it talks about the atmosphere inside and outside the house, how due to everyone, "laid asleep" one can hear the whirrs of the wind and the bending of the trees, due to this wind. This tells us that everyone is asleep but her. The poet uses personification of the "groaning trees" to emphasize, how the only thing happening is the tree moving, and how the persona is the "one alone" that is looking out.



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Examiner Comments

This extract is quite effective in dealing with the language of the poem. It makes a good use of embedded quotation.



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Examiner Tip

The candidate could have improved this paragraph by, for example, referencing context (many other answers dealt with the sisters' experience in the Parsonage at Howarth, for instance) or by making sure that the last point about personification was directed more at the prompt by zooming in on 'groaning' or 'alone' and commenting more precisely on how they contribute to the presentation of imagination.

Question 14

This candidate is writing about 'the ways in which setting is used' in the poem '*Somewhere or Other*' by Christina Rossetti. They are comparing it with '*I now had only to retrace*' by Charlotte Brontë.

Rossetti further uses setting in order to convey how the fantasising-by close search for the speaker's lover continues to grow, emphasising further on the distance and proximity of the lovers to be united. The use of caesura in the line "With just a wall, a hedge, between;" could express the speaker's desperation, and perhaps frustration that they have not been successful in reaching the lover, even if they are merely behind a "hedge". This tone of desperation and frustration could further be linked with Rossetti's background of being a High-Anglican, that emphasises on the

renunciation of human desires. The critic Sandra Gilbert comments, "Rossetti exclaims herself in the aesthetics of renunciation" in the book 'The Madwoman in the Attic'. This argument could be proved as true with the choice of syntax and vocabulary Rossetti has used in this poem. Setting is also linked with distance, where the line in stanza 2 "near or far" switches its order to "far or near". The speaker's isolated renunciation of the union with the lover and the ability to sustain oneself without the potential lover becomes clear here. The alternated syntax could suggest how despite a change in setting, the poet's voice ceases to ever reach the potential lover, despite the regular rhyming scheme of ABAB throughout, perhaps indicating that the two lovers exist ~~and~~ for each other, yet never meet.



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This is a high standard of focused, developed and informed response, confidently combining comments on language and technique with exemplification, critical perspective and contextual knowledge.



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Examiner Tip

The use of very short, embedded quotation (such as 'hedge' here) can be a strength. It is usually preferable to present much longer, relatively unassimilated chunks of text.

Section A: Shakespeare

Hamlet was by far the most popular choice of text, though roughly a quarter of candidates answered on *King Lear*. About 15% had studied *The Taming of the Shrew*. The remainder of the answers were on *Measure for Measure* .

Section B: Pre-1900 Poetry

Romantic Poetry remains the most studied of the selections, with about 60% of the entry in this series. The remainder of the answers were fairly evenly distributed between the *Metaphysical* and *Victorian Poetry* anthologies.

Paper Summary

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

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 sometimes 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.

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)
- Varieties of possible critical reception are exemplified in the Mark Scheme for each iteration of WET04. These can range from specific comments by named critics to 'school-based' theories, e.g. relating to gender concept, eco-critical or Marxist analyses. Where possible, it is better to avoid constructs such as "a critic says" – an alternative might be "one interpretation suggests that", if the candidate has forgotten the name of the person being cited. It is imperative that whatever is being referenced is relevant to the question being answered

- In Section A questions, candidates should carefully consider the assertion (the comment in inverted commas) and the injunction which follows it (the actual task being set). More effective answers tend to use this as a guide for generating a thesis. Often, the prompt 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. Increasingly answers reference particular performances or film version of the plays and this can be a significant strength
- 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.

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