



Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2024

Pearson Edexcel International  
Advanced Level in English Literature (WET04)  
Paper 01

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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 context and critical interpretation 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 context and critical interpretation.

The number of candidates in January 2024 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 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 some of them may be spending too long on Section A, thereby squeezing the time available for Section B.

The role of textual reference deserves mentioning once more. 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 Whilst many candidates embed their references in a sophisticated, even elegant way, a small but significant number do not quote at all.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 often overlooked. Besides making reference to individual critics (who it would be preferable not to call, e.g. ‘critic Eliot’), successful candidates in this series wrote about, for instance Marxist, biographical, gender-concept, Freudian and Eco-critical readings of the texts, both dramatic and poetic. The key to even higher attainment here is not just to include this essential aspect of the construct but to make it relevant to the task.

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 again, 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.

Q1 This question on *Measure for Measure* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q2 This question on *Measure for Measure* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q3 This answer on *The Taming of the Shrew* epitomizes what might be termed a 'bolt-on' conclusion. There is great value in finishing with a flourish, but this is not that. It might have been a better use of time here to make another, more worthwhile point about Shakespeare's use of language or a possible critical response to the question prompt.

In conclusion, we see that the statement, "A fascination with different approaches to love drives the action of *The Taming of the Shrew*", is completely correct and ~~is~~ can be proved by the points listed above.

Q4 This question on *The Taming of the Shrew* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q5 This answer to the question on the presentation of masculinity in *Hamlet* does a good job of making relevant reference to one of the filmed versions of the play, demonstrating clearly an awareness of a different interpretation and using that of the film's director, Kenneth Branagh to inform their own.

However, there ~~are~~ are touches of feminine traits in Hamlet causing his delay in his masculine act of revenge. In Hamlet's soliloquy, ~~he uses a~~ Shakespeare makes use of a feminine simile, 'like a whore' for Hamlet to describe himself. Due to the patriarchy in Shakespeare's England, it is common to use women as a description that degrades oneself. Hamlet sees himself acting like a 'whore', ~~a man~~ acting like a woman being unable to control themselves and is ~~is~~ unable to think rationally like a man. Also in his soliloquy, the exclamatory sentence of 'what an ass am I!' shows Hamlet's struggle in coping with his 'feminine' side of himself, overthinking, being indecisive, being controlled by emotion ~~is~~ and is unable to carry out the masculine act of revenge. In 1996 ~~the~~ Kenneth Branagh's adaptation of Hamlet, Branagh makes use of mirrors that occupies the whole Elsinore palace, showing that every character has a different side of themselves. ~~In Hamlet~~ <sup>when</sup> Hamlet presents his soliloquy in the film, he is looking at the several Hamlets from the mirror reflection, this perhaps shows how Hamlet has that two sided self of him as a noble prince of Denmark and a son of a warrior that expects him to act masculinely towards his father's death but also another reflection of himself ~~in~~ the mirror as a more feminine feminine self that he attempts to hide, the side with the

most sincere emotions present in ~~X~~ Hamlet. In a Romantic lens to view Hamlet, his ~~outward portrayal of what is considered~~ sincerity of emotion, his madness is considered as beauty and chaos that his character embraces under the disciplined Elsinore court, making him a more noble character under the circumstance which Elizabethan England will see this sincerity in a man as feminine and weak.

Q6 This candidate writes in an informed manner about the context of *Hamlet*, keeping their eye on the terms of the question in a sophisticated way.

To further elaborate on the theme of the unknown, Shakespeare employs the provision of limited knowledge to the audience, leading them to question the reality of the murder. This uncertainty generates suspense for the truth to unfold. In the original version of 'Hamlet', the ancient Scandinavian tale describes Prince Hamlet who witnessed his parents' murder by his uncle, and feigns madness to buy time for him to seek revenge

when he grows old enough. By removing the scene where Hamlet witnesses the murder, Shakespeare removes certainty surrounding facts of the case for both Hamlet and the audience, creating suspense. While the ghost shows up proclaiming that he (King Hamlet) has been murdered by Claudius, he is said to come from 'sulphurous and tormenting flames'. The use of fire diction evokes an imagery of hell, though in Catholic beliefs it also symbolises purgatory where souls are cleansed of their sins. This creates uncertainty surrounding the ghost's identity, whether he is truly King Hamlet or a demon from hell; After a failed return by Elizabeth I,

from hell; After a failed return by Elizabeth I, Elizabethan England was still largely divided between Catholicism and Protestantism. In a Catholic perspective, the ghost would be a spirit from the purgatory; but purgatory does not exist in Protestant beliefs and thus the ghost must be a demon from the five pits of hell. Hence, differing religious beliefs within the society would contribute to the Elizabethan audience's sense of uncertainty about the ghost's identity and the reliability of its deposition, creating suspense and tension for the truth to be revealed. Here, a layer of depth is added to the suspense because not only

is it caused by a lack of full information in the play, it also engages with contemporary ideological conflicts at the time. The mystery of the ghost is also emphasized in cinematic adaptations. In Branagh's production, the ghost arrives shrouded in mist, and at times the mist seems to envelope it, adding an extra layer of uncertainty and creating a sense of tension.

Q7 Here, the candidate writes in a focused and articulate fashion about the use of irony in *King Lear*:

Verbal irony, often wielded by the Fool, takes on a deeper layer of meaning defined by the disjunction between what is said and what is meant. The Fool serves as a potent tool for Shakespeare to explore the complexities of human nature, power dynamics and the tragic consequence of blindness. The Fool, traditionally seen as a figure of comic relief, becomes a profound vehicle for Shakespeare's ironic expression. Cheri Y. Halvorson conveys that "Shakespeare uses the beings that his world deems lowly and foolish to destabilize conventional wisdom about class and to subvert the hierarchal expectations of his culture." The Fool's seemingly nonsensical utterances often contain insight and truths with foretell the unfolding tragedy. This is conveyed when the Fool cryptically remarks, "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise," highlighting the irony in Lear's failure to connect age with wisdom. The paradox in Lear's age leading to his downfall engraves the tragic irony in the narrative, emphasizing the disparity between chronological age and true maturity. The use of irony is employed to explore the complexities of human experience and the consequences of misplaced expectations. Moreover, The Fool's role extends beyond mere entertainment, embodying a shrewd commentator on the tragic events. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization can be applied in viewing the Fool's words as a subversive force challenging established power structures. The Fool's ironic interplay with Lear's deteriorating mental state reveals the dissonance between appearance and reality. In his line, "thou madest thy daughters thy mothers for when thou gavest them the rod, and put'st down thine own breeches," the Fool uses the paradox of Lear's daughters becoming his mother and disciplining him to highlight Lear's

foolish political decision to hand over his power to them, stating that they will inevitably use their new power against him. Similarly, the conversation between Lear and the Fool when Lear asks, "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" that the Fool responds with, "Lear's shadow", gives the audience insight into the wisdom of the Fool. This adds a layer to the irony as a character called 'King Lear' holds connotations of strength and maturity, juxtaposed with 'the Fool' who would be regarded as such but yet the audience views the characters interaction oppositely as the Fool pertains the knowledge and maturity that Lear does not hold. The repetition of "who am I?" shows Lear's mental capacity and his downfall into 'nothing'. It adds to the theme of human nature and questions what makes a man, a man. As Lear descends into madness, the Fool's seemingly absurd statement mirrors the chaotic unraveling of the kingdom.

Q8 A good introduction, establishing a clear line of argument usually works well in this exam. The examiner might not always agree with the position established, but it is good to see a candidate start out in a determined, forthright fashion, as here, writing about *King Lear*:

The idea that Shakespeare's 'King Lear' "explores the political realm far more effectively than the personal" is offensively inaccurate and ignorant to the message of the play. There is no separation, no difference between the political and personal realms of this play which is what makes it such a fabulously disguised criticism of the political scene of Shakespeare's time.

Q9 This excerpt from a very effective essay, makes a knowledgeable comment on the publication history of *King Lear*, ably fulfilling the imprecation to 'make detailed (or sophisticated) links between texts and contexts'.

with the <sup>the</sup> anxiety of uncertain inheritance as <sup>the</sup> former queen Elizabeth was childless. In the Quarto version of the play Lear proclaims that he will divide his land into "three kingdoms" as opposed to the Folio version: "I will divide in three our kingdom". This slight change in wording would have heightened the sense of dread for the audience at the time as they awaited the consequences they knew would follow. No audience <sup>member</sup> would have been more pleased with Shakespeare's sentiment that the division of a kingdom leads to discord than King James himself. He strongly believed in keeping the land united and ruled England, Ireland and Scotland under one crown. He also wrote in his advice book to his son "make your eldest ~~the~~ son (heir) ... let division ~~the~~ sow the seeds of discord in the kingdom".

## Section B - Poetry

As stated in the Introduction, candidates will continue to struggle to get above Level 3 if they do not in some way acknowledge the bullet points in the Mark Scheme which address contextual factors and critical perspective.

Q9 This question on *Metaphysical Poetry* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q10 This question on *Metaphysical Poetry* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q11 This question on *The Romantics* was by far the most popular task on this exam. Although one might not love everything about the opening which follows, there is no doubting the candidate's engagement, or their ambition.

"Blake's poems can be analyzed as a response to a collapse in human innocence." In William Blake's profound exploration of suffering within "The Tyger" and "Songs of Experience: London", human apprehension and existential dread unfurls. Blake, a visionary poet of the Romantic era, encapsulates suffering not merely as a feeling but as a cosmic quandary, a philosophical puzzle unraveling in the face of the unknown. In "The Tyger", suffering manifests through fear and the primal majesty of nature, encapsulating the awe and terror of creation's enigmatic design. Concurrently, in "Songs of Experience: London," suffering becomes an insidious specter woven into the fabric of societal decay, reflecting the angst of an industrialized world where human suffering becomes an inescapable reality. The reader can delve into the intricate nuances of these works, dissecting Blake's portrayal of suffering as a mirror to the human soul, revealing not only trepidation but the profound depths of human experience and inquiry.

Q12 There is often, also, a value in conciseness. This introduction to the second task on *The Romantics* encapsulates that.

'Lines Inscribed upon a Cup Formed from a Skull' by Lord Byron is a melancholic poem that leaves the reader with a powerful message to seize the day. Byron invites the reader to contemplate life and the transient nature of mortality. Which is not dissimilar to Wordsworth's 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality,' a poem that emphasises the immortal power of the soul, and the experience of growing up.

Q13 This question on *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* drew too few answers to provide a commentary for.

Q14 This question on *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* 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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