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Examiners' Report

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Pearson Edexcel International Advanced
Level 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 chosen collection and asked to choose an additional poem with which to explore the question and consider relevant contextual factors.

The candidates 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 slight tendency to over-write in Section A, thereby squeezing the time available for Section B.

Summary

The Report for 2306 recommended that candidates ensure that their use of textual reference was at least sufficient and relevant and there seemed to have been some acknowledgement of this advice but, once again, the Assessment Objective grid states that a Band 3 answer (for example) will offer 'a clear response using relevant textual examples'. As a rule, candidates continue to embed their references at least effectively, with fewer quoting 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.

Similarly, as stated, critical interpretation has to figure in any response for it to be considered thorough 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, though in this series, there was a lot of successful coverage of different interpretations, including some strong focus on different presentations of the plays in performance, both on stage and in film or television.

Two 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 was more consistently addressed across the exam, though still 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
- Return frequently to the terms of the question throughout the answer to ensure that analysis is specific to the set task and relevant
- 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. Although forms of critical idiom are somewhat a matter of preference, it would perhaps be better to avoid the formulation 'critic Leavis suggests' as if 'critic' was the given name of the person in question or an honorific title.
- 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, though such commentary needs to be relevant

- 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.

Section A - Shakespeare

There remained some evidence of candidates perhaps pre-learning essays or sections of them and reproducing these with only mild adaptation to the terms of the question.

Q1

Writing about genre conventions in *Measure for Measure*, this candidate produces a neat, sensible conclusion.

Northrop Frye labelled the play as a problem play, and it may be argued that instead of limiting himself to solely comedic or solely tragic elements, Shakespeare has instead presented a complex reading of the psyche of humans, which ^{as lives} includes both lighthearted and sorrowful moments, and Shakespeare may have defied genre conventions in order to provide this psychological commentary instead.

Q2

Many candidates discussed gender roles in the presentation of fate in *Measure for Measure*. This is a fairly convincing excerpt from an essay which adopted such an approach

can be manipulated in order to protect a man. Isabella's dreams ^{or remaining chaste} are consistently questioned by male characters from Lucio "Hail, virgin, if you be." to Angelo who confronts her, dangling her brother's life in her hands, in order to force her to sleep with him. However despite avoiding these ill destinies, Isabella is overcome by the Duke who states "give me your hand and say you will be mine" and the character of Isabella has no remaining dialogue, as if digesting that she overcome her issues for naught. Critics claim that the duke ultimately erodes Isabella's sense of self, depicting how males control women's fate. Angelo and Lucio's treatment of their respective women, of abandoning them, ~~was~~ and claiming no further attachment depicts how men have the power to take away a woman's voice. Mariana's reputation was ruined due to Angelo's dishonesty "her reputation was disvalued in levity" recalling to audience as what he previously rhetorically questioned from Isabella, "but who will believe thee?" depicting how a man's gender and power allowed them to shut down a woman completely. Marilyn French describes how Isabella was forced to ^{publicly} confess to an act she abhors, ~~in order~~ ^{ruining} her reputation. Although some critics say this is not the case,

Q3

This was a question about the poetry of *Taming of the Shrew*. In an essay which had dealt well with the technical specifics of the play's language, here, one of the few people to attempt the task moves efficiently into an overview.

disguise, which, given that the question was not specifically about that, was possibly a good thing.

Q5

A task on the use of imagery and symbolism in *Hamlet* was felt likely to be popular and accessible. This proved to be the case and in this example, a candidate demonstrates their insight and understanding relating to that matter, focusing clearly on language.

The "poison" ~~is visibly~~ that is mentioned in the biblical allusion of the Garden of Eden; in ~~the~~ "the serpent ... sting my father's life now wears his crown" ^{and the hidden action of regicide off stage} "I now visibly enacted as a play as the actor" [pours the poison in [the king's] ear]". Here, the recurring motif of poison further underlines the ^{"rotten"} permeating corruption of the state. The sibilance creates a ^{nasty} hissing sound in "serpent" is echoed in the nasty regicide visibly presented to the audience and the characters. ~~The~~ "Polonius' exclamation of "Lights, Lights, Lights" ^{for the King} may hint at the symbol of light as Hamlet exposes the truth of the hidden deception. The fact that Polonius speaks for the King ^{could further heighten how the King wants to remain hidden to hide his deception}.

Q6

A task on the presentation of Gertrude in *Hamlet* was also felt likely to be popular and accessible. Here too, expectations were confirmed. In this case, the writer takes a clear and confident approach to one element of the play's network of allusions.

Shakespeare presents Gertrude through the eyes of the men around her; to Hamlet, she is a promiscuous woman who betrays him and his father, ~~and is projected as a~~ Hamlet acknowledges her grief of the loss of her husband as he describes her with the simile 'Like Niobe, all tears;' which is a reference to the Ancient Greek symbol of grief and melancholy, as when her children were slain by the Gods, ~~she~~ wept incessantly, even after she was turned to stone. This ~~as paints Gertrude to be~~ alludes to Gertrude, like Niobe, grieving her loss for the entirety of her life, without ever getting over it; it is shortly juxtaposed by Hamlet in his soliloquy, as he describes her to be in 'incestuous sheets'. This is a reference to ~~the~~ Gertrude marrying her brother-in-law; and according to the Canonical law of both the Roman Catholic and the Protestant Churches, such marriages were incestuous and prohibited. A feminist modern interpretation of this

Q7

Writing about the presentation of guilt in *King Lear*, this candidate clearly and relevantly develops a line of argument relating to Cordelia, tying it up with a pertinent personal comment.

Cordelia feels guilt in the love scene as she goes against the patriarchy and ideology that women must obey men and be respectful, her acts of rebellion become more serious as it is her father she is disobeying, this would have been seen as outrageous in a Jacobean society. "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" The metaphor to "heave my heart into my mouth" describes Cordelia's guilt for

not being able to ~~hyperbolically~~ ~~ex-~~
~~empto~~ over-emphasise her love for
King Lear ~~to~~ to gain power and land,
like Goneril and Regan have without
guilt, as the act is so unnatural it
would have made Cordelia feel more
guilty to express her love, in an
exaggerated manner, to gain something
so artificial; she feels it is impossible
and she would have to physically "heave"
her heart into her mouth to do so, and to
go against her ~~own~~ morals. From
a modern perspective, I understand Cordelia's
feelings of guilt and actions ~~to~~ to be
the morally correct thing to do, unlike
Jacobean society that would have
sided with King Lear, having the social
hierarchy and class system in which he
is ~~placed on a pedestal~~ seen as the
closest human to God, as the king.

Q8

Many candidates chose to write about setting in *King Lear*. Here is one of them, taking an interesting approach which acknowledges that setting could include social and cultural issues, not just, for example, the play's physical locations.

In Act 1, Edmund performs a soliloquy ~~also~~ spoken in Iambic Pentameter wherein he ^{believes he} justifies his actions. He utters "Base, Baseborn" and "Bastardy": it is an adynastic list of phrases to allude to an underlying ^{passionate} tone of bitterness and hatred for his position in society. The law of primogeniture dictates Edmund is not deserving of the status of first born as he was born as bastard and the repetition of the epithet "Base" and "Bastardly Edmund" signify how much his inferiority baten him against the "legitimate Edgar". Thus, a binary contrast is created juxtaposing the good of Edgar against the cunning nature of Edmund whom believes "my nativity was under Ursa Major". The reference to the stronger and superior of the two bear constellations reveals Edmund's belief of his rightful position. A more modern, Marxist audience may begin to view Edmund as a hero, as a result, because he seems to be a character oppressed by old systems of power who has decided he will be held back no more. However, on the other hand, the contemporary Jacobean audience - who strictly abided the Great Chain of being - would have viewed Edmund as a true villain who's Machiavellian half contrast that of Edgar in Act 2 as Edgar is in light - as symbol of good - whilst Edmund is shrouded in shadows - a sign of his evil.

Section B - Poetry

Besides ensuring that they are accurate in how they render the names of the poets and their work, it would be generally sensible for candidates not to misspell simile, amongst other things.

It remains generally advisable for candidates to state which other poem they have chosen early in their response, clearly and with some kind of brief rationale.

It is probably still not wise to comment at great length on punctuation (or rhyme scheme perhaps).

There were fewer unfiltered comments on rhetorical technique, it seemed. This may or may not have been in response to comments in the 2306 Report for WET04. It was a welcome development in any case.

Q9

This question, about the presentation of faithfulness in the prescribed work of the Metaphysical poets attracted a number of answers. In this case, the candidate manages the diverse strands of the assessment profile in a very proficient manner.

Philip's message regarding faithfulness and female authenticity can be viewed as a vastly different perspective than that of Donne, displaying a notable dichotomy between male and female views on the subject, by which ~~the~~ the epitome of the patriarchal and gender-biased framework of the contemporary society is highlighted. Philip makes use of a tricolon to reflect the extent of the persona's ^{friend's} commitment, ~~and~~ faithfulness and efforts in ensuring the persona's well-being: "which now inspires, cures and supplies." It could even be argued, from a mere formalist perspective, that the ~~complex~~ confident structure in Philip's poem, featuring alternately that of iambic tetrameter and trimeter, as well as a ~~constant~~ continuous ABAB rhyme scheme repeated in each quatrain, reflects this concept of the ^{high} degree of women's faithfulness and constancy, ~~possibly a more~~ arguably creating a proto-feminist commentary on the incorrect and generalised stereotypes created by men about women.

Q10

As noted in at least one previous Report (and above), candidates are recommended to write in an appropriate critical idiom. However, it is always good to see some enthusiastic personal response, as demonstrated here (the candidate is writing about mood and tone in the Metaphysical poets).

a world of great adventure. "If thou be'st born to strange sights / . . . / till age snow white hairs on thee" oh how beautiful the imagery. Nevertheless the foreboding & "If" at the beginning, the speaker paints a beautiful future for his mantee, even shedding a wonderful light on aging & simply snow from a marvelous other "when thou return'st, wilt thou tell me": he expects stories of grandeur from his mantee apprentice. The regular metre & the consistent rhyme scheme with the regular use of repetition & calming (slowing down of) caesurae all make what's to come ~~even~~ even more effective. "And swear / Nowhere", this ^{couplet} pair of spondaes, before was inspiring, now creates a cryptic tone & BAM! "Nowhere I live, a woman true, and fair". At the end of the second out of three stanzas, Donne & his speaker reveals to us and his apprentice, the main point of his epistle: to insult & critique the nature of women. ~~Follows~~ Following this unfortunate turn, we now see a speaker, unconfident ~~and~~ from his use of interrupting himself. "Yet do not" let him know even if ~~we~~ we were to find a god-righteous woman, for "Yet she / will be / False, ere I come, to two or three". What a

Q11

Many candidates seemed pleased enough to be invited to write about timelessness in Romantic poetry. Not everything has to be perfect in order to succeed and here is an example of a fairly commonly used approach to starting a response. It works well enough.

In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and in 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats creates and presents timelessness in two similar ways. In order to create timelessness ~~in~~ the author uses symbols, imagery and carefully chosen diction. Nevertheless, in 'Ode to a ~~the~~ Nightingale' Keats also juxtaposes mortality of the human being with immortality of nature to emphasize its timelessness and beauty. In both of these poems the author ~~follows the canons~~ implies the features of the Romantic era, and context plays a huge part in author's presentation of the timelessness.

Q12

The question on the power of the imagination as it is presented in Romantic poetry was popular. In this example, a candidate sustains their focus on the terms of the question in a way that keeps their argument clearly on track.

Moreover, the tiger is used as a vehicle through which Blake advocates for artistic endeavors. The imagination is presented as this 'fire' through which the 'hand dare seize the fire'. The allusion to Prometheus stealing the gold from the Greek Gods implies this sense of audacity to create this creature and to initially even imagine it. Moreover, the disembodied nouns 'sinews' and 'shoulder' are then contrasted to the Blacksmith imagery of the 'hammer' and the 'furnace', perhaps suggesting how by the fusion of the human qualities and the industrial force, we can

reach this sublime. The cyclical structure of the first stanza and the last stanza where the ~~tiger~~ word 'could' is changed to 'dare' suggests how through the Poetic Genius we can have the power to imagine and create in this society where the Industrial Revolution had detrimental effects on the individual just like we can see in Blake's painting where this tiger has this 'fearful expression' perhaps suggesting how ~~the~~^{it} was undergoing this rapid social change. ~~This~~ This rapid social change is further reinforced through the iambic pentameter that mimics these fiery conditions under which this tiger was built. Thus, through ~~the~~ Blake use, the 'Tiger' as a vehicle that advocates for artistic endeavour and creation.

Q13

Nature, as it is presented in the work of the anthologised Victorian poets, was taken on board by a good number of candidates. Here is one of them making a positive start to their response by acknowledging that 'nature' might mean more than one thing. Centres are encouraged to support their students by getting them to consider the possibilities of connotation and intention which may exist in the wording of tasks, probably before they start writing.

In the poem 'The Best thing in the world', Elizabeth Barrett Browning lists the things she finds beautiful in the world and largely focuses on nature and its beauty. This is both nature in the natural world and nature of humans and their qualities. Similarly, Christina Rossetti portrays nature and its fleeting and transient qualities in the poem 'May'. Both poems explore the theme of nature. However, Barrett Browning uses it to capture the beauty of love while Rossetti emphasises the brevity and the loss of love.

Q14

This task on desire was also a popular option for candidates writing about the Victorian poets. This answer is just on the safe side of the 'What volume of rhetorical terminology is too much?' debate.

An echo

Christinna Rossetti explores the use of language,

allusion and classic rhetoric to present desire as

an expression of reconnection with a deceased lover.

Perpetuating the ideology that once the days of
togetherness and love come to their inevitable ^{fare} ~~faith~~ of
separation; all that remains is a desire to reconnect.

Rossetti elaborates the emphasis of desire of reuniting

with a lover in the first verse "Come to me in the
silence of night, come in the speaking silence of a dream."

The anaphora "come" extenuates this urgency that is
prompted as the speaker desires for a reconnection

~~with~~ in her dreams and yet he is dead. The implication

of apostrophe emphasizes the address of the

speaker to her lover and yet also ~~etc~~ extends on the

fact that is particularly a one-sided conversation-

appealing to the readers pathos and making them

all the ~~the~~ more aware of the desire that resides

in the speaker heart for a glimpse- a reply from her

beloved. Moreover, "speaking silence" is an oxymoron

and deliberately used by Rossetti to highlight that

though dreams ~~are~~ don't need verbal expression,

they still ~~are~~ carry an intense emotion alongside them.