



Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

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

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## WET04 - Examiner's Report 2501

### 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 this assessment 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 there remains a slight tendency to over-write in Section A, thereby squeezing the time available for Section B.

### Summary

The biggest area for development on this unit remains the depth and detail of critical reference in answers to the Poetry tasks. Once again, in the 2501 series, many candidates proved themselves adept at dealing with that and the contextual concepts and issues for their chosen Shakespeare play, but not as many were able to transfer it into sustained or purposeful discussion in Section B of the paper. There is a tendency there, perhaps understandably, to deal in broader strokes, e.g. to do with notions of the Sublime in Romanticism or generalisations about Byron's character or Shelley's travails and the possible biographical interpretations which might be brought to bear on the poems under consideration. Where more specific and discriminating work appears, it has a marked tendency to stand out.

As previously 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)

It remains pleasing to see strong focus on different presentations of the plays in performance, on stage and in film or television.

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

Q01

There were no answers to this question.

Q02

There were no answers to this question.

Q03

This was a question about the presentation of money and business in *Taming of the Shrew*. This excerpt is from a sustained, informed and engaging response to that task. It retains its focus on the terms of the question particularly well.

“Shakespeare utilises the characterisation of Bianca to underscore the fact that 'money and business lies at the heart' of the play because her comment in Act 2, Scene 1 where she states he knows 'her duty to her elders' implies that she has carefully created her persona in order to conform with the Elizabethan stereotypes of women at the time. The noun 'duty' implies that Bianca has an inherent responsibility as a woman to submit to her father and men. Contemporaneous mores at the time such as laws on the resolution of women's rights claimed that women were 'either married or to be married'. Bianca realises these expectations of women and thus conforms to her 'duty' by maintaining her 'mildness and sobriety' which is praised by many characters such as Lucentio and Hortensio. Critic Karen Newman argues that 'silence ensures Bianca's place in the male economy' and this is supported by the fact that she has multiple suitors and her 'curst' and 'forward' sister has none. However, once Bianca has fulfilled her 'duty' and business as a woman she relies on sexual innuendo in the final act for example her comment regarding 'head and butt' to flirt with some of the other characters. Bianca now has a husband and Vincentio makes a comment saying that she has been 'awakened' this implies that now she has fulfilled her business and gained a husband she can now become a 'new shrew'. Critic Catherine Bates in 2002 argues that the proliferation rather than elimination of recalcitrant women highlights the circularity of Shakespeare's plot which implies that this vicious cycle of women faking their femininity as a form of business in order to conform with societal expectations will continue on for many years. Moreover, Gomez who played Kate in the 2008 RSC production commented that Bianca is the 'manipulative, backstabbing, awful version of what women are, fluttering her eyelids to get what she wants'. This is underscored in Act 1 when Bianca utilises chiasmus and says 'sister, content you in my discontent' and then she continues to play her musical 'instruments'. This motif of Bianca practising feminine activities continues throughout the play and the male characters clearly

appreciate her business as they repeatedly refer to her with the positive adjective 'sweet'. However, Karen Newman explores the metaphorical death of courtly imagery associated with Bianca which further underscores the fact that she fakes her femininity to gain a husband for business and to fulfil herself rather than through genuine love. A postmodern audience may be able to grasp this fact more easily because they may be able to recognise her attempt to conform, however a contemporary audience may simply see her behaviour as normal and may not regard it as a form of business or subterfuge."

Q04

There were no answers to this question.

Q05

The task on whether or not Claudius is 'little more than a comic-book villain' drew a range of responses. Many candidates chose to dispute the proposition. A few agreed with it. These are two short extracts from an essay written by a candidate taking an interestingly personal approach:

The Throughout the play Claudius's thirst for power overdoes his morals and by his actions he we may ed as he not only commits regicide but also ~~man~~ involves in an incestuous marriage. During the Elizabethan age the kings were considered to be the chosen ones and they almost enjoyed a prophet like status, even if the king was an user per offing one & was a direct disrespect to God. Thus, Claudius never gets to enjoy his reign and God ~~of~~ ultimately gives serves him his punishment by the hands of Hamlet.

French critic Ernest Renan states that Hamlet is not a revenge tragedy rather it's an anti-revenge tragedy. And Shakespeare portraying the inner turmoil of each character like Claudius and revealing his motivations ~~again~~ and at time his inactions, further maximates the ~~the~~ & psychology of ~~what~~ having a ~~own~~ morals and ~~conscience~~ conscience and having to act according to the situations in one's own favor. Claudius's attempt to use others in a plot to kill.

Q06

A handful of candidates chose to discuss the significance of the subplots in *Hamlet* and whether or not they were 'idle distractions'. Here, a candidate rescues what threatens to become a somewhat narrative approach by deploying some timely contextual reference.

The revenge plot is arguably the most important plot in "Hamlet", yet smaller ideas play into this, like the ghost and how it is used. The ghost of Hamlet's father describes it as the "Aves of purgatory" while Hamlet fears the ghost "may be the devil". Horatio too fears the ghost and warns Hamlet not to go with it, as the ghost might drive him into madness. This is rooted in the protestant ideas about ghosts being evil spirits, that both Hamlet and Horatio will have been familiar with, as they studied in Wittenberg, a very symbolic place for protestants. The ghost however conveys catholic ideas with "purgatory". This opens the plot up to be very interpreted differently.

Q07

There were no answers to this question.

Q08

By some distance the most popular task on Section A of the paper, the question on the presentation of love in *King Lear* led to a number of very effective responses.

Knowledgeable and interesting, this candidate's answer was typical of many of those to Q08:

clearly rather some flattery - to 'the Jacobean audience, Cordelia's Confession was ideal to a writer. Her familial love & intimate love were the ideal standard - as her entire character represents. From her iambic, rhythmic speech represented on stage by a soft voice to her virtue of forgiving Lear in Act 4.57 - her love is total the perfect, ideal standard. So much so that in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, as romanticists began to emerge & nihilism subsided - retellings of *King Lear* such as Tate's dominated the stage as they often featured happier endings that removed Cordelia's death due to her virtue of love. In Tate's, in fact, her love is further emphasised upon as she married Edgar in the end, suggesting ~~that~~<sup>the</sup> tragedy stems from Cordelia's unjust death.

as it made the play devoid of love. Shakespeare's deliberate ~~for~~ intention was to use Cordelia's love & present ~~as~~ her as pious to emphasise how the corrupted love & lack of heed to consequences - the stage direction 'Enter Lear with Cordelia in his arms' to prove this point. The scene brings to mind the famous depiction of piety - and as <sup>critic</sup> Johnson says - 'Cordelia suffers ~~at~~ the virtue of death'. It may also be that her death, close to Sp's Christian beliefs is <sup>deliberately</sup> reminiscent of the death of Jesus - also for greater appeal to the largely Catholic Jacobean audience - ~~to~~ to represent how the sinful love resulted in her death.

## Section B - Poetry

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.

There was more evidence in this series of candidates running out of time - some answers were moving along at pace, but they were plainly beaten by the clock. Centres should remind students of the need to avoid over-writing on Shakespeare at the expense of the Poetry.

### Q09

Only a very small number of candidates were tempted by the opportunity to write about the presentation of beauty in *A Song*: ('Ask me no more where Jove bestows') by Thomas Carew and another poem of their choice. That said, this answer opens well, pulling in some critical reference from the very start.

In 1779, Samuel Johnson accused Abraham Cowley among other metaphysical poets of "writing" as beholders [rather] than partakers of human nature", going on to proclaim that ~~is~~, in metaphysical poetry "nature is ransacked for illustrations, comparisons, and allusions. Indeed, Thomas Carew's 'Ask me no more where Jove bestows' and John Donne's 'Elegy: To his Mistress Going to Bed' depict scenes to explore ~~and~~ the human nature of attraction to beauty, drawing comparisons from divine celestial bodies ~~to~~ and far away exotic lands to express the writers ~~for~~ admiration for their lovers beauty.

Q10

The use of imagery and symbolism in *A Letter to her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment* and one other poem was the focus of this question. This is one candidate's conclusion; here, a (very similar) critical reference is deployed at the end of the piece, to sound effect.

The vivid imagery in both poems, and the pregnant use of symbolism all the way to the structure and form of them, makes it very easy for modern readers to ~~be~~ relate to the poems, as they create catharsis. Nevertheless, ~~its~~ contemporary critics like ~~of~~ Dr. Johnson might have criticised the <sup>use of</sup> typical metaphysical conceit, hyperbolic language and symbolism which give the poems their emotional ~~meaning~~ meaning and effect.

## Q11

By far and away the most popular of the Poetry items, this task on Power in *The Tyger* (and one other poem) was seized upon with glee by many candidates. Here, one of them argues their case neatly and concisely:

“Additionally, power is explored through the idea of powerlessness, the fact that many social groups did not have any political or social power or that it was restricted builds on Blake's political message that power brings corruption, those in power have used it to control and corrupt the innocent and we see that through the destruction of hope and nature throughout both *The Tyger* and *London*. The idea that *London* was a place of punishment for any protest or activism by describing the streets as 'charter'd' and the imagery of 'mind forg'd manacles' adding a sense of fear to the powerlessness of people. Establishments have used their power to oppress and silence anyone who does not conform to their methods.”

## Q12

The presentation of childhood in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* (and one other poem) attracted a very small number of candidates. One of their answers is excerpted here and exemplifies the kind of mature, well-educated way in which many entrants to WET04 in this series went about their work.

Moreover, the poetic persona accepts the 'Child' as the one from whom which everything begins, as the most important aspect in a human's life. He writes with admiration about the 'best Philosopher' and 'Mighty Prophet!', stressing through the eponymy the significance of the blessed child. Wordsworth questions from the perspective of a matured adult, why ~~is~~ the child so eager to grow up and be binded in 'inevitable yoke' → a metaphor for age, forcing 'thy soul' to 'have her early freight' embedding concrete terminology for an abstract concept. Wordsworth applies Jean-Jacques Rousseau reading of the child as something absolutely pure, only corrupted by society. And yet in movement 3, which is somewhat the telos of the poem, wordsworth achieves a philosophic mindset, implying the philosophy of stoicism through ~~to~~ the oxymoronic lines: 'soothing thoughts that spring out of human suffering'. Evidently enough, the speaker strongly believes that upon distancing from childhood and the alliterated 'new-born bliss', reaching adulthood and thus understanding the impending doom of 'man's mortality', one can achieve 'the philosophic mind' and accept even the 'meanest flower' a symbol of the worst that makes one insightful. Wordsworth is grateful for his childhood, ~~because~~ he understands it serves as the base of all his life, and even goes as far as to interpret the 'Mother's mind' as a 'homely Nurse', who almost helps the child forget his divine experience of sublimity, concealing his memories 'with pleasures of her own' → actions, that can be deemed negatively until we realize that growth, despite contributing to pain and loss only makes one stronger.

Q13

There were no answers to this question.

Q14

There were no answers to this question.

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