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In English Literature (WET04)

Unit 4: Shakespeare and Pre-1900 Poetry

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Introduction

This January saw a small entry for this unit, the June sitting being the preferred option for most centres, but nevertheless there was an interesting range of responses to the paper. There were some well prepared candidates who produced successful answers in the top three levels: level 3 responses being clear and relevant, level 4 being discriminating and controlled, level 5 critical and evaluative. To reach these levels, as detailed in the mark scheme, candidates need to respond appropriately to each of the assessment objectives. Answers need to comment on the language of their texts (AO2) and not simply write about what happens in them, and make good use of their contextual knowledge (AO3) by making points that apply to the specific question being asked. Occasionally some answers presented a paragraph of what looked like previously prepared contextual material, applicable to any question, placed usually at the beginning or end of an essay. Such an approach was unhelpful. The other two assessment objectives scored across the paper were AO1, where a clear relevant argument is looked for, and AO5 where an awareness of different interpretations should be shown. The best AO5 answers showed that appreciation of the texts was enriched by an open minded response and candidates sometimes did this quite successfully without mentioning a single critic by name. Simply listing critics and reporting what they have said without comment does not meet the requirements of the assessment objective.

Candidates should note that for the first section of the paper questions begin with an opinion in inverted commas. The injunction asks that the answer be 'in the light of this statement.' Some answers tended to overlook the statement and respond only to the injunction: comments below on the first question illustrate the limitations of this approach.

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 anthologies (*Metaphysical Poetry*, *English Romantic Verse* and *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*).

Section A : Shakespeare

Questions 1 & 2 : *Measure for Measure*

The first question asked candidates to explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents errors of judgement; however the statement in inverted commas was more specific, suggesting that the play 'examines the dramatic consequences' of this. As a result, the best answers took note of the word 'dramatic', and this helped them to see the play *as a play*, looking at how it works on the stage. There was a tendency for some to latch onto the idea of 'errors of judgement' as a theme they

were familiar with, ignoring the way it works and unfolds in the drama: sometimes candidates gave an opening paragraph that listed the themes. One began in this way, 'The main themes of the play are justice, grace and nature, disguise, power and virtue, and errors of judgement.'

The statement in the second question suggested that, at the heart of the play, there is an unresolved conflict between justice and mercy. Here is a candidate confidently addressing this question:

Justice and mercy are presented in a symbiotic relationship from the beginning of the play. 'Lent him our terror / dressed him in our love' the Duke says of the authority he rests on Angelo. The uneasy juxtaposition of mercy and terror reflects the nature of the power of the lawmaker: neither can exist without the other.

The answer goes on to develop an argument around the 'unresolved' aspect of the conflict:

The conflict between justice (represented by Angelo) and mercy (represented by Isabella) is only brought to outward test through the intervention of the Duke, a third party, and is never fully emotionally resolved...

There is a well handled argument, with close and analytical reference to the text throughout; the essay concludes by noting that the Duke's final speech is written in rhyming couplets which might suggest closure and resolution but at the same time draws attention to the fact that, in reality, the conflict has not been resolved.

Questions 3 & 4: *The Taming of the Shrew*

There were no responses to question 3; a few candidates tackled the way Shakespeare presents power in the play (question 4), better answers being able to see that this was not just a question about Petruccio's power over Katherina but about the way power is held or struggled for in the play more generally, including episodes where masters and servants change roles. It was good to see candidates finding Katherina's final speech open to interpretation: this is the ideal set text for enabling answers to respond vigorously to AO5 (exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations.)

Questions 5 & 6: *Hamlet*

The statement in question 5 asserted that there are only a few moments of tenderness in the play but, when they happen they are powerful. Candidates mainly looked at the relationships between Hamlet and his mother, and between Hamlet and Ophelia; however, the play also includes Hamlet's confiding in Horatio and hints that there might be more tenderness in the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude than Hamlet is prepared to acknowledge. Candidates tended to list their chosen 'moments' and in doing so tended to overlook the point made in

the statement that these moments are 'powerful'. This is another example of where overlooking the statement and responding only to the injunction ('explore the ways in which Shakespeare presents tenderness in *Hamlet*') can limit an answer.

Question 6 was more popular: 'Ophelia struggles to assert herself in what is a male dominated society'. Occasionally parts of the play were misunderstood: here is an answer that plays with the idea that there is more to Hamlet and Ophelia's behavior than we actually see in the play, but the point is pursued without evidence, and errors of fact occur in the eagerness to make the point (Ophelia does *not* come to see Hamlet in Act 3 – she is planted in Hamlet's way; we have nothing to suggest that Ophelia is 'ashamed' of anything she has done; everything in the play appears to the point to the fact that Ophelia has been true to her promise to her father in 'I will obey, my lord'). This is where writing about a character tends to remove that character too far from the play

We see Ophelia assert herself when Hamlet rejects her when she comes to see him in Act three scene one. Although Hamlet rejects her in an attempt to save her from any trouble that would have involved her because of his quest in revenge, Ophelia is left devastated and ashamed for opening herself up to Hamlet as she is unaware of this. ... she may be guilty for not being fully faithful towards her father as she may have had intimate moments with Hamlet that would question her loyalty towards her family.

Context was generally addressed well by answers that considered the 'male dominated society' claim in the assertion:

The struggle of Ophelia trying to assert herself in the court plays an important role in Hamlet's revenge. Hamlet in his disguised madness states that Ophelia should 'get herself to a nunnery.' The repetition of this line implies the fact that Ophelia is a harlot. In the Elizabethan era, a so called nunnery is a place for harlots, women who have lost their virginity, expressing the fact that Ophelia and Hamlet might have had a physical relationship before, correlating to the fact that he once wrote love letters to 'the most beautified Ophelia'. The word beautified highlights the feeling of a goddess-like woman, contrasting the image of a harlot in a 'nunnery'. In the Elizabethan period, women who had physical contact with men were considered as whores and should be kept out of society.

Some readers might not agree with this reading of the word 'beautified' (it is open to interpretation as any scholarly edition of the play will explain at length) credit is given here for close attention to the text.

Questions 7 & 8: *King Lear*

There was not enough evidence from answers to justify a report here.

Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry

Questions 9 & 10: Metaphysical Poetry

Question 9 asked candidates to explore the ways in which despair is presented in Donne's *Nocturnal Upon St Lucy's Day* and one other poem. Question 10 asked about the ways in which a vision is presented in Vaughan's *The World* and one other poem.

These are not primarily comparison exercises, as AO4 (explore connections across literary texts) is not specifically targeted on this paper, although some comparison may come into the answers almost inevitably. However the second poem needs to be chosen carefully. Better answers saw the totality of Donne's despair in his *Nocturnal* and explored how, as a metaphysical poem, it works through the elaborate comparisons with astrology and alchemy, the speaker describing himself as 'the first nothing'; these answers could deal with the tone of the poem and its overwhelming sense of grievous loss. Obvious second choice poems would be Marvell's *The Definition of Love* (especially useful as it talks, paradoxically, about 'magnanimous' despair) or perhaps one of Herbert's poems, where the opening mood of despair is turned round later in the poem through the intervention of his God. One answer bravely used Donne's *A Valediction of Weeping* as a second poem; however, although it begins with the pouring forth of tears, it is not really a poem 'presenting despair' as it is too witty and cheerful for that – the poem eschews despair, it claims that to give in to sighs would encourage the wind to sink the ship the departing lover is to sail in. A more ingenious answer may have been able to argue this through (one is a poem about despair, one is a poem about avoiding it) but treating the two poems as being equally about despair because both deal with tears and sighs is taking insufficient note of differences of tone. A more questionable choice was in an answer to question 10 where Donne's *The Flea* was used alongside Vaughan's mystical vision of Eternity. The answer begins weightily:

In order for one to understand how a vision is presented in *The World* by Vaughan and *The Flea* by Donne one must first define the term. The literal definition for vision is the experience of the sense of sight. However its use in language does not end there, as having vision is to have sight, to have a particular vision is to see something in a certain manner; the use of vision in this manner is most commonly used figuratively. One can have a vision of something that is not limited to literal sight nor is it necessarily limited by the literal physical world especially when used in literature.

This is a laboured opening. In fact the essay that followed was not successful and the choice of *The Flea* did not give the answer enough material to work on (when visionary poems such as Donne's *At the Round Earth's Imagined Corners* are available it is difficult to see the reason for this choice). It might be added however that a truly ingenious

answer might have done something, even with *The Flea* – how the literal ‘sense of sight’, the sighting of a flea, is used in a figurative way ‘not necessarily limited by the literal physical world’ to become a vision and, if only the speaker’s mistress herself could see it this way, she would realise that she should surrender to her lover’s desire. It would be an unusual, perhaps wayward, but not impossible, choice.

Questions 11 & 12: *English Romantic Verse*

Question 11 asked candidates to write about the way a reflective mood is presented in Wordsworth’s *Lines Written in Early Spring* and one other poem. There was a tendency to treat Wordsworth’s poem in quite a superficial way - with birds hopping and playing and every flower enjoying the air it breathes.

The poem however says a great deal more than this and better answers recognised something about Wordsworth’s pantheism at work here, and the poem’s melancholy with ‘What man has made of man!’ There was some relevant consideration of this as a poem about the environment and its appeal to a modern reader because of this, as well as recognition of the time of revolution and change in which the poem was written.

Question 12 asked about the ways in which ‘a search for meaning’ is presented in two poems. The given poem was Keats’ *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Here is a section from an answer which used Blake’s *Holy Thursday* in addition:

The questioning continues in both poems. However, even though Blake did not find an answer, eventually he gave his own answer – ‘Is it a land of poverty!’ the exclamation mark highlighting that poverty remains in this land even though it is supposed to be ‘rich and fruitful’. The rhetorical question of ‘Can it be a song of joy?’ also implies anger that the poet is feeling, as in how can this be a song of joy when everyone is in ‘misery’ and distress? The repetition of ‘And’ in the third stanza magnifies the situation of the land. The sun, the fields are supposed to be the fundamental resources of life, yet ‘the sun does never shine / And their fields are bleak and bare.’ The plosive alliteration of ‘bleak’ and ‘bare’ gives the sense of nothing, also with the poet’s anger within it.

This is a response clearly geared to the requirements of AO2. Some weaker answers seemed to misread the question as if it were simply asking what do the poems mean. The question was particularly focused on the ‘search’ for meaning.

Questions 13 & 14: *The New Oxford Book of Victorian Verse*

There were no responses to question 14 based on Hardy’s *The Darkling Thrush*. Question 13, which asked about the way love is presented, gave Robert Browning’s *Love in a Life* as a starting point.

This is an extract from an answer that used Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnet from the Portuguese XXIV* as a second poem. It is possible to view *Love in a Life* as a more sombre poem than the way it is presented here - as a race against time, rather than totally frivolous and carefree - but the readings of both poems are close and analytical. The essay makes a number of points of comparison, though it should be noted that comparison is not a specifically targeted assessment objective; there is however, through the essay as whole, sufficient response to the remaining AOs to deserve a level 5 mark.

Both poems present love as a shelter from fear. 'I lean upon thee, Dear, without alarm / And feel as safe as guarded by a charm' Barrett-Browning says, the long vowel sounds and rhyming couplet increasing the sense of safety. 'Heart, fear nothing, for heart, thou shalt find her' Browning says, and here, the emphasis is on the lack of fear of loss. Browning's lover may not have the stability of Barrett-Browning's, but the same sense of security is present.

Both Barrett-Browning and Browning show how love narrows the focus of lovers. Browning uses the imagery of the house which the lovers inhabit together to show the seclusion of the lovers from the outside world. The use of a semantic field of words related to household architecture (room, curtain, alcove, closet) which are repeated throughout the text, and are positioned syntactically so they they are emphasised, shows that the love Browning is searching for means that he has no desire or necessity for contact with the outside world. In Barrett-Browning's poem, however, there is an awareness of the outside world ('Let the world's sharpness, like a clasp knife...') but the awareness of this is due to the fact that their love protects them from 'the stab of worldlings'.

Paper Summary (repeated from the June 2017 report)

Future students are offered the following advice:

- Address the assessment objectives which are the same across both sections of the paper
- Remember that context is not simply writing about history but can relate to a whole series of factors – political, social, cultural, intellectual, etc – that influence both the writer and the reader, including of course yourself as a reader, looking at something that may have been written in very different times from the present
- In Section A look carefully at the starting point assertion (the comment in inverted commas) and the injunction which follows it (the actual task you are being set) and make sure your answer does not simply latch on to part of the question only. Often, the assertion will help you with AO5 ("exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations")

- In Section B make sure you extend the argument by choosing an appropriate additional poem, not just the one you happen to know best from the anthology
- Enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner.