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# **Examiner's Report Principal Examiner Feedback**

## Summer 2018

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

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# Principal Examiner's Report

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## Pearson Edexcel IAL in English

### Literature (WET04) Unit 4: Shakespeare and Pre-1900 Poetry

#### 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*).

It is important for centres to notice that the prescribed text for questions 11 and 12 is the Penguin book, *English Romantic Verse*, edited by David Wright. The introduction to that text explains the reasons for the choice of Emily Brontë's spirited poem about political oppression, written in the year of revolution, 1848, beginning "Why ask to know what date, what clime?" to conclude the volume. It has been labelled "Last Lines" so marking an arbitrary end to the romantic movement. Some confusion has arisen because Charlotte Brontë chose another, conventionally religious poem, beginning "No coward soul is mine" to be the last lines her sister wrote (also often called "Last Lines" and a popular choice for reading at funerals). Centres need to refer to the prescribed text to ensure they are teaching the correct poem. The same point applies to the other prescribed texts in Section B of this paper, where confusions may arise if not carefully checked against the set texts.

There were interesting answers throughout the paper by candidates who had been carefully prepared, often steering away from conventional interpretations. In Section A some candidates disliked the duke in *Measure for Measure* and his underhand methods; some were prepared to argue that Katherina is the winner in *The Taming of the Shrew*; there were theories that Gertrude meant well when she married Claudius and Hamlet has mistaken his mother's intentions, simply ascribing them to middle age lust; some answers felt it was difficult to sympathise with Cordelia when she was so stubborn at her father's love test. In section B,

well prepared candidates saw Herbert's *The Collar* as suggesting the clerical collar, the slave's collar and cholera meaning anger, or, in the terms of the question, frustration; Rosina Alcona's lament for her lover killed in battle was well contextualized by those who knew about the Gondal stories, and the erotic and complex rose and lily imagery in Tennyson's *Maud* was impressively handled by Tennyson enthusiasts.

## **Section A : Shakespeare**

### **Questions 1 & 2 : *Measure for Measure***

The first question, on Shakespeare's presentation of justice in the play, was the more popular here; a weakness in some answers tended to be their following through the play character by character and deciding whether or not justice was done to each of them. Some answers decided that Lucio was taken away to be hanged at the end of Act 5: though this is possible, if he still refuses to marry Kate Keepdown, the mother of his child (marrying a bawd is worse than hanging, he argues) his plight was perhaps taken more seriously and literally than the play's attempt at a comedy ending actually suggests. Appreciating the tone, comic or otherwise, was central to the alternative question which asked candidates to examine the extent to which the play might be considered a comedy. There was evidence that candidates had enjoyed studying the play, especially the low life scenes, the malapropisms and the grotesque comedy with the hangman and Barnadine; some candidates had clearly seen a production and one was able to recount the dressing up of the Duke into a friar's habit as a moment of comedy, doubtless as a result of some onstage business. On a serious level there were candidates who were especially aware of the relevance of the play to our own times, with men in power, epitomised by Angelo, using their positions to exploit women, with the plight of the victim being summed up by Angelo's reply "who will believe thee, Isabel?"

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

By far the more popular question was the one about what makes a successful relationship, The given statement argued that this issue is at the heart of the play. Here is a confident opening, which has contextual reference clearly in mind:

*The Taming of the Shrew* written by Shakespeare in the sixteenth century portrays the evolution of three marriages,

full of farcical elements, that undoubtedly challenges an audience's expectation of how a woman should be and therefore raises questions about the power dynamics within marriage, not only to contemporary audiences but also to modern ones in 2018, making the play a timeless romantic comedy.

The answer moves on to talk about the Reformation, the move to Protestantism and the focus on marriage within a patriarchal society, before looking at the two central relationships:

Bianca and Lucentio's relationship is undoubtedly the fruit of deceit and courtly love. Lucentio falls in love, not with Bianca's personality, but with her "sobriety" "mild behaviour" her beauty and "silence". The young student quotes Ovid's works as a source to a woman's heart, failing to see that not every woman can be wooed in the same way. Ultimately this relationship proves to be doomed in the final scene, where Bianca reveals herself as the real shrew telling Petruccio she will "shift [her] bush" so that he will have to pursue her – she is not a sitting target – and dismissing her husband's call as a "foolish duty". Lucentio discovers he has not been the only one playing a disguise and so a lesson is learnt – a successful relationship is one in which the people involved have learnt about each other and learnt to see through any disguise.

The other question asserted that we enjoy seeing foolishness receive the treatment it deserves. Answers considered amongst other things the Induction which establishes the mood of the play with the foolishness of Sly, the triumph of Tranio's wit over the pedant schoolmaster and Gremio being fooled by a younger and worthier suitor for Bianca. Contextual points were made about the way marriage was seen as a financial transaction and how the men seeking a dowry are fooled.

### **Questions 5 & 6: *Hamlet***

Candidates were asked to consider the way good intentions in the play often had tragic consequences. Less satisfactory were responses that worked steadily through the play – although what follows in the extract here works as a relevant answer, it is limited by too narrative a handling and a tendency to list:

The next character who has good intentions which turn into bad ones is Polonius' son Laertes who wants to avenge his

father and sister. Polonius died while spying on Gertrude and Hamlet. Hamlet thought it was Claudius and wanted to stab him but therefore stabbed Polonius. Hamlet and Laertes' sister Ophelia have a romantic relationship but Hamlet plays a mad man and breaks her heart which drives her to suicide...

A good starting point for this question in one answer was Horatio's bleak summary of the events in the play in Act 5, when he describes "purposes mistook / Fallen on th'inventors' heads" and how this describes not only people like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern hoist by their own petard but those with good intentions too. The answer went on to discuss whether or not Horatio's description of the accidental and random nature of events was a fair one, or whether the hand of Fate ensured that original intentions were always thwarted.

The alternative and more popular question asked about Shakespeare's presentation of the causes of Hamlet's madness, the accompanying statement suggesting that audiences sympathise with Hamlet's disturbed view of the world. Here is an effective, if rather grandly written, opening:

In the tragic play Hamlet Shakespeare presents madness in a complex way to illuminate the humanism context in the post-renaissance era which results in great sympathy from audiences of all periods. The possible causes of Hamlet's madness are the ghost's compelling him and puppeteering his thoughts and actions, the contradicting ideals between Hamlet's morals, and Claudius' and Gertrude's actions.

Hamlet's first exposure to the extreme trauma which disturbs his view of the world is his father's death and Claudius' and Gertrude's hasty marriage. Some psychoanalytical critics suggest Hamlet undergoes a period of depression due to his father's death as he loses hope in the whole world, believing the state of Denmark "cannot come to good", showing his fatalistic nature. He is reconciled to his fate as he says "but break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue" conveying his lack of motivation to uphold justice or go against the throne. However, this state of depression and hopelessness soon changes after the ghost's revelation of King Hamlet's murder. Shakespeare uses deeply biased and hyperbolic diction in the ghost's speech like "foul, strange and unnatural" "incestuous" "that adulterate beast" and repetition of "murder". This greatly bombards Hamlet and twists his

former depression to rage and desire for vengeance. This complete shift of personality might be considered "madness"...

### **Questions 7 & 8: *King Lear***

A question was asked about loyalty in the play, following the statement that "although Lear himself is not loyal, this is a play about loyalty." Some interesting arguments followed, as this extract illustrates:

The reason that Cordelia's love and loyalty towards Lear remains true is due to the fact that she views him as a father and not as a king. Goneril and Regan, on the other hand, pretend to love Lear because of his kingly position and hence their respect and love towards him, their loyalty dissolving upon him losing his position. This too, however, can be seen to be Lear's own doing. He allowed for his identity as king to overpower his position as a father and thus abused his sovereign power and treated his daughters more as subjects than as his children. This explains Goneril and Regan's acute understanding that power is more important than familial love. Similarly Gloucester's bastard son Edmund is seen to feign loyalty towards his father because he understands that he requires power and position to become recognised, as his father will hardly recognise him as a son due to his illegitimate birth. Hence Goneril, Regan and Edmund think that loyalty towards others is a mere tool to serve themselves and that ultimately people are self-serving and only loyal to themselves and their desires. This view is supported by the fact that although the three have an allegiance of sorts, Edmund pledges his love to both sisters and that Goneril betrays her sister and poisons her.

The alternative question began with an assertion that "it is difficult to sympathise with any of the women in this play" and invited responses to Shakespeare's presentation of women in the play. Although most answers disagreed with the proposition, arguing that Cordelia attracts considerable sympathy from audiences, and often referring to the way her death was seen by earlier audiences as uncalled for and cut from productions, there were some who called her silence stubbornness and felt that she could have gone along with her father's game in order not to embarrass him in public. Similarly there was an element of sympathy for Goneril and Regan who are faced with having to put up with their ageing father, his

“unconstant starts” and his insolent retinue of a hundred carping and quarrelling knights.

## **Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry**

### **Questions 9 & 10: Metaphysical Poetry**

Question 9 gave candidates George Herbert’s *The Collar* as a starting point and asked for an essay on the ways frustration is presented in this poem and one other. Candidates were therefore free to choose another divine poem (Donne’s sonnet *Batter my Heart* was a popular choice) or a secular poem (Marvell’s *Coy Mistress*, and Donne’s *The Flea* made frequent appearances). There were some excellent responses. The extract which follows captures the opening tone of Herbert’s poem very well with the word “bluster”. Another excellent answer, more informally but quite correctly, referred to the structure, line length and syntax of Herbert’s anguished opening lines as being “all over the place.”

Firstly, in Herbert’s *The Collar*, the poem opens with a tone of bluster, of frustration, and the persona “struck the board, and cried, no more, I will abroad.” The terms “struck” and “cried” convey strong emotive actions that reveal the frustration. The act of striking evokes an impression of aggression and anger correlating with the title of the poem *The Collar* which can be interpreted as alluding to the concept of “choler” meaning anger. Alternatively one can read the title as a reference to the priest’s collar, which is a symbol of complete subservience to God, suggesting that the persona expresses frustration in the lack of freedom he experiences in his devotion to God. This is reinforced by the imagery of freedom Herbert employs – “my life and lines are free, free as the road.” Here the simile compares his freedom to a “road” in which the image of a journey suggests a sense of liberty that his life can be if he chooses to go “abroad” – break away from his service to God as a priest and the frustration this causes him.

The alternative question gave Carew’s *To a Lady that Desired I Would Love Her* as a starting point and asked candidates to explore the presentation of the attitudes of men towards women. Some answers failed to appreciate what exactly was happening in Carew’s poem and



tended to write more generally about men and women in the seventeenth century. This opening however shows a clear understanding:

In Carew's poem the poet's attitude towards the woman he is wooing is generally in praise, resembling the approach, if not the form, of a Petrarchan sonnet. However there is a negative undertone, implying that woman's beauty comes from a maintaining of appearance and that he has the capability to manipulate this appearance through his linguistic mastery of poetry. In John Donne's *The Apparition* the woman in the poem is portrayed as deceiving and arrogant, similarly maintaining a chaste and superficial appearance to hide a less virtuous inner self.

A number of answers chose *The Apparition*, arguing that it reflects the poet's "distorted misogyny". Many appeared to have thoroughly enjoyed reading the poem and, on one level, found it grotesque but very amusing.

### **Questions 11 & 12: *English Romantic Verse***

For question 11 the starting point poem was Brontë's *R. Alcona to J Brenzaida*. Candidates appeared well rehearsed in the Gondal stories, comparing Rosina Alcona's loss to Emily Brontë's own loss of her sister, and the fifteen wild Decembers taking her back to her fourteen year old self when those stories were jointly written. The question asked about the way grief is presented. This answer captures the "double edged sword" of memory well:

R Alcona talks of living a full life, even with grief – how existence could be cherished "without the aid of joy" though grief cannot be given full reign because then memory would bring "rapturous pain" and "divinest anguish". These oxymorons show memory as a double edged sword and depict the persona as being drawn to indulge her grief which she must sternly resist.

The alternative question gave Byron's *Lines Inscribed upon a Cup Formed from a Skull* as a starting point and asked candidates to explore the ways the triumph of life over death is presented.

Byron was only one year older than most of this paper's candidates when he wrote the poem, poking fun at the dullness that so often flows from

(most likely older) living heads. In this case, instead of dullness, wine will flow from a monk's skull found by his gardener. Perhaps it was the nature of the question with its rather serious injunction about the triumph of life over death that led some to treat this poem with perhaps more reverence and seriousness than it deserves, lamenting Byron's alcoholism and wild behaviour – in other words they missed the satirical fun and wit. There were good comparisons with Keats' Odes (*Ode on a Grecian Urn* for example) and Emily Brontë's *To a Wreath of Snow*.

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

Question 13 gave Emily Brontë's *The Visionary* as a starting point. This poem (the one beginning "Silent is the house: all are laid asleep") is also attributed to Charlotte Brontë (critics believe she may have added the third stanza, which brings societal disapproval to the mysterious encounter). There is also a much longer version of this poem, which is not the one included in the set text, Christopher Ricks' anthology.

Candidates were asked to explore the ways determination is presented here and in one other poem. They were open to different interpretations - the encounter might be spiritual, it might equally be a secret lover. Browning's *Love in a Life* was a popular choice of comparison poem.

The alternative question gave Tennyson's *Come into the garden, Maud* as a starting point and asked candidates to explore the ways in which nature is used to create the mood of the poem. The extract which follows used Browning's *Meeting at Night* for comparison:

Whereas one has the eerie sense that the deranged speaker in Tennyson's poem is almost stalking Maud – he is an outsider, lurking in the garden, fantasising about the roses and the lilies, arguing very fancifully that nature is in sympathy with him (the white rose weeps, "She is late"), the persona in the Browning poem is clearly in harmony with nature – it is as if it joins with him in his secret meeting. The little waves are startled awake by the arrival of his boat, but they don't object, and the slushy sand helps him to find a safe mooring. Browning's poem finds its resolution in the harmony of two hearts beating each to each, whereas Tennyson's ends with an image of death, combining the joy of Maud's eventual arrival with the premonition that something terrible is about to happen.

**Paper Summary (repeated from previous reports)**

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.