Examiners' Report
Principal Examiner Feedback

Summer 2019

Pearson Edexcel IAL
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 collection and are asked to choose an additional poem with which to explore the question and consider relevant contextual factors.

It was clear that candidates at all levels had engaged with their chosen texts and that centres continue to prepare candidates for the exam in a way that enables then to respond analytically and with genuine insight. There is potential to develop responses further, through closer exploration of the specific demands of the question, as well as through a clearer focus on context and different interpretations of the texts.

Few unfinished responses were seen in either section of the exam, and candidates did not seem to spend too long creating a complex plan and then run out of time to write it up, which was encouraging. More often, candidates included too much unplanned material and so should be encouraged to allow time at the beginning to plan and organise their ideas before writing.

Section A : Shakespeare

At all levels, candidates appeared able to make confident comments about meaning in the plays, discussing elements of Shakespeare's craft and, at the higher levels, illustrating their points with relevant examples and terminology. The majority of responses were expressed fluently and some candidates demonstrated an impressive level of sophistication and flair in their expression and analysis. However, achievement at AO3 and AO5 was significantly less consistent and centres could focus on context and interpretations of texts as a priority for future exams. The achievement of some candidates was limited by a complete lack of any discussion of AO3 or AO5, despite their ability to demonstrate discriminating or critical analysis of concepts and the shaping of meaning.

At the lower levels, discussion of literary techniques covered a narrow range and tended to focus on individual words, even on word class, or on imagery. At all levels, candidates could include more discussion of dramatic techniques and make more careful consideration of the texts as plays to be performed, rather than as texts to be read. If candidates gained more knowledge of the performance of the plays, in Elizabethan or Jacobean theatres and onwards to modern productions, this should also provide them with a broader range of contextual points to explore for AO3. Interpretations made by productions and the critical responses of reviewers and audiences could then aid AO5 discussion.

The greatest discriminator of success for all questions in this section was the extent to which candidates made use of the comment to construct their argument. At the higher levels, candidates used the specific ideas or assertions in the initial statement, rather than limiting their exploration to the broader instruction in the rest of the question. The quoted comment is intended to stimulate an argument and help the candidates to find an interesting hook for their own ideas.

Hamlet was by far the most popular choice of text for this section of the paper, with the majority of candidates opting to respond to the question on Shakespeare's presentation of women in the play, in the light of Hamlet's assertion that, 'Frailty, thy name is woman'. Few candidates managed to go further than a general discussion of the characterisation of Ophelia and Gertrude and a simple overview of women as victims in a patriarchal society. Centres could work with candidates on exploring groups of characters for this type of question, moving beyond responses which focus on one named character at a time. This question highlighted the widespread issue of failing to use the statement to prompt a targeted exploration of the question. Whilst many candidates focussed on the presentation of women in general, more successful responses also analysed the connotations of 'frailty' and where this description could be most aptly applied to the play's characters.

The other Hamlet question asserted that the play ends in triumph because the court has been purged of corruption and candidates were asked to explore the ending in the light of the statement. It was not answered as frequently as question 5, but elicited a few insightful responses where candidates evaluated the statement in detail and made relevant links from the ending to events throughout the play. At the higher levels, candidates were able to make contextual links to contemporary political issues of corruption, ambition and succession.

King Lear was the next most popular text, and most candidates responded to the question on Shakespeare's presentation of madness in the play. At the higher levels, candidates were able to develop a strong argument in response to the suggestion in the statement that madness sometimes seems exaggerated but must be taken seriously. There were some insightful comments on modern and contemporary attitudes to mental illness and exploration of how the 'madness' of various characters has been conveyed in productions of the play. Fewer candidates opted to respond to the next question on conflict between the generations in King Lear, but there were a number of perceptive responses to this task, where candidates were able to explore the relationships between the old and young, rather than just focussing on individual characters.

For The Taming of the Shrew, candidates were first asked to explore the comment that the desire for financial gain, rather than for love, is the motivator for marriage in the play. The majority of candidates tended to approach the task as a general discussion of the theme of marriage, missing the opportunities for specific analysis of the motivators of love and money. This often led to further missed opportunities for contextual links to any social and historical background on the topic of marriage. The alternative and more popular question asked about Shakespeare's presentation of Katherina in The Taming of the Shrew and produced much more evaluative responses with a strong line of argument. Candidates made better use of the hook in the statement, exploring views that the character is "distinctly unlikeable" and "makes us laugh" with relevant references to alternative interpretations of critics and productions of the play.

Although Measure for Measure was studied by a relatively small cohort, the first question in particular elicited some very successful responses on the character of the Duke as a "problem" and the extent to which Shakespeare attracts sympathy for him. It was clear that candidates enjoyed the challenge of exploring the character from a different angle and many showed insight in their discussion of interpretations and alternative audience responses. The second question invited responses on realism and the ridiculous in Measure for Measure, but fewer candidates were able to demonstrate such secure or confident understanding of these aspects of the play.

Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry

As in the previous section, candidates had clearly engaged with their texts and seemed confident in their exploration of meaning and the poet's craft. Again, achievement at AO3 and AO5 was less successful and an area for development at all levels. There was an over-reliance on lengthy biographical details for the poets, not always successfully linked to content or method, rather than literary context or the influence of social change, for example.

At the lower levels, candidates seemed to have knowledge of only a limited number of poetic techniques and few analytical methods to apply to the texts, although they demonstrated understanding of meaning and effect. The range and relevance of technical methods and terminology explored were often a discriminator between the lower and higher levels. Candidates need a toolkit of a range of literary terminology and poetic techniques to discuss and this is an area where centres should continue to develop their candidates' knowledge.

Again, a discriminator of success for this section was the extent to which candidates made use of the precise question to choose their second poem and then construct their response. At the higher levels, candidates chose an additional poem with clear links to the theme or idea described in the question and then used both poems to illustrate their exploration. The choice of the second poem is important and can be a significant factor in the success of the response. Candidates with a confident understanding of many of the poems in the list were able to choose a poem relevant to the question. However, in some responses the question was ignored entirely, perhaps because candidates chose a poem that had little connection to the theme just because their knowledge of it was more secure.

In some cases, responses tended to become a straightforward comparison of the two poems, rather than a targeted exploration of the question. This task does not require the candidates to compare (unlike WEN01); indeed, comparison tends to make the task more difficult than necessary.

The collection of Romantic poetry was the most popular text for this section, and responses for both questions often demonstrated secure knowledge of the poems. A significant number of candidates opted to respond to the question on the presentation of unhappiness with William Blake's "Holy Thursday" as a starting point. Candidates found a number of relevant ways to approach this question, encompassing mood, intention, societal pressure, and in the best examples, insightful AO5. Many seemed secure in structuring an argument around the topic and were able to integrate relevant social and historical context into their comments on method and meaning, more successfully than for any other collection or question. Perhaps this was because context is such an integral factor in understanding Blake's writing. Byron's "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year" and Shelley's "Stanzas Written in Dejection, near Naples" were popular and highly appropriate choices as accompanying poems. Many candidates chose a second Blake poem instead, with "London" proving a productive choice and enabling insightful discussion of the question. Some candidates who opted to explore "Holy Thursday" from both the "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" produced rather muddled responses, and would have benefitted from more careful planning.

The Metaphysical poets were another popular choice; for this collection Andrew Marvell's "The Definition of Love" and the topic of obstacles to happiness prompted the majority of responses. For their second poem, many candidates chose a poem by John Donne and showed some insight into the methods used and effects created in choices such as "Batter my Heart", "The Good Morrow" and "The Sun Rising". Interpretation of the first poem by Marvell was often less secure or insightful and it seemed difficult for some candidates to construct an argument for the two poems rather than simply presenting an overview of a range of ideas. Similarly, when exploring the presentation of fresh joy in Henry Vaughan's "Unprofitableness" some candidates struggled to develop a logical argument in response to the question, instead attempting to compare the poem with others on the topic of religion, such as Donne's "Batter my Heart", with inevitably limited success.

A small number of candidates responded to the questions on Victorian verse and, for many of these responses, the choice of second poem had the most significant impact on achievement. For both questions, candidates appeared more confident when discussing the poems given as a starting point, but often failed to select a second poem that was fully relevant to the question.

Paper Summary

Future students are offered the following advice:

• address all the 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) are just as important as techniques, concepts and shaping of meaning (AO1 and AO2)

• context can relate to 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 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 the second part of the question only. Often, the assertion will help you with AO5 ("exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations")

• remember that the text in Section A is a play and was written to be performed; you can consider how the play may be interpreted and performed in different productions, as well as how audiences and critics respond

• 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

• remember that the texts in Section B are poems and to explore the form and poetic techniques used by the writers

• develop a flexible "toolkit" of technical knowledge that can be applied to drama and poetry, along with a range of literary terminology

• enjoy your writing and share your enthusiasm with the examiner