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In English Literature (WET04)

Unit 04: 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. Although the entry for this series was low, it was evident that candidates at all levels were capable of engaging with their chosen texts at least on some level and that centres continue to prepare students for the exam in a way that enables many of them to access the higher attainment strands. Indeed, a significant proportion of responses were very impressive, demonstrating analytical insight, sophistication, a genuine ability to construct, express and support an argument and a range of understanding relating to critical approaches and contexts. Relatively few candidates seemed to have difficulties with timing and only one failed to attempt both sections of the paper.

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. Stronger responses were expressed more fluently and some candidates demonstrated an impressive level of coherence and flair in their expression and analysis.

Previous reports have emphasized the importance of addressing fully the demands of AO3 and AO5 and for the most part this advice seemed to have been acted upon. However, as might be expected, there was a range of approaches here. Lower achieving candidates either bolted on pre-learned 'chunks' (chunks of context) and / or critical knowledge without due consideration for their relevance to the question, whilst those in the higher bands wove their awareness thoughtfully into their discussions, naturally adapting what they knew to the terms of the task, as in this example.

In Elizabethan England, values were prized as imperative aspects of the culture. These values would take hold of and restrict many people, with a resounding effect. These values may be religious, or gendered or ~~any such thing~~ ~~more~~ something else but we see its the reflection of their hold in Shakespeare's tragedy "Hamlet", where values are shaky at the very best. Shakespeare creates a world of uncertain values through his various characters, each of whom struggle under one societal pressure or another. In this essay I will be focusing on Hamlet and the responsibility of revenge, Ophelia and destructive female values and lastly, the Ghost whose values are totally uncertain. Each of these characters paint a picture of uncertainty, which I will explore.

Elsewhere there was some effective development of ideas relating to the plays in performance. Such discussion need not be particularly intricate or involved to do well – it is simply appealing because it shows that the candidate has engaged with the text beyond the page. As before, it is crucial to be judicious in the use of such examples, that said. Here, a candidate does an entirely proficient job of making it clear that King Lear is as at least as much a stage work as it is one to be read.

'identifies prefers flattery over the truth'. In Trevor Nunn's 2009 play, Lear is seen to be shaking in anger in Act 1, a foreshadowing of his future madness. The image of Lear presented to the Jacobean audience would be celebrated since kings demanded absolute obedience through the Divine Right of kings - they were appointed by God and therefore should be respected by all means. The modern audience in contrast would be horrified by Lear's villainous attitude and would ~~rather~~ rather call Edmund the one who was 'more sinned against than sinning'.

As in previous series, a discriminator of success for questions in this section was the extent to which candidates made use of the comment to construct their argument. The quoted assertion is intended to stimulate an argument and help the candidates to find an interesting catalyst for discussion. It is not always intended to be agreed with!

Hamlet and King Lear were the most popular choices of texts for this section of the paper, with very few candidates attempting the questions on Measure for Measure or The Taming of the Shrew.

For Hamlet, the question on uncertain values was by far the most popular with almost 50% of the entire entry attempting it. Candidates were mainly able to focus their arguments on issues such as character, the supernatural, action (or lack of it) and other themes such as responsibility and fate to generally good purpose. Only a few failed to derive much beyond the simply descriptive. The following section shows a candidate presenting an alternative critical interpretation in a cogent fashion, specifically referencing the terms of the question.

morality, or our innate decency.

of the uncertainties in "Hamlet"
Not all audiences are in favour with this interpretation, however. One of the most well-known "new criticisms" of 'Hamlet' is by commentator T.S. Eliot, who called 'Hamlet' an "artistic failure", and argued that the world of uncertain values Shakespeare created was merely an attempt of an exploration into philosophical ideals ~~shakes~~ Shakespeare himself knew nothing about, and that the ambiguities and moral dilemmas in the play was "nothing but Shakespeare's philosophical enquiries with questions he could not answer himself."

~~uncertainties permit~~ By crafting a world filled with uncertain values, moral ambiguities and existential contemplations, ~~the~~ "Hamlet" ~~is a~~ ~~brings~~ ~~into~~ ~~the~~ questions the dichotomy of man, revealed by its protagonist's ~~star~~ conflict between duty and morality. Whether or not Shakespeare intended to leave behind these philosophical ideas of the ambiguity of action and inaction, reality and appearances, it is no doubt that this timeless tale leaves its uncertainties to the interpretation of its audience.

The other Hamlet question asked candidates to consider the significance of setting which is, of course a major element of the narrative. It was a shame that so few candidates risked approaching it.

King Lear was only slightly less popular. There was an equal spread of answers to both questions 7 (about the ending) and 8 (focusing on Edmund). Most candidates settled in the middle attainment bands across the two tasks. Many used the ambiguity of the closing scenes of King Lear as broached in the rubric, as a fairly stable launch pad for their analysis without perhaps ever ascending the stratosphere. The character-based debate of question 8 was generally more competently handled in the main. Here, a candidate considers the complexity of Edmund's character in a more thought-provoking fashion:

Edmund is also the cause of conflict between the two sisters ~~and~~ Corin and Regan and allows for the discussion of the female sexuality.

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In the play, Kathleen Melluskie points out that 'in King Lear, the women are seen as the source of the primal sin of lust', which the sisters succumb to fighting over Edmund. His character is therefore deemed desirable, even though he is a villain.

Section B : Pre-1900 Poetry

Here too, many candidates dealt well with their texts and seemed confident in their exploration of meaning and the poet's craft. Again, achievement at AO3 and AO5 remains an area for development, though it was clear in this series that previous Reports had been absorbed and assimilated.

At the lower levels, candidates acknowledged fewer, more obvious poetic techniques and tended towards verse-by-verse recount, though many still demonstrated at least some understanding of meaning and effect. Thus, the depth and detail of debate relating to technique and the terminology employed were discriminators between the lower and higher levels. Candidates need a breadth of literary meta-language and, as ever, should deploy it in a relevant and evaluative way as opposed to unadulterated 'feature-spotting'.

Candidates obviously need to choose their second poem with discrimination, making sure that it will fit the task – some brief amount of time planning a response to ensure that this will be the case is likely to be well-spent. In any case, the more poems in the list they know, the better the candidates' choices are likely to be. A few responses ended up flirting with the task because they only really had eyes for a second poem they clearly loved.

Linear comparison of the two poems can work but responses where the argument is structured by reference to technique first can often seem less superficial.

Roughly a third of the candidature answered the Metaphysical poets tasks and here, Question 10 on John Donne's The Apparition was the more popular choice. The rubric had a very specific focus on the use of direct address and centres are reminded to ensure that students learn to approach tasks of this kind with due technical diligence rather than skirting the core of the question. Despite some minor issues of expression, this candidate maintains a strong focus on the task:

Both of the poems aforementioned make use of the archetypal apostrophe voice; that is when there is a passive listener involved. The apostrophe ~~is~~ in Donne's "Woman's Constancy" is used to portray the persona's frustration following what seems to be a one night stand. Through the use of rhetorical questions or anthyppophoras, the persona braces himself for the cliché of

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responses he often hears following a night's session: "Tomorrow when thou leav'st, what wilt thou say?". The use of the apostrophe makes it much more personal and directed at the woman he spent his night with. This comes at contrast to "Song: Go catch a falling star" where the persona is similarly frustrated, but does not have any specific person in mind. However, one may suggest that from the title and use of ~~the~~ cliché's that Donne is referring to a woman's innate ability to be inconstant, thus emphasizing his frustration beyond the passive listener.

Romantic poetry was by far and away the most popular text for Section B, dominated in turn by responses to Question 11 on Ode on Melancholy and beauty. In fact nearly two thirds of all answers were written about this task. In this example, the candidate blends comments on technique with suitable reference, critical perspective and context well.

Sensory imagery is another heavy aspect in which both poets used to emphasize the beauty in nature and emotions. For Shelley, there is synaesthesia used in "water-lilies, broad and bright" and the amount of colors and descriptions of nature is almost sensory overload to the audience. ~~Keats~~ The in-depth description seems to try and distract the audience from reality, as we are being told ~~the~~ Falpi's idea of a ~~dreams~~ picturesque. This could reflect how much Shelley wanted to escape from his own life, as his ~~her~~ mental health was declining and his dying wife and daughter as well. We sense undertones of ~~see~~ mourning and unease with "the river's trembling edge", reflecting that the beauty we see is only an illusion, as reality is harsh and unforgiving. For Keats, sensory imagery is used particularly in ~~the~~ "aching pleasure writh" and "burst Joy's grape against his palate fine", both vivid descriptions of human sensations. Critic Karl Wendersdorf commented that Keats believed "consciousness is extinguished by death", hence the praising of beauty in sadness through sensory imagery heightens Keat's view on human sadness, as he sees the beauty within it.

Both poems focus on the idea of personifying nature or emotions, as to accentuate the beauty of nature and sadness. ~~Keats~~ Shelley using the



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Turn over ▶

hypallage of "visionary-flowers", showing his belief of ~~at~~ nature being omniscient and glorifying nature. TS Elliot once critiqued that Shelley followed Dante's logic of "sweetest songs sing the saddest thoughts" too much, and this poem is ambiguous on whether there is a very evident proof of sadness behind the ~~then~~ delicate descriptions of nature. Keats focuses on personifying emotions, mentioning "She dwells with Beauty", and ~~Capit~~ capitalizing "Joy", "Melancholy" to depict the beauty of emotions. Both poets present beauty through personification, intensifying the features of emotions and nature.

Only one candidate opted for Q10 and only one for either of the Victorian poetry tasks. The latter was strong and part of it is reproduced here for the purposes of exemplification:

Remember is a petrarchan sonnet, the alternate flowing rhythmic aural canvas ~~erect~~ ^{overt} sounded by the abbaabba ~~rhyming~~ ^{overt} ~~stanza~~ dissolves into the more compact edifice of the sestet. The Darkling ~~has~~ Thrush is one of Hardy's most greatest verses, the ~~care~~ carefully crafted musicality is beautiful in its execution. The word 'darkling' possesses a Keatsian reference - 'darkling I listen' the letter 'l' producing a soft consonance. The poem was initially named 'The Century's End 1900' for it was written on the final days of the ~~1900~~ 19th century. The ~~#~~ word 'stanza' has its etymology in the Italian word 'stanza' which means 'room'. The Darkling Thrush ~~captures~~ ~~houses~~ alludes to the cranial room where memories reside. Hardy, as child, was known to wait for the setting sun to illuminate the red painted stairs of his house. Reminiscent of this ritual is the death of a century. Hardy's stylistic themes of fate the negative powers of fate, frustration and loss

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rememberate in the first two stanzas. Christina Rossetti was subject to frail health much of her life; in the poem she ~~drifts~~ allows the verse to drift in the liminal space of the ~~be~~ living and the dead. She begins with the ~~impart~~ imperative 'Remember' "Remember me". The "silent land" she speaks of is the heavens from whose gates no mortal can return. ~~There is~~ Her spiritual thoughts infuses with the profane - the universal feelings of melancholia, grief and happiness. The poet marks a ~~selfless~~ display

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 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)
- 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). Make sure your answer does not deal with the second part of the question only. Often, the assertion is intended to help you with AO5 (“exploring literary texts informed by different interpretations”)
- remember that the play in Section A was written to be performed - 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

Thank you,

Principal Examiner (IAL English Literature WET04_01)

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