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Examiners' Report

Principal Examiner Feedback

January 2022

Pearson Edexcel International Advanced Level  
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 relevant contextual factors and critical interpretations in their responses. 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 and critical factors. Although the entry for this series was low, it was evident that nearly all candidates were once again capable of engaging with their chosen texts at least on some level. At the higher levels, responses were impressive, demonstrating analytical acuity, 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.

## **Section A: Shakespeare**

There were so few answers to some of these questions that it would not be sensible to generalise on the basis of the available evidence. That said, where useful exemplification exists, it will be provided.

At the majority of the observed points, 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, except in a very few cases where there was very little to reward for this aspect of the profile.

### **Q1**

Only one candidate answered the question on temptation in *Measure for Measure*.

### **Q2**

There were no responses to the task on social status in *Measure for Measure*.

### **Q3**

The task on male domination and the exceptions to that in *The Taming of the Shrew* drew two answers.

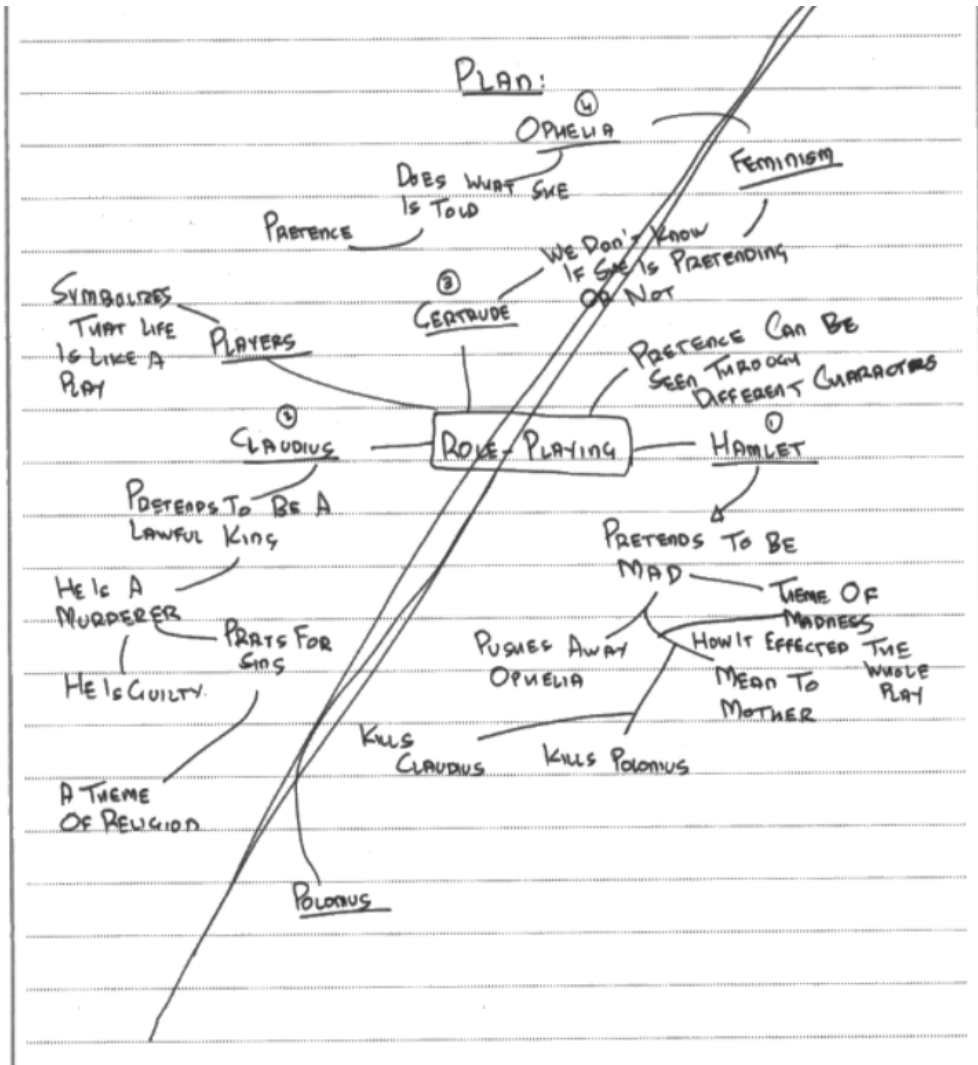
### **Q4**

Only one candidate answered the question on what is taught and what is learned in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

**Q5**

This was by far the most popular option in Section A, with a number of candidates responding enthusiastically to the *Hamlet* question on role-playing and pretence. The best answers had a range of examples from the play with useful direct reference and a good sense of both context and critical analyses (Freudian and psychoanalytic interpretations were understandably popular, given the nature of the task).

The value of planning is often mentioned in reports of this kind. In this case the candidate provides a sound starting point for their answer:



This example is nicely written but tending towards narration and lacking sustained focus on language, context or critical response (though these things did appear elsewhere in the essay). Not every paragraph needs quotations, but some certainly would certainly benefit from at least one.

Shakespeare's use of role-playing in 'Hamlet' can also be used to understand the contrast between ~~the~~ the character of Laertes and Prince Hamlet. Laertes can be ~~more~~ understood as a character who plays the role he is supposed to play. He immediately ~~or~~ travels back to Denmark when he learns about the death of his father and sister and he declares to avenge his family just like Prince Hamlet. However, Laertes is quick to act on his proclamations rather than Prince Hamlet who takes a long time to reach to the conclusion that Claudius is, in fact, the actual murderer of his father.

It can be argued with confidence that role-playing & pretence are indeed everywhere in Hamlet, to the extent that it even defines the plot of the play itself. As a revenge tragedy, Shakespeare uses role-playing in different forms to communicate the idea of appearance versus reality, which in turn reflect the Elizabethan societal concerns about political uncertainty. Most obviously is the physical version of role-playing, the 'play within a play', and more up to interpretation is Hamlet's madness and the deception of Gertrude & Claudius. These ~~are~~ all ultimately incorporated to highlight the easy nature of deception amongst a world of pervasive uncertainty & instability.

This answer also finishes strongly:

Polonius dies & Laertes demands justice, Claudius asks him what he will do "to show yourself in deed your father's son" by action rather than words. This pivotal moment symbolises the character Claudius has been playing, ~~the~~ to which he now uses this character in order to retain his status as a King. Both he and Gertrude seem as symbols of appearance over reality, but while Gertrude is kept deliberately ambiguous, Claudius' certain guilt represents the deception that plagues both political & familial life.

In conclusion, Shakespeare uses role-playing to represent the political, social & religious concerns of Elizabethan England. Through the play-within-a-play, Hamlet's madness, and the role of Gertrude & Claudius, Shakespeare shows how pervasive and universal the idea of deception is, and how easily people can manipulate it to align with their own aims.

The Royal Shakespeare production company supports this idea by portraying Hamlet as ~~is~~ faking his madness. Hamlet is not truly mad, but simply role-playing as mad in order to manipulate those around him, which is comparable to Claudius.

This is an interesting discussion of film versions, relevantly used.

First and foremost, Hamlet's act of insanity is used to reflect the effect of hesitance and uncertainty on a person. This role-playing of Hamlet ~~can~~ shows the conflict between two identities of Hamlet: ~~Prince of Denmark~~ Prince of Denmark, and Hamlet, son of King Hamlet. ~~In~~ The film adaptation directed by Zeffirelli ~~show~~ expresses idea fully in Act 2, Scene 2. ~~The~~ Mel Gibson, the actor who plays Hamlet, delivers his soliloquy in a prince's armour, but in a manner that resembles a child throwing a tantrum. The clear dissonance ~~between~~ between his appearance and attitude reflects the loss of Hamlet's identity in the midst of his acting. While acting in the interests of the Son of King Hamlet, ~~being~~ being viewed as insane by many in the court, he has neglected the Prince of Denmark's royal image. ~~Furthermore,~~ (In Kenneth Branagh's film adaptation starring himself,) Hamlet's ~~in~~ role-playing of madness results in his own irresolution, as he is unable to entirely act in one of his own identities' interest.  $\downarrow$  the same scene is carried out in the solitude of ~~his~~ Hamlet's own reading room. As he delivers the monologue, he walks once

## Q6

5 candidates answered the question on scrutiny in *Hamlet*. In this case, once again, the use of examples is made relevant and offers a good sense of the play as something to be performed and watched as much as read.

In the play directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1996, he made the set with mirrors reflecting back each other to symbolise society's watchful eyes. In more modern plays, Hamlet is seen staring straight into a CCTV camera, which can be more relatable to modern audiences. In both cases, it portrays the prison-like qualities of Denmark's palace, well fitting to the quote 'Denmark's a prison' trapping and destroying everyone in the process.

The task on the roles of The Duke of Gloucester and Lear in *King Lear* drew three responses.

## Q8

The question on the natural and unnatural in *King Lear* led to two answers. In this case, the candidate offers a persuasive and focused discussion concentrating initially on Edmund:

Edmund refuses to obey the arbitrary human laws which he feels "deprive" him and "brand" ~~at~~ him as a bastard who can never amount to anything. "But why is it that ~~his~~ his ambition to succeed his father must be viewed as greed? ~~Following the social order and~~ Shakespeare presents this point through his portrayal of Edmund; that Edmund's sins are purely due to society's prejudice against him, the "sun, the moon, and the stars" have decided that he must be a "villain(s) by necessity". So why is it, that ~~going~~ going against an unjust system, is viewed as unnatural? Through the playwright's skill, the audience can ~~question~~ question the meaning of righteousness. ~~However, this entire train of thought can only come about among modern audiences, since the prejudice against bastards was too ingrained in the minds of the medieval and Victorian audience.~~ From this, we can infer that ~~Edmund~~ Edmund as a character is meant to represent the effect of society's stifling and arbitrary convictions on a person, and that however unjust these convictions are, straying away from the herd can only bring obstruction and ruin.



Ideas relating to the plays in performance continue to be a strength of candidates' work. Such discussions need not be over-developed to do well. These elements in their answers can allow candidates to access both the contextual and interpretive aspects of the assessment model.

As in earlier series, one 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 often intended to stimulate discussion and help the candidates to find a way into interpretive variation. It is not always intended to be agreed with!

### **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 tended to acknowledge fewer, more obvious poetic techniques opted for 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 bands. 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.

#### **Q9**

There were four answers on a lack of satisfaction in 'The Pulley'. The other poem chosen tended to be 'To His Coy Mistress'

#### **Q10**

There were also four answers on awakening in 'The Good Morrow'.

#### **Q11**

The invitation to consider a sense of loss in 'On This Day I Complete my Thirty-Sixth Year' by George Gordon, Lord Byron was popular.

In this case, the candidate relatively neatly sums up their reasons for choosing 'The Sick Rose' as the second poem on which to comment. This sort of introduction can offer a very clear point from which to extend discussion.

In the first half of ~~the~~ Byron's 'On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year', Byron talks about his feelings on turning older and how he feels different from who he is before, he feels ~~the~~ <sup>that he has lost</sup> ~~the~~ the feeling of being loved and his youth. Whereas in 'The Sick Rose', Blake speaks about the loss of purity, the loss of control and the loss of virginity and love through the presentation of the symbolic rose and the invisible worm, which links to the relationship of men and women ~~in the~~ during the <sup>Romantic</sup> ~~Romantic~~ period.

Byron's poem was written ~~during the~~ and when Byron reached thirty-six years old, ~~when at the~~ and before he embarks on one of his conquests in the Greek wars and loses his life on the battlefield. As a man born into high-class, wealth and honour, the desire to end his life in extravagance is reflected in the liberating and empowering tone ~~too~~ towards the end of the poem. Meanwhile, by the time ~~Bysshe~~ Shelley composed "The Question" he had suffered from the loss of two children, his daughter Claire and his son William, both at a young age. With his <sup>reputation</sup> ~~status~~ in Britain also suffering from a nosedive due to his scandalous affairs involving taking another wife, the loss that ~~is~~ Shelley ~~it~~ illustrates is a combination of melancholy ~~from~~ derived from losses that range from his reputation to his children.

### Q12

7 candidates opted to write about Emily Brontë's approach to violence in 'Last Lines'. This response closes effectively:

~~Violence according to the Oxford dictionary is~~  
~~behaviour~~ violence is behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill. It is also strength of emotion of or of a natural destructive force and the idea of and ~~some~~ concept of violence is portrayed ~~beautifully~~ in a ~~bittersweet~~ bitter, melancholy manner by both parts and its <sup>smooth</sup> delivery leaves readers with a ~~note~~ morbid afterthought.

Three candidates opted to discuss the ways in which a story is told in Thomas Hardy's 'A Wife in London'.

### Q14

One candidate wrote about the presentation of a journey in 'I now had only to retrace' by Charlotte Brontë

Engagement can express itself in many forms. Though it isn't always perhaps good to be as open as here, this candidate's response to Q11 has a merit all of its own:

Lord Byron's expressive and flamboyant writing lends well to the themes of his poetry "on this day I complete my thirty-sixth year" explores the loss of youth and love and overcoming the grief of wasted years to move on and live. "My days are in the yellow leaf, the flowers and fruits of love are gone; The worm, the canker and the grief are mine and" Expressing how he is in the ending stages of life, symbolised by the yellow leaf. He expresses how he never found love in his youth when his 'flowers and fruits' were bearing, probably has some sexual connotations there, I can't tell, it's Lord Byron after all.

## **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 should also be discussed in terms of context and critical response – this is often less well covered
- 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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