

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

GCE Advanced Subsidiary Level

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| <p>Paper 8695/02 Composition</p> |
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General comments

There were many enjoyable and pleasing scripts which displayed both imaginative and discursive writing skills in a consistent and secure fashion. Candidates seem to enjoy the opportunity to write at length and better answers show a high level of maturity and originality. Standards of accuracy and fluency are for the most part high. Some candidates fall into the trap of cliché at times (such as on **Question 4**) and should be encouraged to think of original storylines or to play around with generic conventions.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

There were no responses to this title.

Question 2

There were some very strong personal responses here with a good degree of originality and enthusiasm. Candidates showed the ability to adapt and imagine under pressure. One or two answers were too fictional and unreal to sustain the nature of the genre.

Question 3

This was a popular choice and elicited some poetic and sophisticated use of language, which developed and detailed the sense of contrast. Often based on the candidates' own experiences of places, answers were revealing and effective.

Question 4

This was the most popular choice of this section and encouraged some good, imaginative responses; some, however, tended to rely on rather clichéd situations (the horror film, the chase) or left the nature of the situation and reason for it unclear. The motive, implicit or explicit, is essential in areas like this.

Question 5

This produced competent and proficient work especially where different ingredients of the subject under review were assessed and explored. Weaker answers tried to substitute narrative or a summary of content for opinion and judgement.

Question 6

This was successfully addressed when candidates took one view rather than trying to offer a balanced response. The rubric of the title asks the writer to take a particular stance (although balanced views are not ineligible) and is designed to allow for a more subjective and personal response rather than an anonymous impersonal distant answer.

Question 7

This was answered quite diligently and illustrated with a good range of examples and scenarios. Better answers also gave a personal response to possibilities and prospects creating livelier and more engaged essays.

Question 8

In the majority of cases the format of the letter was set out clearly and arguments were presented cogently and combined with a friendly, persuasive tone suitable for the purpose.

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| <p>Paper 8695/09 Poetry and Prose</p> |
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General comments

On the whole, Examiners felt that the candidates who sat papers in this session were less confident with their material than in the summer. There was less assured and directed writing at the top of the range, and more candidates who relied on paraphrase and summary without focusing their answers on the questions set. While most candidates demonstrated that they had a working knowledge of their set texts, it must be remembered that this knowledge is only the foundation of the examination, which tests how candidates can select from and apply that knowledge in answer to specific questions in the paper. Reference to and quotation from texts is essential in the development of argument, and in passage-based questions in particular, Examiners are looking for a very detailed examination of the extract on the question paper. Too many candidates used these as springboards for general discussion, or merely summarised the content of the passage.

In the open **(a)** questions, successful candidates are able to construct a clear argument in response to the question, drawing on their knowledge of the text. They make specific reference to particular episodes, which support their argument, with the occasional use of quotation to highlight key aspects. Such a candidate has a clear sense of direction and organisation, selecting only those areas of a text pertinent to their discussion.

In the passage-based **(b)** questions, successful candidates respond directly to the task set, basing their answer very closely on the printed extract, making links to the rest of the text when required by the question. They quote quite extensively from the passage, with commentary on language, imagery, form and construction, guided by the requirements of the particular question.

Successful candidates do not rely on summary or paraphrase, and show an awareness of the set question.

Candidates answered on the full range of texts, with Plath and Achebe being the most favoured authors on Paper 3, while on Paper 9 Miller and Shakespeare were equally popular, along with Achebe again.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

William Blake: *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

- (a)** Many candidates answering this question argued that the Songs of Innocence are entirely poems of 'happy cheer', some making the point that this provides the contrast with Songs of Experience. This was an entirely appropriate argument, though a number of candidates spent some time discussing poems from Experience, which was outside the requirements of the question. Some candidates did not successfully make the distinction, and discussed these poems as if they were from Songs of Innocence. Candidates who were alert to the nuance of Blake's language argued that although the poems seem to be cheerful, as might be expected as a contrast to Experience, hints of the tone of Experience are already present in some of the Innocence poems.

- (b) Most candidates who answered on Blake opted for the discussion of *The Human Abstract*. Less confident candidates offered a line by line paraphrase of the poem, often betraying misunderstandings. Links with other poems were made without acknowledgement of context or meaning. More successful candidates discussed the poems fully, linking discussion of language and imagery with the discussion of the meaning of the poem. This allowed for fuller, more fruitful comparisons with other poems, enabling a more considered judgement of how characteristic the poem's concerns and methods are of Blake's poetry in the Songs.

Question 2

Touched with Fire: ed. Hydes

- (a) Few candidates attempted this question, but among those that did, some interesting essays were written on 'My Busconductor', the poem quoted in the question, 'On My First Sonne', 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' and 'Macaw and Little Miss'. Some other poems were used with less success, but Examiners were surprised by the lack of discussion of such poems as 'Snake', 'As kingfishers catch fire', 'Horses' and 'Swedes', for example.
- (b) 'The Second Coming' proved a popular choice, even with candidates who struggled with the poem's meaning. Some seemed to be approaching the poem for the first time, suggesting possible meanings as they progressed. Sometimes these essays were fresh and insightful, but were more often confused and uncertain. A number of candidates noted the phrase Achebe borrows as the title of his novel on this paper, and wrote lengthy paragraphs about the novel, which were not relevant here. Among better-prepared candidates there was valuable discussion of form, imagery and language. Such candidates noted the growing violence and horror in the language, the rhetoric and the developing ominous tone of the poem. Knowledgeable candidates linked the reference to anarchy with WW1 and the rise of ideologies such as communism and fascism, while one candidate identified the challenge to Christianity posed by Darwin's theories as the driving force behind the poem. Some powerful answers were those in which the feelings generated by recent world events were compared with the tone of hopelessness and despair in Yeats' poem.

Question 3

Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*

- (a) Candidates who chose to answer this question used the logical choices of poems, 'Tulips' and the two 'Poppies' poems. On the whole these were handled well, as most candidates commented on how Plath transforms the literal flowers into images which reflect the psychology of the narrative voice of each poem. There were some very sensitive discussions in response to the question.
- (b) Most candidates answered this question on 'Paralytic', and here the answers varied widely. A large number attempted a narrative summary of the poem, which does not lend itself to that approach. Many times individual metaphors were discussed in isolation, with curious interpretations which were not linked with a reading of the whole poem. The most successful answers discussed the whole poem, examining the narrator's attitude to illness through close examination of the language and imagery. From this foundation of understanding of meaning and method, such candidates drew comparisons with other poems in the collection.

Question 4

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*

- (a) The question on Nwoye and manhood proved very popular. Some answers concentrated on the contrasts between Nwoye and his father to the exclusion of the concern with manhood in the novel, but most candidates found plentiful material, and were able to show a good command of the text. Some interesting answers considered Obierika and Ezinma as comparisons, which helped to achieve a balanced consideration of manhood in the novel, and some suggested that Nwoye's manhood is flexible and balanced, enabling him to survive through compromise, in contrast to his father.

- (b) This passage was also answered widely, though few candidates noted the words 'Comment closely' at the opening of the question. Many answers here were general and narrative. Although they usually acknowledged Okonkwo's unhappiness and patience during his exile, and some noted the events which happen in Umuofia meanwhile, many opportunities were lost by failing to examine the detail and language of the passage itself. Those who did, commented on the names which Okonkwo gives to the children born in exile, on the language used to describe Okonkwo here which has not been used previously (e.g. 'grateful'), the rainbow image at the end and language such as 'wasted', 'weary' and 'dragging'.

Question 5

Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*

- (a) Many of the answers on Miss Havisham were hampered by a tendency to paraphrase parts of the narrative. A large number of essays consisted of summaries of each section of the novel in which Miss Havisham appears. More successful answers referred to the same episodes, but with a closer attention to the 'ways' in which Dickens does or does not create sympathy. Such answers, for example, noted the cruel dialogue with Estella in the early meetings, but the descriptions of the decay which Pip discovers later. Sharp answers noted that the reader is guided by the narrator to a large degree, and Pip's changing views of Miss Havisham are a crucial narrative method employed by Dickens.
- (b) Magwitch's description of his court case offered considerable opportunity to consider how the manner and language of his account supports the content of it. Unfortunately these opportunities were seldom grasped, as most candidates summarised the content of the passage, though they noted the differences between Compeyson and Magwitch and that the tale demonstrates injustice. Many candidates' answers would have been much improved with close attention to the writing of the passage.

Question 6

Doris Lessing: *Martha Quest*

- (a) Candidates who attempted this question usually showed themselves very aware of the divisions in Rhodesian society presented in the novel. While most commented on race, some threw the net wider and discussed class and age divisions as well. Sometimes the essays were illustrative, forgetting that the question asked for discussion of 'the ways' the divisions are presented. More directed answers often focused on how the divisions are perceived through Martha's eyes, offering a degree of detachment and comment.
- (b) Candidates who attempted the passage in this question often found it difficult to engage with Lessing's dense prose, and discussed her thoughts and dissatisfaction in a general way. More confident answers traced the progression of Martha's thoughts through the passage, commenting on the references, the italicisations, the sentence length, her observations and the internalisation of the passage within her mind.

Question 7

Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*

- (a) Candidates generally showed good knowledge of Biff and Happy in response to this question, but selecting and focusing the information to provide an answer to the question was a problem for some. A number of candidates relied too much on character studies, whereas the question asked about characterisation and importance. More successful answers noted the contrasts between the characters, illustrating the parallels between Happy and Willy for example, and the importance of Biff's disillusionment in his father and his father's values.
- (b) Those who answered on the passage between Linda and Willy often discussed the relationship in general terms rather than focusing on how it is dramatised in the extract. It was surprising how many candidates omitted to mention the Woman, and Willy's infidelity, at all. Those candidates who were alert to the drama wrote very well, noting the stage directions, the stockings, the laughter of the Woman and her gradual emergence, alongside Willy's dialogue of self recognition and Linda's dialogue of total support.

Question 8

William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*

- (a) A number of candidates agreed unequivocally with Malcolm's assessment and referred to the heinous deeds committed by Macbeth, and to the cruel speeches of Lady Macbeth. Surprisingly few candidates challenged Malcolm's judgement, or referred to the characters' mental anguish, the involvement of the witches, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and suicide or Macbeth's final soliloquy.
- (b) In answering this question, most candidates understood why Malcolm claimed to be full of lust and avarice but not all completely understood Macduff's stance. Though most commented on the comparisons with Macbeth, fewer picked up and commented directly on the play's and the question's concern with kingship.

Question 9

Caryl Churchill: *Top Girls*

Too few candidates answered on *Top Girls* for it to be possible to generally comment on performance in response to these questions.