

FRENCH LITERATURE

Paper 8670/04

Texts

General comments

As expected, Molière and Zobel were the most popular authors. There was a good response to the return of Mauriac, and a fair degree of interest in that of Flaubert. Fewer opted for Anouilh, Camus, Le Clézio and Del Castillo, but all questions were attempted.

Only one or two Centres presented candidates who wrote at excessive length. As has been the case for some time, an essay which could have scored a high mark was capped at a maximum of 17. Conversely, there were more unduly short essays than usual. Candidates should be reminded that the category 'insubstantial' has a maximum mark of 9. An essay covering only about one side of paper (in average handwriting) would in most cases be insubstantial in content. As usual, a number of candidates answered two questions on the same text. It must be repeated that this practice is self-penalising.

Examiners passed comment on the number of commentaries in which candidates embarked on the first question without appearing to consider the scope of the other two. This led to over-lengthy answers in the former case, and unnecessary repetition in the latter.

The vast majority of scripts were legible and presentable. A major area of tactical error was, once again, the writing of lengthy introductions incorporating irrelevant information about the author, or generalisations about the book. Such material almost invariably announces an essay which does not tackle the question. An introductory paragraph which outlines the candidate's approach to the question and communicates a clear understanding of its implications is of much greater value. At the other end, the best essays have a concluding paragraph which reflects the overall direction they have taken, whereas the weaker ones just stop, sometimes mentioning the essay title/topic but leaving an assortment of loose ends. In between the two, examiners sometimes find a single block of writing with no paragraphing at all, or a series of paragraphs in apparently random order, some of which consist of only one sentence. Thoughtful paragraphing and logical sequencing of points greatly enhance the impression made on the reader. Candidates could also be advised that the paraphrasing of a text, e.g. 'X dit que....' is unwelcome. Examiners are looking for comment, not paraphrase.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

Mauriac: *Le Nœud de vipères*

- (a) By no means all candidates correctly identified the specific cause of Louis' state of mind in this extract. In order to provide a full answer, it was necessary to refer to the burnt fragments of letters found in the bedroom grate, as the most significant factor here is the discovery that Isa was jealous of her husband's relationships with certain other individuals. This harks back to their conversation in which she confessed to him that she was often waiting in vain for him to go to her in her bedroom. Weaker candidates answered in general terms about his sense of regret at the mishandling of his family relationships, and their answers unnecessarily overlapped with the second part of the commentary. Most were able to comment in detail on the reasons for Louis' sense of remorse, and also to identify the roles of the characters that had died. What was missing from many answers was a sense of what prevented Louis from responding to people in a way which would have broken the ice.

- (b) The essay on religion produced some very good answers, although many dwelt at length on the negative aspects and gave too little attention to the matter of Louis' 'conversion'. This was all too often seen as a sudden experience which changed the character from bad to good in a flash. The novel has a carefully crafted series of episodes in which Louis alludes to the nagging questions in his mind about the hidden meaning of life. This sequence makes the 'conversion' more credible. Thus, candidates who analysed 'bourgeois' Christianity with its hypocrisy and social posturing in contrast with the lonely soul-searching of the central character were given greater credit than those who dwelt only on the domestic tensions generated by religion, important though these are.

Question 2

Molière: *Les Femmes savantes*

- (a) The vast majority of candidates identified the role of Vadius in the background to this scene. There was less unanimity as to his status: he was described as Trissotin's friend and as his enemy, and a number thought that he was a true scholar in contrast to the deceitful Trissotin. The best answers concentrated on the vanity of both characters which led to the quarrel. A surprising number of answers commented only in general terms about Trissotin's defence of Philaminte, or related it to his desire to pursue his sinister aim, whereas the significant issue here was the enthusiasm displayed by Philaminte for the poem. Credit was duly given for specific reference to this. The second part of the question produced answers which accurately described Philiminte's intentions, although they were not always sufficiently clear about 'le moyen' which she thought would turn Henriette into an intellectual. Candidates' opinions (omitted by some) were appropriately censorious, referring justifiably to Philiminte's tyrannical role in the household and her single-mindedness. What was sadly lacking from almost all responses was a sense of the absurdity of her plan. Most candidates seemed indignant rather than amused, and examiners were delighted to find the word 'ridicule' on the rare occasions it was used. Answers on Henriette in the third section were generally sound if often overburdened with paraphrase. Those who referred to her as a mouthpiece for Molière failed to convey an understanding of her role as representing one particular attitude towards *préciosité*, which cannot be construed as that of the author.
- (b) Those who discussed Clitandre's 'bon mot' successfully related it to the context, but in some cases dwelt at undue length on the rivalry between him and Trissotin for Henriette's hand in marriage. Attempts to define 'un sot savant' were not always successful. The best answers focused on the absurdity of those who seek to display intellectual qualities which in reality they do not possess. As usual, too much was made of the idea of one character being Molière's spokesman. This led some candidates to overstate the view that Clitandre takes an anti-intellectual stance. It would have been more appropriate to explore examples of the satirisation of excess, obsessive behaviour and, again, the pretentiousness which is invariably at the heart of Molière's comedy.

Question 3

Anouilh: *Becket*

- (a) The first question produced largely accurate answers with varying degrees of detail about the war, and appropriate comments about the King's concern for his own safety. Responses to the other two questions were much more varied in quality. Weaker candidates often misinterpreted the word *ennuyé*. Those who understood it showed an awareness of the King's displeasure at the change in Becket's behaviour, but there was some confusion between his promotion to Chancellor and his later appointment as Archbishop. Candidates broadly understood the difference in the characters' attitudes towards the common people and the King's impatience with Becket's concern for them. Answers to (iii) were all too often vague and general, failing to point out that this remark is a sign of things to come later in the play.
- (b) This might be described as an 'obvious' question with a clear agenda concerning Becket's rift with Henri in the conflict between Church and State. The quality of candidates' answers varied not according to their perception of the issue, but to the amount of detail they were able to provide, and also to the structure of their essays. This was an opportunity for well-prepared candidates to show their paces, whereas weaker ones resorted to narrative and paraphrase. The repeated use of 'X dit que' was found in these answers, and could not be rewarded on the same level as exegesis.

Question 4

Le Clézio: *Le Chercheur d'or*

- (a) The first appearance of this text in the main examination session produced mostly sound work from those who chose option (a). What was wanted in (i) was some detail about why Alexis felt the need to leave home again, and this should have included his dislike of 'polite society' and of the working environment, not just generalisations about his preference for freedom. In (ii), candidates were appropriately supportive of Laure's disgruntlement. Some answers could have gone into more detail with regard to her complaint that *plus jamais il n'y aura de place pour nous ici!* Candidates' opinions about Alexis's decision to leave were mostly appropriate, and the best answers, as always, struck a balance between black and white.
- (b) Only a few candidates tackled this question, which was probably just as well. In most cases, it seemed that they ignored the very precise indication provided on the question paper of the context of Alexis's remark. If they had checked, they would have realised that the burden of this issue is about what was to happen next (i.e. the war in France), not what had happened already. As a result of this misunderstanding, many candidates scored low marks here, as their answers did not contain enough relevant material.

Question 5

Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*

- (a) This question was attempted by relatively few candidates. They tended to make much of Homais' role in the club-foot operation, and of his being the unconscious provider of the poison which Emma used. They were less successful in tracking his presence throughout the novel as a satirical portrait of self-importance and ambition. Examiners would have welcomed more examples than they found of his pomposity and tendency to pontificate. He is, after all, constantly trying to be someone and something which he is not, and the fact that society rewards him for this at the end of the novel constitutes a jaundiced comment on that society which is characteristic of Flaubert.
- (b) The great danger which candidates should avoid in dealing with a lengthy novel is the temptation to recount what happened. There was little merit in narrating Emma's relationships with Charles, Rodolphe and Léon without drawing attention to the ways in which they all fell short of her expectations. Candidates did well to point out that Emma's indulgence in romantic fiction, together with her extremely sheltered early life, were responsible for her delusions about both marriage and adultery. Some referred most effectively to the ball at La Vaubyessard as another stimulus to her capacity to fantasize. Relatively few of them were able to focus on the discrepancy between fantasy and reality which Emma was too naïve to foresee. The best answers alluded to the hollowness of the lives at the château where Emma saw only excitement and romantic intrigue, and to the obvious shortcomings of the three men who were supposed to whisk her away from her humdrum existence. Perhaps a greater awareness of Flaubert's manifest contempt for his characters would have helped some candidates to see the point of the question more clearly.

Question 6

Del Castillo: *Tanguy*

- (a) Both of these questions generated answers which were heavily dependent on narrative. Candidates wasted time and space on relating Tanguy's life with his mother before the two became separated, rather than on her role in his life as an absentee, and on their brief encounter at the end. A plausible case was made by many for the idea of a series of substitute mother figures (including a couple of male ones!). Some took the view that the notion postulated by the title was not acceptable, and answers which provided an explanation as to why the idea was voiced in the first place, as well as alternative suggestions, were welcomed.
- (b) This question produced a majority of competent answers but also a lot of plain narrative. The best answers saw the opportunity to point the contrast between Tanguy's sustained sense of solitude and the warmth of companionship, in most cases temporary, which he experiences at regular intervals.

Question 7

Camus: *Les Justes*

- (a) The contrast between Kaliayev and Stepan was broadly understood by all candidates who answered this question. They were able to comment, with greater or lesser degrees of detail and insight, on Stepan's hard-line attitude and Kaliayev's more humane approach. Some candidates felt that Stepan's position was justifiable in view of the treatment he had received in prison, and did not always point out that his inflexibility and dealing in absolutes are not necessarily to be perceived as a strength. Those who sided with Kaliayev were able to produce a more balanced argument, and the best essays showed a firm grasp of the implications of the central debate between the two characters. It must be pointed out, as was the case with recent work on Sartre, that weaker candidates tend to reproduce ill-digested notes about existentialism, and such material is no adequate substitute for an analysis of what the characters say.
- (b) Candidates who chose this question fared less well than those who opted for (a). The implications of the question are bound up with the play's title, and with Dora's despairing cry that being *les justes* excludes her and Kaliayev from conventional happiness. Candidates found it difficult to discuss this issue. The dramatic aspect is of course more a matter of opinion. Critics have taken the view that the emotional and sexual frustration evoked by the relationship helps to counterbalance the high-minded philosophical debate and to infuse some dramatic emotional tension. Some candidates did perceive this, but not with much clarity.

Question 8

Zobel: *La Rue Cases-Nègres*

- (a) There is a skill in choosing the right question, and a lot of candidates made a bad decision in this case, because they were not able to do more than relate what the narrator describes in the course of the novel. On the positive side, most did see the importance of José's fascination with the stories told by Médouze, and also the effect on him of going to school. However, the repeated use in many essays of 'José décrit....' led to a superficial treatment of the question. The better answers showed an awareness of the gradual development of the narrator's perspective on life as he becomes more experienced, more aware and more mature. To score a good mark here it was essential to do more than just describe life as lived in the countryside and the town. The child's perception of his surroundings and of society changes, and that is the point.
- (b) A large number of candidates chose this topic, and the quality of answers consequently varied from the sketchy and randomly structured to the detailed and cogent. Weaker candidates got bogged down in an unduly lengthy description of the life and aspirations of M'man Tine. Her ambitions for her daughter and grandson have their importance, but there are other characters to mention, not least José himself. The best essays were able to focus on relevant details and give appropriate weight to the development of the narrator's ambition from success at school to social reform.