

# LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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## GCE Advanced Subsidiary Level

**Paper 8695/02**

**Composition**

See Paper 8693/02 above.

**Paper 8695/09**

**Poetry, Prose and Drama**

### General comments

With a far greater number of candidates than last year, Examiners saw a range of approaches to questions, but again answers were dominated by Blake and Achebe. Although answers were offered on every text on the two papers, only *Great Expectations* saw appreciable numbers.

Again most candidates showed a good accurate knowledge of their texts. Very few candidates seemed unprepared for the exam. Knowledge of plot, character and theme was usually present, often to a sound standard; it was in their ability to select, illustrate and argue that candidates showed their level of achievement. The knowledge is essential, but alone it is not enough at this level; what counts is what candidates are able to do with that knowledge and how they use it to address the questions set on the examination paper.

Reference to specific episodes in a novel or play, or to specific ideas explored in poetry, are essential to develop arguments, and where candidates are writing about authorial technique, that reference needs support from some quotation from the text. As has been said in this Report in the past, Examiners do not expect abundant detailed quotation, but they do expect that answers will be supported by some clear reference to the text. A large number of answers in this session had no textual reference apart from passages of paraphrase.

It is therefore particularly important that candidates answering the passage-based option answer the questions, which inevitably ask them to look at the detail of the section printed on the paper. It is very disappointing to see candidates missing opportunities by answering questions which ask them to 'comment closely' or discuss 'methods' or 'presentation' without a single quotation from the printed excerpt.

### Comments on specific questions

#### **Question 1**

William Blake: *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

- (a) Some of the answers to this question showed impressive knowledge of Blake's philosophical background, and even made productive reference to other works by the poet. The premise of the question was generally agreed with wholeheartedly, though many candidates found it easier to argue that Blake disliked organised religion, with reference to poems usually taken from 'Songs of Experience', while they found the 'religious spirit' more difficult to illustrate. Those who did referred to Blake's belief in the immanence of God and to the Christian references in the poems. Interestingly, 'The Tyger' was frequently used to illustrate both sides of the argument, though with markedly more success on the 'religious spirit' side.

- (b) Discussion of 'Spring' often included reference to a harmony between humanity and nature, the innocence of children and the religious significance of the Lamb. Candidates were able to discuss elements of form, with the short lines, rhythm and refrain, and often compared these with other poems. Some commented further that in this poem, unlike some others, Night is not threatening, while others picked up some suggestions of Experience in this Innocence poem. Some candidates found a problem of balance here: some reference to other poems was needed in order to evaluate how far 'Spring' is characteristic. Some referred to no other poems and some discussed others so fully that they were unable to 'comment closely' on 'Spring'.

## Question 2

*Touched with Fire*: ed. Hydes

- (a) Answers to this question made reference to 'Refugee Mother and Child', 'On My First Sonne', 'Digging' and 'Prayer Before Birth', while 'Mid-Term Break' was often also explored. While all the poems chosen were used appropriately, perhaps the most fruitful comparisons were between the first two, candidates often writing with sensitivity about the situations described in the poems and about the poets' use of language.
- (b) Answers on Wordsworth's 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' varied widely, some candidates aware of the 19th century date, while others wrote about vehicle pollution. Some were aware of Wordsworth's reputation as a poet of nature, and this informed their answers, but some candidates who did not have this information wrote careful and responsive essays based on their own close reading of the poem. There were some very thoughtful pieces of writing on the language and tone of the poem, and while some saw the poem simply as a paean to London's beauty, others noted that the timing of the composition was crucial, and that the beauty existed only because 'that mighty heart' was 'lying still'.

## Question 3

Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*

- (a) Candidates who answered this question chose a wide range of poems, the discriminator being how well they commented on the effects of the imagery they chose, and related these comments to the overall meaning of the poems. Many candidates showed a real responsive appreciation of Plath's poetry, and this question produced some of the most sensitive and detailed writing which Examiners saw in this session.
- (b) In their writing on 'Letter in November', candidates commented well on examples of language and imagery and were often able to make appropriate links with other poems, but not many candidates were able to give a convincing account of the poem as a whole in order to show what the language and imagery contributed to it. However, many candidates were able to show a comprehensive knowledge of Plath's poetry and its varied concerns.

## Question 4

Chinua Achebe: *Things Fall Apart*

- (a) This text was again hugely popular, and answers were equally divided between the two questions. This question provoked many extremely thoughtful and personal essays; very few Centres seemed to have a 'party line', and the result was that candidates were clearly thinking through the issues for themselves. Responses and conclusions were varied, and nearly all the candidates who answered the question showed comprehensive knowledge through their range of reference. Sometimes the reference was close to paraphrase; the more confident candidates selected their reference very precisely to inform their argument, and often included snippets of quotation. Some candidates discussed the range of individual female roles in the novel, while others explored the balance of masculine and female principles in the novel as a whole.
- (b) There were many good answers on Ezeudu's funeral too. Some answers strayed into discussion of Okonkwo, which was not an ideal focus for this question. Better answers were fully aware of the significance of the episode, both in terms of the plot's development and in terms of the perception of the ceremony, commenting that the incoming white men would find frightening and incomprehensible what the reader recognises as a manifestation of a complex and spiritual culture. Few candidates examined the presentation explicitly, but many dealt with it implicitly in their discussion of the spirits and the reader's response.

### Question 5

Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*

- (a) Rather too many of the answers to this question simply summarised Pip's rise and fall in London society. Better answers highlighted and examined key moments and were particularly aware of the context in which Pip makes his claim that his life has been 'blind and thankless'. Most of the answers showed a thorough knowledge of the novel, but techniques of selection and argument were sometimes found wanting.
- (b) The passage produced some good and detailed discussions, though many candidates did not fully acknowledge the instruction to 'comment closely' on the way the relationship is presented in the passage. Those candidates who looked carefully at the structure of dialogue, tone of voice and small accompanying actions did very well. A number of candidates discussed the prevalence of hyphens in the excerpt successfully, and some commented on the balance between the younger Pip presented in the passage and the elder Pip who is narrating.

### Question 6

Doris Lessing: *Martha Quest*

- (a) Despite the pivotal role of Stella and Andrew Matthews in Martha's development, only a handful of candidates answered this question.
- (b) Nearly all candidates who had studied this text answered this question. These answers usually found plenty of detail in the passage to discuss, looking carefully at the language, imagery and juxtapositions in the extract. Martha's response in the passage was often linked with her attitudes presented elsewhere in the novel, showing a thorough knowledge of the text. Her reliance on her reading and her failure to act was well documented.

### Question 7

Caryl Churchill: *Top Girls*

- (a) This question was in most cases the better answered of the two. Candidates were well prepared to answer on the question of 'women's values', and some historical preparation enabled most to discuss 'the values of society'. Better answers recognised that the two are closely linked, and that the play examines the opportunities for women in the society contemporary with the play's composition.
- (b) Answers here, considering the nature of the extract, were often disappointing. There was a lot of summary, and some candidates listed the historical women in the scene, so that 'dramatic effects' were often ignored. Successful answers noted that this is one of the very few places in the first Act where the women do not focus on their own stories, as they all listen to Joan's narrative. There was some commentary on the pace and development of her narrative, the vocabulary employed ('the baby just slid out'), and the approving laughter followed by the stunned silence at the end of the extract.

### Question 8

Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*

- (a) There were very few answers on this question, but those which appeared explored the idea of the American Dream in the play. There was not much consideration of the way it is presented in the play.
- (b) The extract was the more popular option, and candidates wrote with some sensitivity on Linda's role in providing a realistic view of the Lomans' situation as well as her constant emotional support for Willy. Willy's self-deceit and yearning for material goods was also commented upon, yet very few candidates paid any attention to the stage directions in the passage.

## Question 9

William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*

- (a) Discussion of Macduff usually demonstrated a good knowledge of the play, though many candidates chose to discuss character rather than characterisation. Answers usually centred around his role as foil to Macbeth, but several essays also made interesting connections with Banquo and considered the abandonment of Lady Macduff and their children.
- (b) There were some very good answers on the passage question, candidates commenting well on the connections with the rest of the play made in Macbeth's first speech and noting his vacillations of mood as the scene develops. Candidates also commented usefully on the context of the scene to focus on 'this point in the play'.