

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H472

For first teaching in 2015

H472/02 Autumn 2021 series

Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.



Reports for the November 2021 series will provide a broad commentary about candidate performance, with the aim for them to be useful future teaching tools. As an exception for this series they will not contain any questions from the question paper nor examples of candidate responses.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

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Paper 2 series overview

Paper 2 is the Comparative and Contextual Study. Candidates choose one out of five topics and answer two questions: a critical commentary on an unseen passage from the topic area, and a comparative essay on the topic which compares two literary texts they have prepared.

November 2021 was again an unusual series with a very small number of candidates; examiners were impressed by the dedication of those who had prepared for and sat these examinations under difficult circumstances over the last two years. Candidates offered responses on all five topics for the paper: the quality of the answers ranged from some excellent, consistently detailed work to some which was relatively brief and poorly prepared. As in previous sessions, there were more answers in response to American Literature 1880-1940, the Gothic and Dystopia; the remaining topics (Women in Literature and The Immigrant Experience) attracted very few responses.

<i>Candidates who did well on this paper generally did the following:</i>	<i>Candidates who did less well on this paper generally did the following:</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privileged analysis of literary effects over contextual material in their responses to the unseen passage. • Read and responded to the whole of the unseen passage in detail, including the ending. • Adapted material thoroughly to the terms of the question in the comparative essay. • Wrote a comparative essay which was clearly structured and justified its length. • Supported their answers with detailed reference to primary and secondary material. • Privileged literary discussion over historical/social comment in the comparative essay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depended heavily on contextual material in their responses to the unseen passage. • Ignored parts of the unseen passage, especially the ending. • Offered substantial amounts of prepared material in the comparative essay which had not been adapted to the demands of the question. • Wrote an over-long, disorganised comparative essay which was difficult to follow. • Wrote generalised answers lacking in supportive references. • Privileged historical/social comment over literary discussion in the comparative essay.

American Literature 1880 - 1940

Answers on the extract from Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* were generally ready to engage with the contextual issues of the passage, especially social class. The title of the novel was found by some to be poignant in combination with Maggie's rather wide-eyed, innocent response to her Bowery treat. Most answers appreciated that Pete and Maggie were experiencing a poor man's version of the entertainment enjoyed by 'the aristocratic theatre-going public'. There was occasional confusion about the social status of the performers, who were implausibly seen by some candidates to represent the moneyed classes looking down on the working class audience. Better answers responded to the atmosphere created by Crane early in the passage with the 'rollicking refrain' and the glasses pounding 'rhythmically' on the tables; responses at the very top end analysed Crane's rather detached, humorous treatment of the scene. Contextual issues surrounding the 'negro melody' were appropriately explored by most candidates; the best answers responded to Crane's irony in his treatment of the great patriotic cheer rising from audience, mostly 'of foreign birth', in response to 'The star-spangled banner'.

The comparative essays were divided evenly between Question 2(a) on 'greatness' and Question 2(c) on 'a sense of place'. Performance varied across the cohort. Answers that depended on prepared material which was not sufficiently adapted to the question tended to be less successful. Good answers on 'greatness' generally considered the distinction between greatness in terms of financial success and greatness in moral terms. Many answers on 'a sense of place' chose to interpret the question as relating to social class and discussed the issue of having a place where one can belong in society. All candidates discussed *The Great Gatsby*; other texts included were *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Age of Innocence* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. One answer lost marks substantially by using a Paper 1 text for comparison with *The Great Gatsby* rather than one of the texts on the prescribed list.

Rubric infringements

To keep to the rules for the exam, candidates must write on two prescribed texts in their comparative essay. If no prescribed texts are referenced, the mark will be 0; if only one prescribed text is used, the answer cannot score above 15 marks out of 30.

The Gothic

This was the most popular topic this series. Answers on the extract from Susan Hill's *The Small Hand* were usually at least competent and occasionally excellent, making links to other writers such as Hugh Walpole and H P Lovecraft in support of their discussion of Gothic characteristics. Some answers unusually commented on the passage without supplying any contextual support, resulting in the loss of marks. Others concentrated on identifying gothic tropes without offering enough analysis of the literary effects in the passage. Many answers commented on the first person narration of the passage, but some responses referred to the narrator as a woman or a boy, which suggested that these candidates had not read the headnote supplied at the top of the passage. This did impact the success of these responses.

Use of the headnote

Every unseen extract is supplied with a headnote which gives useful information about the passage and should help candidates to avoid confusion in their readings.

Some answers suggested that the narrator might be 'unreliable', and this occasionally led to problematic readings where all of the information supplied in the extract was regarded as suspicious. Better answers picked out techniques such as personification ('nature had...sucked the light and the air out of it') or military imagery ('only the toughest plants' could 'invade and occupy'). Responses at the top end spent some time on the manifestation of the child's hand in the last paragraph of the extract. This moment, which constitutes the climax of the passage, was missed by some candidates; candidate should be careful and thorough in their reading.

The comparative essays again demonstrated a range of quality, with very few opting for Question 4(a) on 'religion' or Question 4(b) on 'ordinary life'; most candidates chose Question 4(c) on 'extreme feelings'. Less successful work on Question 4(a) showed limited knowledge and understanding of religious context; work at the top end had a fantastic grasp in particular of Christianity in Victorian times, including pertinent insights into the importance of the Oxford Movement. Work on Question 4(b) often struggled to develop and sustain an argument. In response to Question 4(c), less successful work often gave the impression of packing in plenty of material without enough care for relevance or structure. Some essays were long, ineffectively argued and lacking precision in their selection of material: for example, more than one candidate quoted Aidan Day's comment that Angela Carter's fiction is 'a bit extreme' without relating it to the 'extreme feelings' in the question. Better answers were usually shorter and more controlled, with a closer eye to sustaining relevance and constructing an argument. The favourite combination of writers remained the core texts, *Dracula* and *The Bloody Chamber*, but work was also seen on *Frankenstein*, *Beloved*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and (in brief additional discussion) *Light in August* and *The Italian*.

Dystopia

Answers on the extract from Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* mostly found it accessible and could easily relate it to their experience of reading in this genre. Less successful answers sometimes resorted to description or paraphrase of the passage and either lacked contextual support or filled the answer with discussion of the set texts at the expense of the passage.

The unseen extract

In answers on the unseen extract, most of the marks are given for analysis of literary effects. Brief references to set texts may be helpful as context but should not be extended.

Most answers were more attentive to qualities in the passage. Many recognised its credentials as eco-dystopia and analysed the presentation of climatic conditions effectively: in particular, comments were offered on the use of violent terms such as 'pummelled' to describe the nature of the snowstorms. Comments were also offered on the political aspects of the situation depicted in the passage with the breakdown of normal life in the city and the suffering of the poor. Most answers discussed the violent behaviour of the police at the end of the extract, and the response of the narrator – 'I broke out of the line' – was seen by some as a metaphor for her refusal to conform.

The comparative essays for this topic were fairly evenly divided between the three options, Question 6(a) on 'violence and physical suffering', Question 6(b) on 'a utopian ideal which has gone wrong' and Question 6(c) on 'inventing new uses of language'. Answers to Question 6(a) needed to supply examples of violence and physical suffering, most choosing material like the torture suffered by Winston Smith in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Particution scene in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Responses that were sometimes thin in terms of references to context and different interpretations tended to be less successful. Answers on Question 6(b) ('a utopian ideal which has gone wrong') and Question 6(c) ('new uses of language') were often successful, suggesting that candidates had thought about these issues and had interesting things to say about them, including reference to Margaret Atwood's coinage 'Ustopia', a combination of 'utopia' and 'dystopia'. Answers on language made good use of terms from Orwell and Atwood like 'Newspeak', 'Big Brother', 'unwoman' and the names 'Offred', 'Ofglen', 'Ofwarren', forced on the handmaids to replace their own, which categorise them as the possessions of high-status men. Most of the comparative essays were based on Orwell and Atwood, although there was also work on *Fahrenheit 451* and *Brave New World*.

Women in Literature

There were very few responses to this topic. Successful work on the extract from Joan Lindsay's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* considered the significance of the date of publication (1967) relative to the date of setting (1900), and suggested that the limitations placed on the female characters in the extract were being judged from a 1960s perspective. There was effective analysis of Lindsay's descriptive writing, especially of Mrs Appleyard ('an immense purposeful figure'), although the humorous tone was missed. Contextual links to historical topics (the Industrial Revolution) and other literary texts (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, *Hedda Gabler*) were often unhelpful in supporting discussion of the passage.

Only one of the comparative essay questions was attempted: Question 8(c), on female characters 'taking a journey of self-discovery'. This was interpreted variously as a question about same-sex relationships (based on discussion of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *Mrs Dalloway*) and as a question which sees the novels as cautionary tales where female characters (in particular Marianne Dashwood from *Sense and Sensibility* and the protagonist of *Jane Eyre*) suffer for their mistakes and finally achieve happiness as a result. Answers were clearly organised and presented, and ready to consider alternative ways of interpreting the question, for example by applying the idea of self-discovery to male as well as female characters.

The Immigrant Experience

There were likewise very few answers on The Immigrant Experience. Less successful work on the extract from Bernard Malamud's *The Assistant* offered little more than narrative summary, perhaps pointing to the occasional rhetorical question or simile without developing discussion of the literary effect. More successful work was more sensitive and thoughtful, considering the important differences in the experiences of the older and the younger man. Links were made to contextual material about immigration into the United States and to other literary texts featuring immigration such as *Brick Lane* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

Only one of the comparative essay questions was attempted: Question 10(c), on the 'freedom and opportunity' which might characterise The Immigrant Experience at its best. Less successful work made some attempt to engage with texts and contexts but struggled to develop a clear argument and generally saw only the problems associated with immigration. Better work considered the question in relation to different characters and identified moments of freedom and opportunity, while acknowledging difficulties and disappointments too. Answers generally needed more detailed reference to primary and secondary material to support their arguments. Work was seen on *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, *Brick Lane* and *Small Island*.

Guidance on using this paper as a mock: key teaching and learning points and comments on improving performance

- Holistic marking: responses are given a mark as a whole by examiners, rather than a separate mark for each Assessment Objective.
- Assessment Objective weightings indicate the focus of the response, and the knowledge and understanding used to drive forward and support the argument.
- The 'best-fit' approach for defining the level is used in the assessment, and then the mark is refined within the level according to how well the relevant Assessment Objectives have been addressed.
- The key factor considered by examiners is: how well has the question been answered? Candidates should not 'twist' questions away from those set in order to address a preferred topic.
- Examiners are encouraged to be positive and optimistic in their judgement, and to be aware of any personal bias when making mark decisions.
- Students can be engaged by encouraging them to address their set texts from the interpretative and critical perspectives of important contemporary movements and issues.
- Creative approaches to teaching - and responding to - the texts and questions should be embraced.

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