

FRENCH AND FRENCH LITERATURE

<p>Paper 8670/04</p>

<p>Texts</p>

General comments

The spread of marks was very wide, with a small but significant number of candidates at or towards the top end, as well as a substantial number scoring very low marks. The work of the former was characterised by relevance to the question backed up by logical paragraphing and appropriate detail, and the latter by a lack of attention to the questions, sketchy knowledge and weak structure. More specifically, commentaries awarded high marks showed a good knowledge of the text and the particular issues raised by the passage, whereas those who earned few marks offered little more than paraphrase, with no reference to the question or evidence of sound textual knowledge.

Examiners reported an increase in rubric infringement. They even wondered whether all candidates understood that *soit ... soit* offers a choice, as some gave brief and often incoherent answers to more than three questions. Others attempted only two questions. A further obstacle to the award of good total marks was a tendency to spend too long on two questions and write very little on the third. As set out in the mark scheme, a maximum of 17 is awarded for an essay of excessive length, and some otherwise very good work had to be penalised in this way.

All questions were attempted, the most popular texts being *Le Nœud de vipères*, *Les Mains Sales*, *Vipère au poing* and *L'Étranger*. Few candidates answered the second question on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, or the second question on *Le Diable au corps*.

Centres are advised to address the following issues:

Many candidates waste time copying out the essay title, whereas a clear number and letter will suffice. The time spent by some candidates writing out their essays 'in rough' would be better spent on planning. Introductory remarks including biographical detail and praise of the author and/or work are not useful. Essays which are too long score a maximum of 17.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

Mauriac: *Le Nœud de vipères*

- (a) Almost all candidates successfully identified the role of Marie in Louis's life. Some answers were only sketchy, indicating that his relationship with her was better than those he had with the other children. More detailed answers elaborated on her spontaneously affectionate gestures and his ability to respond to them. Candidates broadly understood that her demise removed the only potentially fruitful relationship between Louis and a member of his family. The second part of the question was less successfully handled. Only a minority of answers managed to focus on Louis's anti-clerical views, his refusal to subscribe to Catholic conventions, and the disapproval that such views generated in the society inhabited by the Fondaudège family. Many answers merely alluded to his feeling that divorce would be damaging for him professionally and financially, which amounted to little or no more than a paraphrase of the text. Conversely, most candidates understood that Isa had, in Louis's absence, assumed control of the children's moral and spiritual education, and that he was incapable of communicating with children anyway.

- (b) Answers to this question could be split, in general terms, into two types: those which looked at the details of Louis's youth and those which gave undue attention to the 'Rodolphe episode' at the expense of other, more relevant information. Most who attempted this question made suitable references to the role of Louis's mother and his ungracious response to her, his solitary life devoted to study, and the consequent health problems, his interest in money, his hostility to Catholicism and his difficulty in forming relationships with women. Whilst it was appropriate to mention the role of Isa, many candidates gave too little attention to the fact that her apparent love for him dispelled his lack of self-esteem, and his over-hasty conclusion that she did not marry him for love reinforced this negative feeling. Few answers alluded to his inability to 'abandon himself' or his sense of social inferiority. Only the best answers provided links between these elements of his youth and his character and behaviour as an adult.

Question 2

Voltaire: *Candide*

- (a) Many answers were generally vague and lacking in detail. Competent commentaries explained where the characters were arriving from, why and how they needed to escape from there, and Candide's aim of rejoining Cunégonde and Cacambo in Venice. Weaker answers had the characters arriving from South America (thus ignoring the substantial passages dealing with France). By no means were all candidates able to identify, let alone discuss, the execution of Admiral Byng in the context of Voltaire's satire of blind patriotism and its negative effects. Very few pointed out the dismissive tone used to describe the snowy wastes of Canada as the cause of this war. There was some understanding of Voltaire's views on war, but the satirical attack on excessively zealous patriotism over an issue which was not remotely understood by the people witnessing the execution featured in very few essays. Answers to the third part of the question also tended to focus only on Candide's increasing sense of disillusionment, whereas those who considered his anticipation with regard to Cacambo's fidelity and his optimism about an eventual reunion with Cunégonde were able to give a more balanced account.
- (b) Candidates were able to give plenty of examples of saddening events in the story. Credit was given to those who succeeded in structuring the material thematically, as opposed to those who recounted in more or less random order a number of experiences which eroded Candide's confidence in Pangloss's Optimism. Many essays seemed to take the misfortunes at face value, as though the story were meant to be realistic. It was, of course, desirable to link these experiences to Voltaire's aim of discrediting the view that disasters and instances of man's inhumanity to man were part of an ultimately harmonious universal plan. With regard to the ending, many were able to see it only as a happy issue out of all the characters' sufferings, whereas an awareness of the element of compromise was evidence, in some scripts, of a more careful reading of the last chapter.

Question 3

Sartre: *Les Mains sales*

- (a) Credit for answers to the first part of the question depended on the amount of detail in the answers, as the situation was broadly familiar to most of those who had studied the text. Whilst some were able to offer little which could not be paraphrased from the passage, stronger responses pointed out not only the change of party policy which caused Hugo's refusal to rejoin it, but indicated what Hoederer had set out to do and why. There were many good answers on the subject of Olga's attitude, although most confined themselves to her emotions rather than commenting on her apparent inability to see Hugo's difficulty in accepting the terms of the ultimatum. The third part of the question was all too often limited to a critical perception of Hugo as obstinate and / or confused. What Examiners were looking for was his need and determination to define himself through one particular act, however ambiguous its motivation. Relatively few candidates saw the opportunity to demonstrate that Hoederer was right when he accused Hugo of clinging to a principle rather than moving on.
- (b) A surprisingly large number of answers failed to identify the character who uses the words of the play's title. Consequently, many essays did not focus on Hoederer, but attempted an interpretation based on the idea that involvement in terrorism dirties the characters' hands. A competent answer might well contrast Hugo's position with that of Hoederer, but for a good mark, the essay needed to concentrate on the issue of political expediency and the view that the end justifies the means.

Many essays sought to interpret the title by going through all the characters, including Slick, Georges and even Jessica. The best answers, on the other hand, concentrated on the views of Hoederer and their implications.

Question 4

Le Clézio: *Le Chercheur d'or*

- (a) Answers to this question were mostly competent. Candidates showed a good knowledge of Laure's attitude to her brother's departure, and the reasons for her reservations about the desirability of his long absence. They also provided, to a greater or lesser extent, relevant details about the events which ruined the family and made the narrator determined to provide them with the opportunity for a new and better life. The third part of the question produced a rather more varied response, but a pleasing number of answers identified the changes in the narrator's interpretation of treasure as being more important than his failure to find what he thought he wanted.
- (b) Candidates who chose to write about the role of Ouma were also generally well acquainted with the relevant material. Most essays referred appropriately to the ways in which she taught Alexis about living in the natural world, and to her influence on him as he gradually came to realise that all this was more important than buried treasure. Most answers stopped short of mentioning her disappearance at the end of the novel. They might usefully have taken the opportunity to allude to her continued presence in the narrator's imagination as he contemplates what new horizons she will inspire him to find.

Question 5

Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*

- (a) On the whole, candidates who offered answers on Roxane showed a good knowledge of the text. The principal discriminating factors here were essay structure versus random narrative, and the greater or lesser tendency to adopt a 'black and white' approach. It was essential, in order to provide a passable answer, to establish the importance of Roxane's *préciosité* and to understand how this highly significant socio-cultural factor in and around 1640 affected her attitudes and behaviour. If this was established, it was possible to explain her dismissal of Christian for failing to express himself adequately. Balanced answers made pleasing reference to the fact that she was very easily taken in by the play-acting, to her extraordinarily heroic (even melodramatic) journey through the battlefield, to her genuine remorse in the last act and the pathos of her withdrawal from society and her double loss. In order to score well on this question, it was necessary to explain and evaluate her behaviour in the light of both 17th century attitudes and the conventions of neo-Romantic drama. Those who criticised her behaviour merely on their own terms were not well rewarded.
- (b) Only one or two candidates attempted this question, and their answers were so insubstantial that it is not possible to draw any useful conclusions. Examiners were looking for a balanced account of the play's theatrical conventions – some of which perhaps strain our ability to 'suspend disbelief' – and the emotions expressed by the characters, which might be regarded as both plausible and involving.

Question 6

Bazin: *Vipère au poing*

- (a) Given that the quotation which provided the question was taken from the text, Examiners were surprised by the fact that a substantial proportion of candidates who chose to discuss it did not appear to understand the word *indispensable*. Probably for this reason, many essays were based on a different agenda which took no account of the issues raised by this key word. Such essays were inevitably awarded a mark consistent with the impression that the question had not been addressed. Relevant essays considered Brasse-Bouillon's increasing emotional dependency on his mother in terms of his obsession with outwitting her and taking vengeful action. The best answers also took account of the effect on this obsession on his psychological development, and successfully indicated that the significance of the remark lay not only in the narrative but in the long-term damage it did to the adolescent boy.

- (b) The structure of answers to this question was potentially provided by the quotation, and most (if by no means all) essays made constructive use of this. The discriminating factors were thus the accuracy of interpretation and the level of detail. The issue of faith was broadly and correctly understood to evoke hypocrisy and the use of religion as a weapon. The best answers did not confine themselves to Mme Rezeau, but gave appropriate attention to the tutors and to M. Rezeau. The issue of authority was mostly given relevant and accurate treatment by the candidates. The third issue was less well handled, as many saw it only in terms of a lack of parental affection and the consequent effect on the boys' mentality. A closer focus was needed here to show awareness that the pretence of affection and the distribution of favours, notably by Folcoche, was deployed as a means of winning loyalty in order, for example, to get information.

Question 7

Camus: *L'Étranger*

- (a) Many candidates attempted this question, with widely differing results. There were many essays which dwelt at unnecessary length on the events in the first part of the story. What was required was an analysis of Meursault's version of events in the light of these facts, and a critique of the court's inability and refusal to accept these facts at face value. Ill-digested notes on *l'homme absurde* and/or Existentialism did not address the issue. Candidates who saw the point of this well-known quotation concentrated on Meursault's unwillingness to invent explanations which corresponded to, and therefore satisfied, conventional thinking. Likewise, it was appropriate to discuss religion in terms of Meursault's characteristic stance with regard to the expectation that he would, like all previous criminals in this situation, capitulate and satisfy the terms of reference of those who would judge him.
- (b) Few were inclined to disagree with the statement at issue. Those who did not just see it in black and white terms were able to impress Examiners by showing Meursault's capacity, albeit limited, for empathy of a sort. The majority of essays took a censorious line, particularly (and often at length) in connection with the funeral and Meursault's dealings with Marie. A more sophisticated response might have considered that the terms of reference of the quotation are those of the people who so comprehensively failed to cope with someone who simply did not share them, let alone express them in a comfortingly conventional manner. Love and friendship for Meursault may not have had the same resonance as for most people, but the candidates who shared the view that he was some kind of *monstre moral* simply missed the point. It was refreshing to read, just occasionally, that there was no evidence that Meursault never loved his mother, nor that he was entirely devoid of feelings.

Question 8

Radiguet: *Le Diable au corps*

- (a) Candidates did not find it difficult to justify the appropriateness of the quotation in terms of the narrator's behaviour. There was, however, a widespread tendency to be highly critical of him and to convey the impression that Marthe was an innocent victim. The fact is that her *égoïsme* is also an issue, in that their activities and attitudes are shown to a large extent as being *à deux*. Good answers showed that Marthe connived with the narrator at times, rather than being manipulated by him. Weaker essays predictably took a narrative line in order to show that the narrator did as he pleased. This, however accurate, was a simple and superficial approach and did not receive the level of credit awarded to those who considered the couple's complicity.
- (b) Only one or two candidates attempted this question, and no useful conclusions can be drawn from their answers, which showed a very limited grasp of the issue. Examiners were looking for an understanding of the role of the author in showing the fallibility of the first-person account. The novel contains many examples of the author's critical view of the narrator's self-conscious play-acting, unreliable certainties, and ill-judged convictions, but attempts at this question generally failed to identify them.