

1995 HIGHER SCHOOL CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

ENGLISH (3 UNIT)

In 1995 2180 candidates presented for the examination in 3 Unit English.

COMMENTS ON INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONS

The following is a summarised version of feedback supplied by the Senior Markers and their marking teams, together with observations by the Supervisor of Marking.

General Remarks

- * The standard was generally high in 1995, with few scripts in the D or E ranges.
- * The questions were generally quite subtle, appearing to be straightforward but actually involving quite difficult concepts and a level of knowledge beyond the texts themselves. This, however, allowed students to answer at their own level of ability, and enabled examiners to discriminate between answers.
- * Candidates demonstrated an improved ability to use language and punctuation effectively.
- * One particular area of weakness was in essay structure: a typical pattern was an elaborate and generalised introduction, a mini-essay on each text, and a hurried conclusion. Students should be encouraged to integrate their discussion across the two or three required texts, rather than working through a check-list of each text separately; they should also be discouraged from compiling lists or catalogues of thematic or contrasting items as the main basis of their essays.
- * Some candidates did not appear to have been adequately prepared; this was indicated by short answers, over-use of secondary critics, and an inability to discuss the set texts in detail.
- * Quotation of secondary critics at length is not recommended.
- * Where candidates use quotations from the set texts, they should try to incorporate these into their essays, rather than extensively quoting text with little context.
- * Students should be reminded that the use of acronyms for titles is not an appropriate form of abbreviation, eg TTOTS for *The Turn of the Screw*. A more acceptable method is to use a sensible single-phrase abbreviation, eg *The Turn* ... (rather than *Screw*!).
- * Teachers and students are encouraged to look at the 3 Unit Sample Answers published by the Board of Studies.

Question 1: The Gothic Mode

(The Gothic is characterised by an oppressive sense of enclosure; its effect is mainly psychological.

What pleasure can be derived from reading Gothic fiction? Discuss with reference to the THREE texts set for study.)

This was perhaps the most demanding question, with three separate strands (*oppressive sense of enclosure, effect is psychological, what pleasure can be derived*) and three texts to write about. Two texts would have been sufficient, and would have allowed candidates to write in more detail, as it was, discussion was necessarily brief, but the majority of students managed the requirement well.

The structure of the question posed problems for many candidates; there was no clear link between the quotation and the direction to discuss the *pleasure* to be found in reading these novels. Some students ignored the quotation entirely, while others concentrated on the quotation and ignored the question; both these strategies were accepted by the examiners as legitimate.

Because the question itself moved away from the key terms of the quotation, students responded in a wide variety of ways. Only the very best were able to analyse the kind of pleasure derived from reading Gothic novels, with many simply asserting that this was so. A number of students went through the novels one by one, discussing one or more of the terms *enclosure*, *psychological effect* and *pleasure* in each case, with only the best being able to integrate their responses to all three texts. Weaker candidates had trouble with the term *enclosure*, interpreting it in a literal and physical sense, with frequent reference to *subterranean passages* as the first in a catalogue of concrete items.

As in 1994, *The Castle of Otranto* came in for dismissive treatment. There were too many generalised assertions that it had nothing to say to a modern reader, usually accompanied by a patronising assessment of eighteenth-century taste and intellectual attainment. More attention should be given to the historical context of books such as these, and, as well, a more open-minded approach should be adopted when tackling the writing of eras and cultures other than our own.

Question 2: Revenge Tragedy

('Revenge is a kind of wild justice', wrote Francis Bacon.

How do you perceive the nature of revenge as dramatised in the TWO plays you have studied for this Elective?)

This elective attracted the largest number of candidates, with most students writing on *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi*.

The question was more difficult than it seemed and produced a wide variety of answers. Students were not penalised for concentrating either on the concept of *wild justice* or on *the nature of revenge* (rather than dealing with both), since well-developed arguments based on detailed discussions of the plays were being sought.

The lack of explicit connection between the quotation and the question confused the weaker students, who spent too much time trying to explain what they thought *wild justice* might be. Only the most able answers dealt adequately with the *dramatisation* of revenge, an issue which was rather buried in the wordiness of the question. Weaker students offered a great deal of conjecture, often naive, about how an Elizabethan/Jacobean audience would perceive a scene, character or situation.

Many students also had difficulty in discussing the *nature of revenge* as opposed to merely listing the vengeful acts undertaken by the protagonists. Those who did tackle the issue successfully were able to draw attention to contrasts and/or similarities between the two plays in order to support their arguments. Weaker answers often began with lengthy accounts of Elizabethan attitudes to revenge as a way of discussing the *nature* of revenge. Stronger answers integrated this kind of background material with a developing argument, using it to bring out the significance of a scene or quotation.

An important discriminator was the ability to frame an argument around a clearly defined concept of *wild justice*. A few excellent answers drew on further knowledge of Bacon's remarks about revenge and incorporated these into the structure of the essay.

Answers in the average range tended to agree with Bacon (a safe position) and to go on from there to discuss the motives and methods of the avengers and the high price they paid for vengeance, working through one text and then the other by means of the familiar *listing* strategy. In this category weak answers lapsed into story-telling, and used quotations with no discernible relevance to the claim being made and/or in complete disregard of the context and chronology of the play.

The better answers revealed more understanding of the conventions of revenge tragedy, while the best answers were able to deal with dramatic conventions and the dramatisation of the revenge theme.

There was plenty of evidence that students were well-prepared on the context and historical background of the genre of revenge tragedy, but only the stronger students were able to integrate such information into a detailed discussion of the texts in relation to the question.

Question 3: Utopias and Anti-Utopias

('The worlds presented incorporate elements of both Utopia and anti-Utopia; indeed, the one is impossible without the other').

*How true is this? In your answer, refer to Thomas More's **Utopia** and ONE other text set for study.)*

Whilst the question appeared to be straightforward, it was a challenge in that it called for conceptual thinking as well as a discussion of themes.

Generally, students displayed a very basic understanding of the terms *Utopian* and *anti-Utopian*, interpreting them as *ideal* and *awful*, in relation to their own standards and expectations of life. Only a few of the stronger candidates tackled the issue of *one is impossible without the other*, and this conceptual aspect of the question did produce some mature and sophisticated arguments. On the whole, however, this question appeared to intimidate students, who resorted to listing the Utopian and anti-Utopian elements in the texts. The result was a large number of very similar answers with the main discriminator being the fluency of writing style.

The best candidates were able to analyse the relationship of Utopia to anti-Utopia, and to make good use of literary techniques such as point-of-view and characterisation. Poorer candidates tended to discuss what students liked or disliked in the societies represented in the novels, missing any sense of their literary or satirical purpose.

Many failed to realise that the *worlds presented* in the novels referred to the imaginary worlds created by the authors, and their answers consisted mainly of listing the good and bad points of the various lifestyles on offer, rather than considering the authors' purposes in inventing them. A number of students confined their answers to a comparison of Books I and II in *Utopia*, rather than discussing the anti-Utopian elements of the island as well. Too much emphasis was placed on lists of physical details, such as the simple clothing and communal eating, and not enough on the underlying irony of More's work. Not all students appeared to have a sufficient understanding of the ambiguities of *Utopia*, as the answers did not generally demonstrate a sound knowledge of this text.

The weakest answers compared the Utopian elements in *Utopia* with the anti-Utopian elements in the other novel chosen. In the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, there was often a complete lack of awareness of the Utopian element, but a few of the stronger students did discuss issues such as the Inner Party's view of perfection, Winston's view of the countryside, Mr Charrington's room and his hopes for the Proles, and other items in this context.

Question 4: Yeats

('Yeats's imaginative world, whether of the inner life or of the world about him, is at once terrible and beautiful'.

How true is this? Discuss with detailed reference to TWO of the poems set for study.)

It was generally felt that it was a change for the better to have no poem or extract printed on the examination paper. Students were encouraged to focus on the question and to use their knowledge of the poems to make an argument; the majority rose to this challenge with aplomb.

To some extent the choice of poems determined a student's ability to answer the question successfully. The most common choices were *Easter 1916*, *Leda and the Swan*, and *The Second Coming*. Other poems, such as *The Wild Swans at Coole*, were not so suited to the demands of the question, and those choosing them struggled to find elements of the *terrible* or of worldly awareness in these poems.

Answers which focused on the opposition of *inner life* or *of the world about him* were often side-tracked into very thorough and detailed accounts of Yeats's theory of the gyres, phases of the moon, etc. Some students seemed to have studied *A Vision* rather more thoroughly than the poems themselves. Weak answers often announced themselves with spurious biographical material and large doses of Maud Gonne. The strongest answers dealt with Yeats's responses to social and personal issues, such as the Irish rebellion, old age, poetic inspiration, etc., as a means of illustrating the tensions between his inner life and the world about him.

Weaker answers generally failed to link the phrase *terrible and beautiful* with *Easter 1916*, and, although students were not penalised for this, it usually meant that their answers showed only a superficial understanding of the phrase, interpreting *terrible* in the sense of *terrifying*, rather than in a more powerful sense of *awe-inspiring*, *fateful*. Most of these answers worked from a simple dichotomy between the two terms, cataloguing items indicating terror or beauty in each poem, with no real understanding of the effect of juxtaposing the two terms. So in *The Second Coming*, for example, *lion* was beautiful while *vultures* (sic) were terrible, and so on.

On the whole, the question encouraged students to focus on the poetry rather than on the circumstances of Yeats's life, and it was generally felt that the majority did like the poetry and had engaged with it enthusiastically. There was an impressive display of textual knowledge, genuine attempts to respond to the poetry, and some successful efforts to deal with poetic language and technique. The level of analysis offered was, however, not always particularly good, with the line-by-line *translation* approach limiting some responses.

Question 5: The Poem Sequence

('The poem sequence must engage with public issues and questions; it cannot afford to be intimate and personal').

To what extent do you agree? Discuss with detailed reference to ONE of the poem sequences set for study.)

The candidature for this elective was very small (about 116) but their answers were generally of a high standard and students seemed very well prepared. A number answered on Lowell, some on Tranter, very few on Brennan. Some followed the sequence through in their discussion, with the danger of *telling the story*, while others chose relevant poems to answer the question, a slightly more successful strategy.

The Lowell answers tended to equate *public issues and questions* with *universal*, and to debate the extent to which Lowell's poetry dealt with *universal* themes. A recurring argument was that his poetry is personal, therefore the poem sequence must be personal as well, but this claim was often not well substantiated, with many students launching into set-pieces about private and personal poetic material which were comparable with some of the Plath answers in previous years. The number of poems available for discussion led to some superficiality, although some candidates overcame this by dealing with poems in groups.

The relative impersonality of Tranter suited the question better, and the Tranter answers fell mainly in the B-range and low A-range. These represented some good attempts to tackle issues and themes, though, in some cases, without fully integrating the responses into a coherent argument. The term *post-modernism* was bandied about by a number of students rather vaguely and not very constructively. Generally, however, students who wrote on Tranter did very well, and dealt with the rather difficult question sensibly.

Weaker answers provided a single interpretation or dwelt on details of *plot* or character. In stronger answers students discussed particular poems or sections in relation to the various techniques available to the writer. Few agreed with the quotation given, though discussion of *West Street* and *Skunk Hour* revealed limited awareness of the public issues raised in these poems.

Question 6: Modern Drama

(Each of the plays set for study was regarded as confronting and innovative when first performed.

Choose TWO of the plays set for study, and discuss how you see their impact now.)

This question invited students to consider the issue of textual reception, which, understandably, few of them were able to tackle in any depth. So, although it was an interesting question, for the majority it was difficult to answer well.

On the whole, however, the standard was high and it was pleasing to note that candidates are increasingly aware of drama and dramatic techniques, as well as of themes and characterisation. The range of knowledge of the texts, the ability to engage with the question, and a sense that students had really enjoyed studying these plays were all impressive.

Of those students who were aware of the second aspect of the question, i.e. comparing the reception of the plays then and now, most gave very subjective responses and vague generalisations along the lines of *nobody would object to swearing on stage any more*. The more basic responses concentrated on the scatological elements of the plays, suggesting that the impact of the plays would now be lost as modern audiences are apparently *unshockable*. Only the best of those students who tried to distinguish between the impact of the plays when first performed and their impact now were able to develop a convincing argument.

Most students, however, were able to address the terms *confronting and innovative* in a thoughtful and detailed manner. These terms encouraged them to see the plays as drama rather than merely as written text, and the stronger students were able to discuss dramatic techniques confidently. The best answers related dramatic technique to the ideas presented in the plays, integrating the discussion of the two texts rather than dealing with one and then the other in a linear fashion. There were some well-argued essays demonstrating that the ideas represented in the plays were just as confronting for modern audiences, a successful strategy for addressing both parts of the question.

In some of the weaker answers, there was a tendency to confuse drama with *television scripts*, so that audiences became *viewers* and first performances became *first releases*. Dramatic *effects* were occasionally written as *fx*.

Question 7: Modern Fiction

In what ways do TWO of the modern fiction texts you have studied challenge conventions?

Although this question required quite a breadth of knowledge, it was perhaps the most straightforward question on the paper, with most students choosing to discuss the texts in terms of literary and/or social conventions. Of those who focused on social conventions, many were limited by their interpretation of *conventions* as being *acceptable behaviour*. This led to a catalogue of ways in which the main characters behaved unacceptably, particularly in relation to *An Open Swimmer* and *An Item from the Late News*.

The main difficulty for those contemplating literary conventions was a lack of understanding of what *was* and what *was not* conventional, with weaker students making excessive claims for their specific texts. To write in the first person, for example, was to *challenge convention*. All novels written before modern times were attributed a chronological plot development, so that the *flashback* technique was regarded as challenging convention. *Streams of consciousness* was another device declared to be highly unconventional.

In stronger answers candidates considered both literary and social conventions and suggested reasons for the authors' particular choices with regard to their plots and characters. Some students looked at factors internal to the novels, such as narrative structure and style, while others focused on external issues related to theme, such as the moral corruption of society, the struggle of the non-conforming individual, and so on. Those who answered in a holistic way, using examples from both their chosen texts to further each idea, rather than writing about one text and then the other, tended to present very articulate responses which focused closely on the question.

The best candidates were aware that the novels themselves set up their own framework of *conventions* which were then challenged by the words and actions of central characters; there were many excellent answers which took this approach.

Question 8: Language of Persuasion

(In this famous speech from Shakespeare's Henry V, (Act III, Scene 1, Lines 1-34), King Henry urges his troops to make a further attack on the French city of Harfleur. Examine his speech for the persuasive use of language.)

As in previous years, this question was answered by very few students, most of whom tackled the Shakespearean discourse quite confidently. Stronger students picked out the main topics of the speech which formed the planks of the argument - the appeals to patriotism, honour, family, etc. The best responses balanced a deep and thorough analysis of the text with an ability to recognise the persuasive elements of the rhetoric.

A few very weak answers might have been the work of *refugee* students from other electives, who dealt with the passage as an unseen language analysis and knew little about the techniques of persuasion. Most of these opted for the line by line paraphrase.

In general, students were reasonably well prepared for this question, though a need to improve and extend their vocabulary of stylistic terms was still apparent. References to concepts such as discourse, register, rhetoric, imperatives, deictics, etc., were few and far between, but lifted the essays into new realms of achievement when they did occur. Students should, perhaps, be encouraged to read more widely in the expanding field of literary stylistics, eg Carter, Fowler, Fairclough, in order to prepare for this elective.

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ADDENDUM

THE MARKING OPERATION

Markers

Number of Senior Markers:	4
Number of Markers:	30
Average number of scripts per marker:	278

Of the 34 appointments (SM and M), 30 were experienced markers and 5 were new markers.

Marking Process

Each question was marked out of 25.

Each candidate answered two questions, each question was double-marked, once by Corporate, once by Domestic markers (with the exception of the small number of Question 8 scripts which were double-marked by Domestic markers).

For every candidate, one question was first-marked by Corporate and second-marked by Domestic, and the other question was first-marked by Domestic and second-marked by Corporate markers (with the exception of Question 8 scripts).

Reconciliations

Marking was out of 25 for each question. A difference of 5 or more between the first and second mark was regarded as discrepant.

Reconciliation of discrepant scripts was carried out by the Senior Marker whose team had done the second marking.

COMMENTS ON THE MARKING OPERATION

The operation went very smoothly, with the joint briefings and pilot markings being particularly helpful in enabling the four teams to find a common standard. The impression is that candidates now sitting for the 3 Unit examination are well motivated and generally very able.

Another consequence of the small candidature is the high standard of work in the 1995 examination. Very few candidates fell into the E range of marks, and relatively few in the D range: a total of 2.25% of the candidature fell into these grades.

MARKING SCHEME

The Marking Scheme is based on the Syllabus Objectives, as listed in the Board of Studies Syllabus Guide, and a list of assessable outcomes derived from these objectives.

Syllabus Objectives and Assessable Outcomes

Objective 1

To improve the ability to understand and appreciate spoken and written English, and to speak and write English well.

Outcomes

- * high standard of written English
- * clarity and sophistication of writing style
- * ability to make close reference to text and language to support argument.

Objective 2

To develop and refine individual response to literature in English, both past and present.

Outcomes

- * ability to develop a coherent and logical argument
- * evidence of original and individual response to text.

Objective 3

To provide for deeper and more extensive study of particular authors and topics.

Outcomes

- * high level of understanding of text
- * relevance of answer to question
- * detailed knowledge of content.

Assessment Hierarchy

Grade A (25-22)

- * constructs coherent and logical argument
- * addresses question
- * individual interpretation and analysis
- * close reference to text and/or language to support argument
- * clear and/or sophisticated writing style
- * detailed knowledge of text.

Grade B(21-18)

- * constructs argument
- * answer is relevant to question
- * attempts an individual response
- * some reference to text and/or language to support argument
- * clear writing style
- * good knowledge of text.

Grade C (17-13)

- * some cohesion in the argument
- * answer not always relevant to question
- * very basic and/or standardised interpretation, tendency towards repetition
- * reliance on quotations with limited analysis of text and/or language
- * simple but basically clear writing style, some non-standard forms
- * reasonable knowledge of text.

Grade D (12-7)

- * inability to form an argument
- * answer not obviously relevant to question
- * inadequate interpretation
- * use of quotations or references to text with no analysis or explanation
- * simple writing style, use of non-standard forms
- * limited knowledge of text.

Grade E(6-0)

- * candidate has run out of time, writes only a few words or lines;
- * candidate has become ill (may be indicated by Examination Supervisor);
- * non-native speaker of English with extremely poor literacy skills;
- * stress leads to *non-serious* answer - refer to SM or SOM;
- * no attempt to answer the question relevantly.

Not Attempted

- * Completely blank booklet, or words equivalent to *Not Attempted*.
- * N/A entered on the mark sheet. This is different from a mark of O.