

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 0397/01

Poetry, Prose and Drama

General comments

On the whole, candidates in this session showed themselves well-prepared for the examination, demonstrating good textual knowledge and an appreciation of the authors' techniques, though there was in some cases an over-reliance on the biographical background of authors. This was particularly evident in answers on Keats' poetry, of which there was a great number. The other very popular text was Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*, though Examiners also saw a large number of answers on *Touched with Fire*, *The Mill on the Floss* and the Katherine Mansfield short stories. As has become the norm, paper 9 Drama answers had very few answers on *Serious Money*, while Shakespeare and Williams were equally popular.

Biographical material often featured heavily in answers on Keats, but was also evident in answers on Mansfield, Ngugi and Shakespeare (Sonnet 116). A knowledge of the context of the writing can often be very valuable in developing a candidate's interpretation and can be fruitful in gaining insights and understanding. In answers to exam questions, however, such material needs to be used with care. It is successful when used to illustrate particular points or develop connections. It is not, however, a substitute for detailed textual knowledge, discussion of the set text, or an answer to the question set. In a worryingly large number of answers, candidates discussed author biographies at the expense of the texts themselves, which led to very partial address to the question.

Successful answers demonstrate knowledge of the text, and of context where appropriate, and select from that knowledge precisely to answer the specific question on the examination paper. In the passage-based questions, successful candidates analyse the language and form of the extract on the paper in considerable detail, using the question to guide their focus.

Question Specific Comments

1. John Keats: *Selected Poems*

(a) This was the main question where the use of biographical material was problematic, as many candidates showed a far better knowledge of the vicissitudes of Keats' life than they did of Keats' poetry. However, many candidates were able to make reference to Keats' life very productively, tracing his concerns through well-chosen poems, such as 'Ode to a Nightingale', 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', 'To Melancholy', etc. Pleasingly, while candidates were able to illustrate Keats' presentation of sorrow, loss of love and the frailty of human existence in these poems, most were also able to offer some evaluation, noting that this is not a complete summary of Keats' work. The celebration of the season in 'To Autumn' and the union of the lovers on 'The Eve of St Agnes' were frequently cited to provide a contrast with misery and heartbreak.

(b) 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' proved to be quite a challenging poem for candidates, some of whom chose it despite an apparent unfamiliarity with it. Successful answers focused clearly on the sense of mortality in the poem, beginning with the opening lines and examining the simile of the "sick eagle", comparing this with the grandeur of the Marbles which have survived, but are subject to, the ravages of "old time". Many candidates made interesting links with 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', while others connected the poem with Keats' ambition of artistic immortality, while a number were able to make perceptive comments on Keats' use of the sonnet form.

2. *Touched with Fire*: ed. Hydes

- (a) Candidates ranged very widely in their choices of poems for this question, though among the most frequently used were 'The Wild Swans at Coole', 'Ozymandias', 'The Early Purges', 'The Fallen Birdman' and 'The Pond'. In some cases, candidates were not fully successful because they seemed to be adapting pre-prepared answers roughly to fit the question. Successful candidates confidently thought again about their poems to consider explicitly how they communicated a sense of a 'particular moment'. In these answers, Examiners were often pleased to note that candidates were not only able to discuss language and imagery capably, but often were able to blend thoughtful comments on features of syntax and metre into their arguments, looking at how the poets were shaping the 'particular moment' for the reader. Some candidates managed to look at poems entirely afresh, creating thoughtful insights.
- (b) Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 116' was a popular choice and elicited some good responses. Even less confident candidates were often able to note the way Shakespeare uses the structure of the sonnet to develop his ideas about love. There was some misunderstanding ('wandering bark' was attributed to a dog by some candidates) but most saw an echo of the Christian marriage service in the language. The extended metaphor, half-rhymes, the imagery of exploration and the puns were noted. Most saw the last two lines as a challenge: one or two recognised the change of tone here, much more quizzical than the formality and seriousness of what had gone before.

3. Stevie Smith: *Selected Poems*

- (a) and (b) Too few answers were seen to make a general comment possible.

4. George Eliot: *The Mill on the Floss*

- (a) In a number of cases, answers here were narrative based, candidates being unable to progress beyond a basic summary of events in the novel to show that Tom and Maggie have a great deal of bad luck. More thoughtful answers looked more carefully at the phrase 'victims of circumstance' and examined what those circumstances are in the novel. They considered character, parentage, economics and social attitudes, showing how these factors are shown to affect the development of Tom and Maggie in the course of the novel. Education misapplied to Tom and society's treatment of Maggie after the Stephen Guest episode were frequently cited, and some candidates considered the question of the role of Fate. Some very good answers were able to give examples of omniscient narration which direct the reader's sympathies towards both Maggie and Tom, but very few candidates commented on Eliot's narrative interventions where questions of Fate, character and circumstance are raised.
- (b) Occasionally candidates saw this question as a general one about the sisters, writing about all of them with little reference to the passage. More confident answers focused clearly on the extract, noting not only the sisters' characteristic behaviour, but the humour of their presentation created by Eliot's descriptions, imagery and dialogue.

5. Katherine Mansfield: *The Garden Party and Other Stories*

- (a) Candidates defined 'new situations or places' very widely, with some interesting results. Although some answers were limited to narrative summary, many candidates looked successfully at Mansfield's presentation of both character and situation. There were good answers which featured discussion of 'Her First Ball', 'The Little Governess', 'Millie' and 'The Woman at the Store' among others. Some very thoughtful responses showed how Mansfield's narrative often moves fluidly from description on the situation or place to the consciousness of the characters, making a direct connection between them.
- (b) This was a very popular question, attracting a wide range of answers. Even less confident candidates were able to show how the Brechenmachers differ, though the most successful answers discussed Mansfield's presentation of their attitudes towards each other and towards marriage explicitly, considering the social restrictions and expectations placed upon women. Many details in the passage were picked out for comment, such as Herr Brechenmacher's gesture of offering his wife 'one of the best pieces', compared to a man feeding his pet dog, the shocking suggestions of wedding night rape, the contrast between the Herr and the Frau conveyed in his striding and her stumbling, and interpretation of the 'white and forsaken lay the road ahead' as a metaphor of the Frau's life.

6. Ngugi: *A Grain of Wheat*

- (a) While weaker answers were dominated by narrative summary, many candidates recognised the enormous impact which detention has on Gikonyo in the novel. On the one hand, candidates noted the events which happen in his absence, notably Mumbi's child fathered by Karanja, but there was much discussion of the changes to Gikonyo's character, from confident idealism to disillusioned guilt. The importance of his betrayal of the oath and his estrangement from Mumbi were discussed by nearly all candidates, recognising how these issues fit into the novel's pattern of guilt and betrayal. Many candidates commented on the shift to capitalism, but also noted the image of the stool, which they recognised as a final image of hope for both the relationship between Mumbi and Gikonyo and for Kenya.
- (b) There were many strong answers to this passage-based question, and there were a number of responses to Karanja, ranging from outright condemnation to a degree of sympathy. Some argued for a love of Mumbi, while others noted the word 'wrench', suggesting aggressive acquisitiveness. His relationship with John Thompson was the focus of much of the comment, most candidates seeing him humiliated in his service, looking at the way he prepares his appearance and the reference to the 'watery lump' in his throat. Candidates often missed the context that Mwaura is deliberately attempting to lure Karanja to the Uhuru ceremony, but most were able to place Karanja himself within his developing characterisation in the novel.

7. Caryl Churchill: *Serious Money*

- (a) and (b) Too few answers to make a general comment possible.

8. William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

- (a) Candidates usually showed good knowledge of the play in answers to this question, and were able to cite a number of references to superstition. More confident candidates used close reference and quotation in support of these comments. Detailed knowledge and the ability to discuss the role of superstition marked out the more successful candidates. The soothsayer, omens, storms dreams and ghosts were all seen to contribute to superstition in the play.
- (b) In answer to this question, candidates were usually alert to the levels of political expediency and ruthlessness in the extract, some noting a sudden change in an audience's perception of Antony. In particular, candidates commented on the treatment of Lepidus by the other two triumvirs, noting the beginnings of a suggestion of discord between them.

9. Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*

- (a) Although a few candidates commented inaccurately that nothing at all happens in the play, most recognised that big dramatic events were not its concern, but the developments of emotions and relationships within the Wingfield family. The most successful candidates noted that the events of the play, though small in themselves, arise out of the relationships and have a huge impact for the characters. Key to this argument were the scenes of Jim's visit and Tom's departure. Some candidates noted how Williams augments the emotional intensity of key moments with lighting, music and other stage effects.
- (b) This play has been very successful in encouraging candidates to see the drama text as a theatrical text, and they have in general been very responsive to Williams' stagecraft. Answers to this question demonstrated this tendency again, noting the importance of the opening stage directions, the punctuated dialogue, the use of capital to indicate raised voices, the interruptions and the later stage directions, all of which contribute to the 'dramatisation of the conflict'. Very pleasing was many candidates' ability to recognise and comment interestingly on Laura's contribution to the scene, despite her minimal speaking role in it.