

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Paper 0397/01  
Poetry and Prose

## General comments

This session was marked by some lively and well-informed answers from candidates, who, by and large, responded to texts and questions with vigour and knowledge. Keats' poetry remained popular, but it was pleasing to see that large numbers of candidates had studied the new CIE poetry anthology, *Songs of Ourselves*, which has proved very successful. Answers on the prose texts were approximately divided equally between the three choices.

It was rare for Examiners to see the work of candidates who lacked textual knowledge; the majority clearly knew their texts very well, and there were many signs of real engagement and enjoyment. Some candidates, though, lacked full development of the skills to apply that knowledge to the particular task on the examination paper. In particular, candidates need to focus on the careful selection of material and precise references and quotations to illustrate their points and advance their arguments. It is difficult to write successfully about an author's language and technique without quotations to exemplify the points being made.

Candidates are sometimes tempted into a narrative approach to questions and insert contextual and biographical knowledge, sometimes where there is little relevance to the question. It is important for candidates answering the passage-based questions to analyse the language and form of the extract on the paper in considerable detail.

## Question Specific Comments

### **Section A: Poetry**

1. John Keats: *Selected Poems*

(a) This question raised central aspects of Keats' verse and gave candidates a wide choice of material from which to draw. The odes were very popular choices, while some candidates referred to 'Lamia', 'The Eve of St Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. Confident and successful candidates selected their material well and had a clear idea of what they wanted to say about Keats' appreciation of beauty – some linked beauty to women and love, others to temporality and mortality, for example, choosing either complementary or contrasting poems. A number of candidates missed the opportunities provided by the question, though, providing paraphrases of two poems without focusing on the wording of the task. The requirement in the question to discuss 'the ways' Keats writes about beauty was too often overlooked, leading a number of candidates with good textual knowledge to receive disappointing marks. It was interesting to note how many times 'Bright Star' appeared in answers to (a) – while it can be a relevant choice, it was not often made so, suggesting that the candidates who took this route were not confident in their knowledge of the poems as a whole.

- (b) 'Bright Star' proved a popular choice and candidates often wrote well on the poem's main directions, the yearning for 'steadfast' stability and the sensuousness of the final lines. There were some examples of remarkably precise and sensitive analysis of the poem, teasing out its final ambiguities. Such answers noted, for example, that the movement towards mortality is already encapsulated in the midst of the sensuality with the adjective 'ripening'. There were also, though, some casual readings of it which led to misunderstandings. For example, many candidates wrote about the attractive imagery of nature in the first eight lines and picked up the striking 'No –' at the beginning of line 9 without noticing that it follows the 'Not' of line 2, thus missing the crucial context of the natural imagery and some of the poem's meaning. Candidates frequently mentioned that the poem was a sonnet, and while some noticed the difference between the detached 'gazing' of the octave and the experiencing of the sestet, comparatively few showed how Keats makes use of the form.

2. *Songs of Ourselves*

- (a) This question attracted discussion on quite a wide range of poems, the most popular including 'The Planners', 'The City Planners', 'Summer Farm', 'Where I Come From', 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' and 'The Bay'. The most successful candidates chose their poems according to a plan of what case they wanted to make, so that 'The Planners' and 'The City Planners' were often paired to show how poets responded to the growth of modern urban life, while others linked poems to discuss poets' exploration of the relationship between places and the individual. Candidates are more successful with the poetry (a) questions if they have a clear idea of what argument they wish to pursue in response to the question. A general discussion of two separate poems is seldom as successful.

- (b) 'The Spirit is Too Blunt an Instrument' proved to be very popular and was widely successful as a stimulus to interesting writing. Some candidates, though, found it difficult to discuss the text as poetry, often quoting it as prose, and an overwhelming majority asserted strongly that it has no rhyme. Only a very few, alert candidates noticed the detailed connected rhymes across the stanzas, perhaps mirroring the detailed construction of the baby itself. There were some strongly personal responses, some suggesting an inhumane scientific response to the baby, while others suggested that the poem showed science pushing out the role of the Creator. Most, though, responded to an unusual but vigorous exploration of the delight and wonder at new life, using microbiological terms to demonstrate the amazement. Candidates who also paid attention to the poem's final lines, which suggest that, while 'human passions' cannot in themselves produce the perfection of the child, they successfully create 'despair and anxiety/and their pain', tended to do very well.

3. Stevie Smith: *Selected Poems*

- (a) There were few answers to this question.
- (b) Again there were few answers, but here some candidates responded well to Smith's tongue in cheek approach, her clever variations of rhythm and rhyme and her unusual subject matter, treating death as an ambiguous familiar friend.

**Section B: Prose**

4. Achebe: *Anthills of the Savannah*

- (a) The novel attracted a large number of answers, and Examiners were pleased to see a range of engaged and vigorous answers on quite a challenging text. While some candidates did merely list social problems and suggested there were no solutions, there was some thoughtful debate in many of the essays. Many candidates were able successfully to demonstrate the range of problems which are highlighted in the novel, ranging from drought and poverty, through corruption to political instability. Many remarked that solutions were not easy, and some referred back to Kangan's colonial past, while others focused on Ikem's Marxism. Ikem's speech at the university was often central to candidates' responses, as was his relationship with the taxi drivers, while many considered a renewed role for women in Kangan society, referring to the symbolic naming of the baby by women in the last chapter. Some candidates mentioned that the news of Sam's replacement by another general reminds the reader, though, that nothing is certain.

- (b) The passage was a popular option. Candidates wrote well about the situation described and the irony of the party atmosphere for an execution. Many missed, though, the importance that the extract described 'Ikem's observations' – his role as narrator here is part of the understanding of the excerpt, as the descriptions of 'people's behaviour' are his. The overall impression of behaviour was discussed with energy, but candidates often neglected the opportunity to look in detail at the language and imagery Ikem uses. Candidates who responded to both Ikem's narration and the details of his language were often successful in noting a sense of despair when he looks in vain for a sign that the people are capable of rising up against the authorities, balanced by an appreciation of their immense patience and good humour in the face of adversity.
5. George Eliot: *The Mill on the Floss*
- (a) The question on the role of the river was very successful. While there were candidates who opted for a summarised narrative, the majority paid attention to the word 'structure' in the question, and wrote about the river not just as the scene for the novel's actions, but as a shaping motif for the novel itself. Candidates referred to significant episodes, with early childhood, the boat trip with Stephen Guest and the final flood featuring frequently, while other answers linked the flowing of the river symbolically with Maggie's character. Many argued with some deft selections how every aspect of the novel is linked in one way or another to the Floss.
- (b) The passage was recognised as a crucial one in the development of the novel, signalling as it does the real onset of Tulliver's troubles which result in the loss of the Mill. There was usually a clear understanding of Tulliver's stubbornness, his lack of education, his aggressiveness, his love of family and his hatred of lawyers in general and Wakem in particular, and occasionally of the dramatic irony of 'You would not be forced to go to law with him, I hope, brother?' Some very successful answers showed appreciation of the ambiguity of Tulliver's characterisation, presenting him as both a figure of sympathy and one of aggressive stupidity, while others showed a thoughtful response to Eliot's gentle humour in the narration here, arguing that the humour is indulgent, leading the reader to a response to Tulliver which leans towards the sympathetic.
6. Katherine Mansfield: *The Garden Party and Other Stories*
- (a) Candidates tended to agree that Mansfield's stories were more concerned with the characters' minds than events, and used stories such as *The Garden Party*, *Bliss*, *An Indiscreet Journey*, *Her First Ball*, *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding* and *A Married Man's Story* to illustrate their discussion. Ironically, even in these answers, though, some candidates lapsed into narrative summary while asserting that the real interest was in the characters' minds. More successful answers looked closely at the mental life of the characters, contrasting their responses with the events around them. Sophisticated responses examined Mansfield's narrative techniques, showing that events are frequently filtered through the characters' perceptions and responses as the narrative moves in and out of characters' minds, making it difficult to pin down events themselves separately from the characters' mental responses.
- (b) This was a very popular question, though a surprising number of candidates seemed unaware of the context which is revealed in *The Voyage*, namely the death of Fenella's mother, thus missing the emotional undercurrent of the extract. On the other hand, many candidates commented on the pervasive dark imagery at the beginning of the story and suggested that by this means Mansfield is already hinting at the mother's death and the family's mourning. Others commented on the way several parts of the description suggest a childish perception, suggesting that the narrative veers towards Fenella's perception of the journey. There were some very sensitive responses, which looked at Fenella's embarrassment at the emotion between her grandmother and father and questioned her own avoidance of mourning and emotion.