

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 0397/01

Poetry, Prose and Drama

General comments

Examiners saw a full range of responses to the questions on the examination paper this session. At the upper end of the mark range there were answers which were polished and assured, giving perceptive expression to complex ideas and considering effects of writing. It was a pleasure for Examiners to see many answers which included vigorous, informed, personal responses displaying confidence and thoughtful understanding. It was also evident, though, that candidates with more modest achievement had actively engaged with texts and questions and in many cases an enthusiasm for the texts the candidates had been studying was apparent in their writing. In a few cases, textual knowledge was sketchy and responses restricted to narrative paraphrase.

Candidates tend to rely on summary most frequently when writing about prose texts, where reference to the plot is often an important part of the answer. The more confident candidates avoid paraphrase by selecting particular episodes for discussion very securely, making connections between different episodes and showing how they fit within the writer's narrative structure. One key piece of advice is for candidates to develop the habit of discussing the author, and the author's presentation of character or event, rather than characters or events themselves.

There was much less undirected biography and context in answers this session, which has in the past hampered a number of poetry responses in particular. Such material has its place, when used to develop points of the candidate's argument or understanding, as it was in many Wordsworth answers. Used in this way, an awareness of background material can show a mature awareness of the writer in context.

It is worth, too, voicing a reminder about the need to 'comment closely' in answers to the passage-based questions. Candidates who use the passage to focus on choices of structure, vocabulary, imagery, punctuation and other literary techniques and their effects do well. Clearly in this type of question, with the set passage on the question paper, paraphrase or summary has no value at all.

One disturbing feature was the number of candidates who quoted poetry with no indications of the written lines, as if it was prose. Such treatment of poetry was dominant, but demonstrates a fundamental missed appreciation of the ways in which poetry is structured and works.

Comments on specific questions

1. Sujata Bhatt: *Point No Point*

(a) Take-up for this first session for Sujata Bhatt's poetry was comparatively small, but the questions produced some interesting and successful answers. There were, though, very few answers to this question. Poems such as '3 November 1984', 'Walking Across the Brooklyn Bridge, July 1990', 'Wine from Bordeaux' and 'Skinnydipping in History' were used to show how Bhatt considers violence and political upheaval in her poems.

(b) Most candidates writing on Bhatt opted for the question on 'The Peacock' and many were able to make connections with other poems about childhood or animals in the collection. Candidates noted the free variation in line length and position as characteristic of Bhatt's poetry, while the most successful also commented on the effects of that freedom in the reading of this particular poem, sometimes comparing those effects with those of other poems. Candidates appreciated the rich language in the description of the peacock, its call, colour and movement and many wrote successfully on the moment of childhood 'magic' recreated in the poem. Some candidates wrote in an interesting way about how the poem links to Bhatt's ideas about the nature of imagination and the craft of poetry.

2. *Songs of Ourselves*

- (a) 'Aspects of human life' offered candidates a very wide choice, which led to a range of answers covering a number of different poems. Aspects considered included death, stress, illness, marriage, pride, sense of identity, to name a few, and poems chosen ranged as widely as 'The Cockroach', 'Modern Love', 'On Finding a Small Fly...', 'Ozymandias', 'The Man with Night Sweats', 'Summer Farm' and 'A Consumer's Report' itself. In a few cases, candidates restricted themselves to a summary of the content of their appropriate poems, but there were many impressive answers which were based on contrasting or complementary poems, allowing candidates to develop a clear thesis in their essay. Those candidates who were able to support their argument with quotations and careful analysis were very successful.
- (b) 'The Planners' was an enormously popular choice and produced some vigorous and individual answers. Some candidates accepted the poem as fulsome praise of architects and planners and their triumph over nature and time, stamping their mark indefatigably on the landscape. In others' view, the poem begins this way, but that view gradually disintegrates as Cheng's irony becomes more evident. Most candidates were alert to the ironic tone from the opening blunt sentences, confirmed by the final lines of the first stanza. Some sophisticated answers demonstrated awareness of further ironies and ambiguities, acknowledging that mathematics does indeed have 'grace' and that there is audacious beauty in the engineering which makes a bridge 'hang'. The extended dental metaphor does imply superficiality and cosmetic surgery with 'gleaming gold' on the one hand, but also reminds the reader of a dentist's role in fighting decay and disease. In these answers, candidates suggested that the ambiguities are finally resolved with the paradox of 'history is new again' and the destruction of the 'fossils of the last century'. The final stanza caused some problems, with many candidates ignoring it altogether. Some noted the past tense of the verb 'would', others that Cheng has not written a conventional poem in terms of form, structure or rhyme, but in that way has expressed his anger all the more powerfully – his art lacks the 'grace' and 'dexterity' expected of poetry and is in that way another challenge to the planners.

3. William Wordsworth: *Selected Poetry*

- (a) Many candidates demonstrated knowledge of Wordsworth's theories and poetry, some making reference to *The Lyrical Ballads* and its *Preface* and were familiar with the idea of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. 'Nutting', 'The Solitary Reaper', 'Tintern Abbey', and 'Intimations of Immortality' were among poems chosen and generally commented on suitably. The strongest answers showed a strong awareness of the treatment and role of emotional memory in the poetry, providing the poet with 'life and food/ For future years'. Less confident candidates restricted themselves to memories described in the poems. While there were many detailed answers, some drifted into speculation, paraphrase or narrative.
- (b) Most candidates had a clear understanding of 'Lines Written in Early Spring', though the comments were often rather broad and sometimes restricted to Wordsworth as a 'nature poet', for example. Given that the question asked candidates to 'comment closely', surprisingly few candidates wrote in detail about form and language. Very few noted the shorter last line of each quatrain, with many describing the rhythm of the poem inaccurately as iambic pentameter. On the other hand some candidates noted such details as the enjambment and sentence structure which mirrors the trailing periwinkle in stanza 3, the energetic verbs 'hopped and played', the determination apparent in "And I must think, do all I can" and the glum repetition of 'What man has made of man.' Some very successful answers noted that it was subtle details such as these which lifted otherwise simple diction – the 'language really used by men' – to an effective poem. The conflict between humankind and the natural world was frequently discussed, and the Romantic view that humanity was diminished by this separation.

4. Achebe: *Anthills of the Savannah*

- (a) *Anthills* was an enormously popular text, and this a very popular question. The most successful answers combined excellent organisation of information with high level discussion. Most candidates were well informed on the essential moments for women in the novel and chose to look at a number of female characters, rather than focusing almost exclusively on Beatrice. Frequently answers threw into opposition two views of women: the traditional one of women oppressed, abused, marginalised and exploited in a patriarchal society, and modern woman who is educated, strong, articulate, and spirited, characterised by Beatrice. Many candidates made very well chosen

references to the novel, such as the novel's title, the Idemili myth, Beatrice's African name ('a woman is also something'), Ikem's sexual relationship with Elewa, Beatrice's role at Sam's party and the final naming ceremony. The most successful answers looked at all the female characters, and while most saw Achebe arguing for a greater role for women, some thoughtful candidates suggested that women were still portrayed as only able to get involved after the men had failed.

- (b) This was another popular question and the clearest discriminator was whether candidates had answered the question, which required them to examine the *presentation* of the information in the Special Announcement. Many candidates wrote about Sam's brutal regime, about political dissidence and about what really happened to Ikem, but did not focus at all on 'the presentation of information'. More successful answers examined the language of propaganda and saw the emotive impact of vocabulary such as 'unpatriotic', 'dastardly', 'master-minded', 'foreign collaborators' etc. Such answers often related the announcement to contemporary political 'spin' and demonstrated its separation from the truth by careful reference to the novel's portrayal and the reader's understanding of the events it purports to describe. These contextual references led candidates back to the announcement's euphemisms, such as 'scuffle' and 'fatally wounded'.

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

- (a) At the lower end of the mark range, this question attracted some paraphrase and character summary, but at the higher end, it produced some of the best answers Examiners saw during the session. Some responded to Eliot's hint that Maggie is in fact a tragic figure and traced the novelist's display of both nobility and error at different stages of Maggie's development. Such answers demonstrated that Eliot portrays a progression from childish errors of thoughtlessness, such as the death of Tom's rabbits, through errors based on concern for fellow human beings, like her relationship with Philip Wakem, to her greatest error borne of temptation – her river journey with Stephen. A number of candidates clearly identified with Maggie in her fight for regard in a patriarchal, repressive society and many sympathised with Eliot's portrayal of her essential dignity in the face of rejection and reproof. Some of the most successful answers showed how these aspects are brought together in the tragic ending of the novel, though curiously many candidates ignored the final flood and the deaths of Maggie and Tom altogether.
- (b) The passage gave opportunities to most candidates who attempted it to make sensible comments about Tom's determination, pride, preparedness to work and respect for his uncle, and Uncle Deane himself, who is portrayed as avuncular and controlled, giving sound advice from his perspective as a successful good businessman. The most successful answers supported these observations with a close focus on the detail of the passage, such as the opening interruption when 'Mr Deane put up his hand', and the dialogue, noting Tom's educated correct speech and Deane's more casual enunciation. Candidates with the sharpest understanding of the question, who directly considered the impact on the reader, wrote the most successful answers, blending a close examination of the details of the writing with a personal response. A number were able clearly to express why they were led to a sympathetic view of Tom struggling with his pride, and while some saw Deane as a wise and careful advisor, others viewed him as pompous and proud, undermined by Eliot's descriptions of his expanding waistcoat and his gold chain, as well as his unconsciously comic dialogue, which places the heads of other businessmen under the table with his legs.

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

- (a) Mansfield was again a popular choice and many candidates attempted this question, often interpreting 'disappointment' in individual ways. Some suggested that, for the characters at least, the conclusions were often worse than 'disappointing' – Bertha Young, the Little Governess, for example – and several pointed out that it is invariably women who find themselves in these 'disappointing' situations – and often because they got themselves there. Frau Brechenmacher was often cited as a case in point, as the story's end shows her accepting her lot, and even seems to be training up the next generation to suffer as she has done – 'girls have a lot to learn'. The argument that Mansfield presents disappointment for women in her stories as a method of social critique was popular, and in some cases was argued successfully. Candidates used a wide range of stories, including the two referred to above, *Her First Ball*, *The Garden Party*, *The Woman at the Store* and *Prelude*. Some candidates looked at character epiphanies, some of which are not fully grasped, or are forgotten, leading to disappointment for the reader, while more limiting interpretations included sad or inconclusive endings.

- (b) Some of the answers to this question were hampered by a lack of awareness of the context from which the passage is taken. Without knowledge of the wartime setting, it is easy to misinterpret the episode, as a number of candidates did, apparently oblivious to the rest of *An Indiscreet Journey*. More informed candidates, who also looked at the details of the passage, picked up on, for example, the first person narration, the use of French, the verbs of motion, the short sharp sentences, the inverted commas round 'our good friend, Madame Grinçon', the use of 'presumably' and 'I supposed' (ll. 42-43) as indicators of 'uncertainty and excitement' and of the context of the passage.
7. Athol Fugard: *The Township Plays*
- (a) and (b) Too few answers to make a general comment appropriate.
8. Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*
- (a) Though this was not a very popular question, those who attempted it usually demonstrated confidence with the text and its context. Such answers acknowledged that the cast of the play, apart from the Immigration Officers, is entirely drawn from the immigrant community and therefore shows aspirations from the basic level of earning to send money home, to establishing a secure domestic environment which includes both tablecloths and education. The most confident answers looked at Miller's dramatisation through the range of characters, including the newly arrived 'submarines', the central family unit, and outsiders like Louis and Mike, as well as the choric authority of Alfieri. Beyond this they looked at dialogue – both what is said (Marco's and Rodolpho's comments on poverty in Italy) and *how* it is said (the accented dialogue of Marco and Rodolpho and the more Americanised dialogue of the other characters.)
- (b) The most successful answers here noted the word 'develops' in the question and fitted the extract into the context of the audience's understanding of Eddie's developing view of Rodolpho. This created opportunities for making links to other parts of the play, such as the argument with Beatrice which immediately precedes this section, and led to a focused examination of dialogue and stage directions in the set episode. Alert candidates paid close attention to the stage directions which clearly indicate Eddie's discomfort ('searchingly', 'uncomfortably grinning', 'Troubled') while the dialogue at face value says nothing of consequence about Rodolpho. Strong answers made the point that much is conveyed through implication – the contrast between Marco's hard-working masculinity ('a regular bull') and Rodolpho's unexplained humour. This in turn was linked to views of masculinity in the play, with candidates making references to Eddie's judgement of Rodolpho's sexuality and his challenging kiss.
9. William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*
- (a) There were surprisingly few answers on Shakespeare in this session, and very few answers to this question. Those who attempted it noted Octavius' late entry into the play and the early signs of tension between him and Antony in the first triumvirate scene and their discussion of Lepidus. Candidates showed awareness of the contrast Shakespeare makes between the two characters – Antony experienced, passionate, loquacious and ruthless, while Octavius is younger, calm, reserved and gives the impression of being equally ruthless. Candidates referred to the conflict apparent before the battle and the uneasy truce at the end of the play. Here some looked forward in Shakespeare's work and made reference to the characters' ultimate fates in *Antony and Cleopatra*.
- (b) The most successful answers to this question were written by candidates who had a clear sense of the genre of the piece and who responded not only to the written word of the extract but visualised how it would appear on the stage. Such answers saw the drama of the opening lines' indication that the conspirators are firstly gathered kneeling around Caesar making their supplications, so they must rise to stab Caesar and bring him down to their former level, leaving them standing. Successful candidates too made reference to the spectacle of the conspirators standing with dripping daggers amongst the confusion of commands and questions which dominate the dialogue after the killing. They also noted that when order is restored with Brutus' stately dialogue, it is to lead the conspirators in a ceremony which would appear gratuitous and repugnant – 'Stoop, Romans, stoop/ And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood'. There were rich opportunities in this passage to explore dramatic detail and effect. Candidates who paraphrased the events of the passage missed those opportunities.