

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 0397/01

Poetry, Prose and Drama

There was a wide variety in the responses which Examiners saw during this session. The top end of the mark range featured answers which demonstrated a detailed knowledge of the set texts and a sophisticated marshalling of argument, handling quotation and analysis with deft accuracy. However, there were candidates towards the lower end of the mark range who demonstrated sketchy and partial knowledge with little awareness of the demands of the questions. Most candidates know their texts well and the discriminator is how well they select from that knowledge and organise it to answer the specific question on the paper. The most successful candidates are those who clearly acknowledge the question on the paper and answer it fully, shaping their material in response to its stimulus. A feature of the success of such answers is also the secure textual reference used to support points – quotations from selected poems and precise references to episodes in novels and plays, backed up with quotation.

Candidates who deal only with the plot, characters and ideas of texts, showing little awareness of their literary construction, will not be very successful in this syllabus. The passage-based (b) questions put a particular emphasis on appreciation of the author's language use and other techniques, meaning that summary and paraphrase has little value.

Question Specific Comments

1. Sujata Bhatt: *Point No Point*
 - (a) There were very few answers to this question, but the proposition in the title was both opposed and accepted, with candidates comparing colourful India-based poems such as 'The Peacock' and 'At the Marketplace' with more political poems such as 'Wine from Bordeaux' and 'Walking Across Brooklyn Bridge'.
 - (b) 'Genealogy' was a popular poem. Though its title, sadly, was not often commented on, candidates understood the way the poem articulates the difference between the adult and the child's perception and traces a line of familial descent which goes beyond the birth and death of the individual. Stronger responses explored the way the form and language of the poem reflected the child's perception of birth and death, looking at the simple vocabulary and the use of italics to represent the child's direct speech. Successful candidates commented on the child's tone of certainty, with only one question, in her expression of her concern for family bonds. Less confident answers summarised the content and ignored language and form altogether.
2. *Songs of Ourselves*
 - (a) Candidates attempting this question were able to demonstrate knowledge of poems growing out of personal experience, although both poems were not always given equal weight. The ability to address the whole question and discuss the ways the poets made universal comments out of these experiences marked out the most successful candidates. The question offered a breadth of approaches and a very large range of poems was used by candidates, who wrote about the way poets reflected on matters such a love, death, nature and the vicissitudes of life. It was surprising to see how many candidates attempted this question without using any quotations at all, while others restricted their comments to the ideas and content of the poems, without addressing issues of poetic expression. The most successful answers matched content with expression, looking at the form of 'A Birthday', 'The Cockroach' and 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', for example, or the language of 'Pied Beauty', 'Modern Love' or 'The City Planners'. Others focused on the ways that very personal perceptions are explored, in 'The Bay', 'Night Sweat' and 'Long Distance', for example.

(b) This was by far the most popular question on the paper. Most answers were at least competent and noted a tension between the representation of urban city life and that of the countryside, choosing appropriate quotations to illustrate that duality. More sophisticated answers went further than that, looking closely not only at the ideas, but how they are expressed in the poem. Such answers found a more complex reading, with vocabulary and structure suggesting ambiguity. Some also showed a perceptive awareness of structure, alliteration, punctuation, rhyme and half rhyme and linked the effects of these techniques to their argument. Inevitably, these confident answers focused closely on the final couplet, which is more complex than the rest of the poem, while less certain candidates ignored this stanza. It was a surprise to Examiners how many candidates lacked some basic technical terminology with which to discuss poetry – many referred to ‘paragraphs’ rather than ‘stanzas’ or ‘verses’ for example.

3. William Wordsworth: *Selected Poetry*

(a) The question on solitude gave candidates plenty of scope in their choice of poems and this was a popular question. Most candidates who attempted this were aware of the importance of solitude and solitary figures to Wordsworth’s poetry and some were able to refer to some of his theories expressed in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*. Many answers offered detailed discussion of two poems based on solitary figures, such as ‘Lucy Gray’, ‘The Solitary Reaper’ and ‘Resolution and Independence’, noting the way the poet expresses his attraction towards such figures. On the other hand, there were some narrative answers and some candidates wrote about nature rather than solitude, and were not highly rewarded.

(b) While there were good responses to this question, on the whole it was disappointingly answered. Most candidates were able to write about the content and theme of the extract from ‘The Prelude’, noting the importance of formative influences in the poet’s boyhood and the instructive role of nature. Candidates generally found it difficult, though, to comment on the ways Wordsworth expresses those ideas. The given passage was rich in opportunities for comment on language, imagery and versification, but these were tackled meaningfully by only the most confident candidates.

4. Achebe: *Anthills of the Savannah*

(a) *Anthills* continues to be a popular and successful text, encouraging engaged and thoughtful responses to questions. Here candidates noted that though Kangan is an independent state, many of its ruling elite are English educated and maintain some colonial injustices. Candidates naturally tended to focus on Sam and his regime as examples of corruption and abusers of power, citing particular references from the novel, including Ikem’s death and the treatment of Abazon. Knowledge was often impressively detailed and many candidates demonstrated a real appreciation of the novel. The most confident addressed the terms of the question more subtly: rather than merely agreeing; they pointed out that the legacy of colonial rule had been to cause the fragmentation and destruction of indigenous hierarchies, leading to moral chaos which enabled the rise of totalitarian leaders and corrupt state systems. These went on to argue that the novel shows that to gain true independence, Kangan must embrace African rather than European methods, and that this is Achebe’s main argument.

(b) Nearly all candidates were able to put this passage securely within its context and many went on to note the irony of Chris’s death at the moment of his freedom and the fall of Sam. The discrimination in marking responses often lay between those candidates who restricted themselves to matters of plot and character and those who engaged with Achebe’s narrative method. These answers considered the placement of the passage within the novel’s structure and looked at the combination of narrative and dialogue. The blending of formal English and pidgin was often noted, demonstrating both Chris’s authority and his ability to communicate with all people. These points were linked to Achebe’s developing characterisation of Chris and the importance of his taking a stand at this point. Candidates also commented on the presentation of the onlookers and the girl herself as an indication of the state of Kangan. Interestingly, many candidates did not understand Chris’s ‘Last Grin’ comment.

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

- (a) Most candidates who answered this question found plenty of evidence to support the claim that the individual, Maggie in particular, was stifled by the social rules governing society at the time, and many drew on the fact that, as this can be seen as an autobiographical novel, it is clearly an important concern. A focus on Maggie was natural, but many candidates widened their focus and considered other characters including Tom, Philip Wakem, Mr and Mrs Tulliver and others as victims. Social expectations were recognised in areas of marriage, education, work and gender. Good knowledge was often shown, the most successful answers avoiding narrative summary by arguing their case with close, specific references.
- (b) Many candidates showed competence in discussing Tom and the education bought for him by his father. Some contextualised this and discussed too Maggie's thwarted desire for an education, despite greater aptitude. Comparatively few candidates, however, discussed Eliot's ironic style in the passage and many avoided discussing the details of the writing at all, and therefore missed the opportunities and challenges of a passage-based question. There were, too, a number of misunderstandings. A surprising number of candidates expressed the belief, for example, that Tom really is lame.

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

- (a) Many candidates responded to this question with enthusiasm. The most successful answers focused on the effects of Mansfield's characterisation. Some candidates concentrated on the way in which the reader's responses to individual characters were manipulated through language and narrative viewpoint, while others pointed out that the effects Mansfield aimed to achieve were related to concerns important to her: class and the position of women in a patriarchal society. In the light of this, Herr Brechenmacher, the old man in *The Little Governess*, the woman at the store and the narrator of *A Married Man's Story* were popular choices of character. Some candidates, however, chose less obvious characters, presenting interesting arguments about Bertha in *Bliss*, the little governess herself and Frau Brechenmacher, seeing something dislikeable in their perceived complicity with their positions. Other candidates, too, challenged the question by presenting characters who are likeable in contrast to those who are not.
- (b) Candidates found plenty to say about the duplicitous old man and the naïve governess. The most confident candidates commented closely not only the language used by the old man and the governess but also on the significance of the imagery. Such answers recognised that Mansfield provides hints about the old man's interest in the governess, but that one needs to read for a second time before seeing them and thus the reader as well as the governess is initially deceived. The most successful answers examined the writing, down to individual word choice and punctuation, in great detail.

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) While many candidates concentrated on the more central relationships of Catherine and Eddie, Catherine and Rodolpho and Eddie and Beatrice, more thoughtful answers included interesting work on Eddie's sexual difficulties with Beatrice and his difficulties with Rodolpho and their respective sexualities. Good textual knowledge was usually shown, with careful references to the appropriate parts of the drama, such as Catherine's dance with Rodolpho and Eddie kissing him.
- (b) Less confident responses to this passage tended to concentrate on Alfieri to the exclusion of discussion of the initial stage directions, which formed an important part of the selected extract and the way it establishes the world of the play. Those who did focus on these, noted the decent domesticity in the midst of poverty and the introduction of areas of action which become important later in the play: the rocker, the dining table, a bedroom door, the desk and the telephone booth. Alfieri's choric role was often commented on, and the creation of a modern tragedy in a world where cultures and understandings of justice are mixed. Few candidates included the final lines, but those who did noted the significance of Eddie's arrival and Alfieri's introduction of him in the past tense.

9. William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

- (a) There were few answers to this question. Most responded well to the invitation for a personal response, but read the question as requiring a response to the character of Cassius, rather than Shakespeare's *characterisation* of him and so missed the focus on how the playwright elicits a response from an audience.
- (b) Most of the answers to this question achieved a focus on the extract and showed an understanding of Antony's manipulation of the citizens. Some made intelligent comments on the significance of the mob in the play as a whole and noticed Antony's skill in referring to them as 'friends' and 'countrymen'. Many were aware of irony – and provided evidence – and compared Antony's speech with that of Brutus. There was some appreciation of the subtle structure of the extract with Antony seemingly restraining the people's rage while saving the reading of the will as a final masterstroke. Such answers appreciated Antony's appeal to the mob's feelings with his offer of money and violence.