

# LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 0397/01  
Poetry and Prose

## General comments

Candidates in this session overwhelmingly seemed well-prepared for the examination, showing good textual knowledge and an appreciation of the authors' techniques. There was much evident interest in, and enjoyment of, the set texts. Again, the majority wrote on Keats' poetry and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*. There were, though, sizeable numbers who wrote on *Touched with Fire*, *The Mill on the Floss* and the Katherine Mansfield short stories. Paper 9 Drama answers were quite equally divided between *Julius Caesar* and *The Glass Menagerie*, with very few answers on *Serious Money*.

In some cases, it seemed that candidates considered textual knowledge enough for an answer. However, it is possible to show extensive knowledge and fail to fulfil the demands of a question. The most successful candidates make careful selections from their knowledge to answer the specific question on the paper. Such answers use reference and quotation to support points, and focus on authors and their techniques rather than characters and plot. It is worth reminding teachers and candidates here that candidates who have learned a number of quotations, which they can apply to questions, tend to construct successful answers. This is particularly a feature of poetry answers, where it is very difficult to write successfully about language and technique without quotations to exemplify the points being made.

Less successful answers often demonstrate knowledge, but without selectivity. Such candidates often approach answers from a narrative position and rely on contextual and biographical knowledge. In the passage-based questions, successful candidates analyse the language and form of the extract on the paper in considerable detail.

## Question Specific Comments

### **1. John Keats: *Selected Poems***

(a) This question offered wide opportunities to candidates, but success in answering it did demand possession of a detailed knowledge of the poems, with quotations. The best answers revealed very close knowledge of the poems and focused not only on the richness of Keats' language and imagery, but crucially on their contribution to the effects of the chosen poems. Most candidates wrote about the Odes, but many demonstrated how Keats' language choices evoke tone, atmosphere and setting in the narrative poems. In some cases, however, candidates had difficulty in analysing Keats' technique in any depth. Others were unable either to quote, or to refer to specific details in the poems. Answers such as these tended to assert that Keats' poetry is rich in language and imagery without demonstrating their point with references to the poems themselves.

(b) Many candidates were able to contextualise the extract from *Endymion* and identify its place within the narrative, and went on to place its concerns with idealised love and its dangers within Keats' poetry. They discussed features of language and form, the references to Greek mythology and the pastoral setting. However, some candidates did not read the question closely enough and instead of commenting closely on the passage, worked through the extract listing what they recognised as characteristics of Keats' writing. Sometimes these were related to other poems, but the essential part of the passage-based questions is the primary focus on the passage itself. There were a large number of answers which said nothing about *Endymion* at all.

## **2. *Touched with Fire*: ed. Hydes**

(a) Relatively few candidates answered this question. The success of those who did again depended in a large part on the level of detail in the knowledge of the chosen poems. Many wrote about the pain of loss, using 'The Voice', 'The Wild Swans at Coole' and 'Cold in the Earth', while 'Mariana', 'Solitude' and 'Little Boy Crying' were also popular. In some cases, candidates perhaps chose the poems they knew best, even if not readily appropriate to the question, resulting in a struggle to make a persuasive answer. The most successful answers here clearly looked at language and technique to see how the poets expressed their views of pain, and some candidates wrote sharp and penetrating comparisons.

(b) 'Rising Five' proved a popular choice, many candidates showing their appreciation of its warnings about looking too much to the future. While some candidates went through the poem systematically, occasionally offering no more than a synopsis, those who read the question carefully were able to comment on the development of the poet's concern with time, paying close attention to the structure of the verse. These candidates commented on the broken lines and noted the increase in the pace of the ideas towards the end of the poem.

## **3. Stevie Smith: *Selected Poems***

(a) There were few answers to this question. However, some were able to note Smith's use of colloquial vocabulary, bathos and jaunty rhythms in contrast with serious themes, used to give a very particular individual perspective on their subject matter.

(b) Again there were few answers, but a small number of candidates responded quite well to this question, showing an understanding of the poem and using apt references to support the argument. There was particularly interesting comment on the way Smith personifies the characters of the poem by description and the way they speak. God and the wind here provoked thoughtful discussion, and several candidates picked up the idea of 'fairy stories', looking at both God and Smith herself in that context.

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

(a) It would appear that the issue of the presentation of women in this question provoked strong feelings which led to many candidates writing eloquently on the feminist perspective. Strengths included clear references to Maggie's position as a clever girl diminished by those around her and compared unfavourably with Lucy, seen by society as the ideal of femininity. Candidates referred to an education wasted on Tom which would have benefited Maggie, and the constriction of her own desires by her brother and society's expectations. Many candidates showed how Eliot's presentation of the dull provincialism of St Ogg's exacerbated what was already the narrow-minded Victorian approach to women's place in society. Maggie is shown to be ill-suited to this, with her need for human love, compounded with her independent spirit and love of books. The disparity of society's treatment of Maggie and Stephen Guest was often a feature of the answers. For success in this answer, candidates needed detailed and precise references to the novel. Those who relied on generalities and plot summary did less well.

(b) There were some good responses to the passage, with a sensitive understanding of the complexity of the relationship between Maggie and Philip. The passage was generally seen in relation to the wider context of the novel — their first meeting, the family differences, and Tom's attitude. Less successful candidates wrote extensively on this context without analysing the passage in any detail. There were opportunities to examine the vocabulary and punctuation of the extract to show how Eliot develops theme and character. Some candidates commented on Eliot's portrayal of the power relations and on how Philip's dialogue demonstrates his understanding of Maggie's character, enabling him to undermine her resolve.

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

(a) Comparatively few candidates attempted this question and some demonstrated confusion about the term 'narrative voice', which is central to the study of prose fiction. At the weaker end, candidates tended to rely on narrative and retold the plots of two stories without evident reference to Mansfield's choice of the voice in which the stories are told. However, some candidates had clearly considered the issue of narrative voice and wrote successfully, sometimes comparing the nature of the narrator, in, for example, *A Married Man's Story*, *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding* and *The Woman at the Store*. Some candidates were able to show how the narrative voice sometimes closely reflects, but is separate from, the central character, such as in *Her First Ball*, while others were able to demonstrate how the narrative in several of the stories moves seamlessly between third person observation and the characters' internal thoughts, such as in *At the Bay*, *The Garden Party* and others.

(b) This was a very popular question. Many candidates commented on the deeply unappealing description of Mrs Kember but went on to comment on her paradoxical attractiveness in contrast with the small-mindedness of the society around her. A number of candidates used their knowledge of Mansfield's life and her growing boredom with the Bloomsbury set to comment both on the conventional life of the Bay and on Mrs Kember as an essentially empty woman. Several commentaries also focused on sexual identity, including comment on Beryl and Mr Kember. Many candidates were alert to Mansfield's methods of presentation, noting the tone of dialogue, the sense of irony and the interweaving of society's perspective into the narrative. A number of candidates had difficulty with this aspect of Mansfield's style, though, and consequently missed the ironies of the extract.

## **6. Ngugi: *A Grain of Wheat***

(a) Though the passage was the more popular of the questions on Ngugi, this question still attracted many answers. A number of candidates, though, did not read the question closely enough and missed the reference to 'the time of independence', concentrating their essays on the treatment of the Kenyan population by the whites during the time of colonial rule. Some other candidates provided character sketches of the prominent white characters in the novel. Neither of these approaches was a satisfactory way of answering the question. However, there were many alert and thoughtful answers, which did tackle the experience of whites at the time of independence, focusing on the uncertainty, fear, sadness and anger experienced by the whites, and their own sense of betrayal. Some argued that, for an author with such a clear political view, Ngugi is remarkably balanced in his portrayal of the white characters, while others argued that in spite of his attempts to appear unbiased, his portrayal succeeded in undermining them.

(b) This was a very popular question, and the most successful candidates were able to place the passage within its context, as another piece of the puzzle the reader is piecing together about Mugo. Successful candidates saw a new side to Mugo, contented and at one with nature in true Gikuyu fashion, and a contrast with chapter one, where Mugo's shamba work is a failure. Candidates also noted his isolation and detachment, and the irony of his perception of himself as a saviour when he becomes the betrayer. Some candidates argued that Mugo is presented as Judas, not Moses, but also that in a sense he does set his people free because he confesses and makes it possible to leave the things of the past behind. Those candidates who based their writing very closely on the passage were the most successful, making quick and judicious links with other parts of the novel. Less successful answers wrote general essays on Mugo without close reference to the extract on the paper.

## **7. Caryl Churchill: *Serious Money***

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

## **8. William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar***

(a) This question was answered by a few candidates, who saw the female characters revealing the private side of Caesar and Brutus, where the play mainly deals with them in public. Some commented on the masculine world of the play, where women's strength and insights are undervalued. This characterisation was also linked in some cases to the language of the play, where tears, for example, are dismissed as 'womanish' and Caesar is described mockingly in his illness as like 'a sick girl'.

(b) There were some careful analyses of the passage, candidates paying attention to the stage directions indicating the pomp of Caesar's entrance, the behaviour of other characters around Caesar, and the dialogue of Caesar himself. The most successful answers saw the scene theatrically, as Shakespeare creates a visual impression of Caesar as well as one through dialogue. The drama of the Soothsayer's intervention and Caesar's response to it was noted, one or two candidates considering the different effects created by the timing of Caesar's dismissal of him.

## **9. Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie***

(a) Answers to this question showed understanding of the difficulty of Tom's situation, although they did not always concentrate on Williams' techniques.

Some candidates had difficulty in focusing on 'the end of the play' and many tended to forget that what is said in the play may not be reliable, since Tom clearly dislikes his mother and may not report correctly — part of Tom's own admission that it is 'a memory play'. For example, Williams notes that by the time he leaves 'we cannot hear the mother's speech, [and] her silliness is gone'. Williams' earlier signs that Tom would go, following his father's departure, were noted, as were the love he has for Laura and the guilt he will go on feeling.

(b) The passage question was the more popular choice. Less confident candidates only wrote about Amanda and a little about Laura, while more confident candidates commented on the effects of Tom's initial speech. The most successful candidates discussed the contribution made by the stage directions and screen legends. Williams' stage directions are always important, and make a particular contribution to this scene; they emphasise the 'astonishing' alteration to the room, the 'fragile, unearthly prettiness' of Laura, and Amada's 'devout and ritualistic' preparations, for example. Some candidates argued about whether Amanda is selfish or selfless, and noted both her support for her daughter as well as her diminishing comments.