

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 0397/11
Poetry, Prose and Drama

General Comments

The examination produced a wide range of answers with good coverage of each of the set texts, though *Stories of Ourselves* and *Jane Eyre* were particularly popular choices. Nearly all candidates showed some interest in what they had read and were able to select from their knowledge to answer the questions. The real discriminator is the detail of that knowledge and the level of the candidates' understanding of the writing and construction of the texts. It is the candidates who can go beyond accurate recall of characters, events and even quotations, to say something about how the writers' choices shape meaning and affect the readers' responses, who achieve the high marks on the paper.

It is particularly disappointing when that kind of attention to the writing is missing from answers to passage-based questions, where the candidate has the text printed on the question paper and has the opportunity, therefore, to examine the detail of the writing intensively. Every passage-based question demands this kind of close commentary on the writing and candidates who do not acknowledge this requirement will not score high marks.

Examiners increasingly gain the impression that large numbers of candidates approach the selected poem tasks without having studied the poem prior to the exam; many answers carry the hallmarks of an 'unseen' response, often making rudimentary errors. Candidates who answer on poems which they have not studied put themselves at a great disadvantage.

On the other hand, Examiners were also delighted to mark and reward many substantial, well-informed and sensitive essays, based on detailed and often sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the texts.

There was a spate of rubric errors this session, often, but not exclusively, focused in particular Centres. It is important that candidates know that they need to answer one question from two sections on this paper.

Comments on Specific Questions

Question 1. Sujata Bhatt: *Point No Point*

- (a) Few candidates chose this question. Of those who attempted it, the most successful clearly focused on the question's requirement that they discuss 'ways in which' relationships are treated in the poems. The relationships chosen varied between inspirational figures ('Sujata: The First Disciple of Buddha'), through lovers ('Love in a Bathtub') to children ('Genealogy').
- (b) 'The Writer' was much more popular and produced some interesting, sensitive responses. Candidates noted the poem's provocative opening and were often alert to language, repetition, rhetorical questions, personification and physical line placement used ironically to evoke an effective impression of the natural world while the poem expresses that impossibility. The strongest answers were able to express this paradox of 'the writer's art' explored in the poem.

Question 2. *Songs of Ourselves*

- (a) Candidates selected a wide range of poems to answer this question, though a number overlooked the detail of the question's wording and missed the focus on 'the relationship between human beings and the world around them' and wrote about what they perceived as nature poems. More successful answers looked carefully at the relationship and the way it is explored by poets. Some interesting answers compared human beings' relationship with the natural world ('Hunting Snake' for example) with the relationship with the urban world ('The City Planners' for example).
- (b) This was a very popular option, though a surprisingly large number of candidates misread l.22's 'failed not' as 'failed' and thus misunderstood a large part of the poem. This was one of the features of answers which suggested that some candidates were looking at poems in the exam without prior study. On the other hand, many candidates were aware of Hardy's advanced age when this poem was composed and saw the poem as a wry subversion of his usual pessimism, accepting that 'he never expected much' out of life anyway. Such answers discussed the tone of the poem (described appositely by one candidate as 'two old friends having a chat'), with the dialogue between the speaker and the World, its repetitions and regularity of form. There was sensitive and well-expressed appreciation of the tone of the poem, with its understated mixture of acceptance and regret.

Question 3. William Wordsworth: *Selected Poems*

- (a) A number of candidates were hampered in their attempts at this question by their choice of inappropriate poems and their determination to write about Wordsworth's view on nature. However, those who read the question carefully chose such poems as 'The Solitary Reaper', 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' and 'Lines Written in Early Spring' and showed how Wordsworth's choices of language, imagery and form transformed his observations into something evocative and significant. Candidates who knew a good range of poems and could recall key quotations were much advantaged.
- (b) The extract from 'Tintern Abbey' was a very popular option and most candidates made some reference to the rest of the poem from which it was taken. Some gave a rather summary-based account of the extract, but confident candidates focused on 'the development of Wordsworth's view of the natural world' and traced his images of boyhood wild ecstasy and recognised the shift in tone in l.26. The best answers looked at Wordsworth's use of blank verse and examined closely the choices of diction and imagery.

Question 4. Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*

- (a) This question provoked pleasingly personal responses, with candidates arguing very different views. The best answers looked at both sides and appreciated the ambiguity of Brontë's portrayal of Bertha. Candidates picked out the gothic nature of some of the bestial descriptions of her and her wild behaviour and used this to argue that the reader's sympathies are with Rochester and Jane. Others, however, interpreted the behaviour as symbolic of frustrated passion and jealousy for Jane and sympathised with Bertha. Discussions of Rochester too showed a range of views, with as many detractors for his incarceration of Bertha as supporters for his desperation for a meaningful relationship after the insanity of his wife.
- (b) While there were some narrative responses, candidates who looked at the language, imagery and dialogue of this passage found plenty of interest. In particular, some candidates closely examined the structure and language of St John's speeches, suggesting that they create the effect of a legal case being prosecuted rather than a proposal of marriage. This was contrasted with Jane's shorter, punchier speeches which couple reason with feeling. Candidates who did not quote and comment on the detail of the passage missed its opportunities – and opportunities to gain marks. Successful candidates were able to build on passage detail with references to other parts of the text, particularly contrasting this scene with Rochester's proposal and linking the imagery applied to St John and Brocklehurst.

Question 5. Tsitsi Dangarembga: *Nervous Conditions*

- (a) Nearly all candidates who attempted this question were able to show their knowledge of the novel and many worked through various female characters to comment on their roles. Tambu, Nyasha and Miaguru received a lot of attention, with others extending to Lucia and Tambu's mother. Such answers were usually sound, but more developed and successful answers were able to conceptualise the issues by making comparisons and considering the roles of men as well. In this way, some candidates were able to challenge the accepted view and argue that some of the women are not inferior. Successful answers avoided assertions and sweeping assumptions about women in Africa, instead referring to specific incidents and quotations from the text.
- (b) Some of the changes in Nhamo were noted by most candidates; the more successful answers closely focused on Tambu's perception of those changes, as the question required. Such answers noted the implications of the tone of voice in both recognising the physical changes and the apparent loss of knowledge of Shona. The gradual irony of its 'miraculous' return was usually noted and the best answers were able to demonstrate the detached observational quality of Tambu's narrative here, particularly apparent in the final paragraph of the extract.

Question 6. *Stories of Ourselves*

- (a) Several stories from the anthology were chosen by candidates for this question, including *Of White Hairs and Cricket*, *Sandpiper*, *Tyres* and *The Open Boat*. In many cases, unfortunately, candidates progressed little further than relating the narrative of their two chosen stories. Successful answers considered the structure of the stories, the narrative voice and perspective, considering the ways that these features affect the reader's understanding.
- (b) There were quite frequent signs of candidates approaching this question without prior knowledge of the story, as several answers lacked any knowledge of the identity of the narrator or his relationship with Usher – to whom some candidates referred a '*the Usher*'. Those more familiar with the material often wrote well, showing appreciation of the drama conveyed through the imagery and language. The better answers were sensitive to the Gothic style with the passage's archaic language and were able to pinpoint the heavily charged parts of grammar in the sentences. The importance of the description of the weather conditions was noted, as well as the irony of the final line.

Question 7. Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*

- (a) Less confident candidates limited their discussion to Rodolpho, or Eddie's distrust of Rodolpho, while more successful answers used this area as a springboard to consideration of masculinity more broadly in the play. The role of men as bread winners was discussed, as well as physical strength and sexuality. There was much profitable discussion of Eddie, Rodolpho and Marco and even some thoughtful comment on Eddie's friendship with Louis and Mike.
- (b) Candidates who looked closely at the dialogue, and matched this with close attention to the stage directions, were able to develop strong answers which acknowledged the balance of love, affection and tension in this extract. Answers which did not look closely at the writing of the passage were much less successful.

Question 8. Peter Shaffer: *Equus*

- (a) Though there were few answers, candidates often used the question's stage direction to focus on the theatrical way Shaffer presents the horse chorus. Weaker answers described what happens to horses in the play, while strong answers were alert to the drama created by movement and sound in the chorus.
- (b) Some candidates engaged personally with the argument here, debating whether Alan is deserving of support and treatment for his 'pain' after committing such a violent crime. Fewer candidates were able to explore the implications of Dysart's sense of regret. Personal responses were successful when matched by close attention to the dialogue to show how that debate is treated in the scene.

Question 9. William Shakespeare: *Henry IV Part 1*

- (a) There were not many answers to this question. Less confident candidates described the differences between the characters and events in the court and tavern – often the question's focus on the 'dramatic effects' of the 'contrasts' was overlooked. Stronger answers showed how the tavern often presents a distorted mirror image of the court and noted the importance of Prince Henry's inhabiting of both worlds.
- (b) The strongest answers to this question had some sense of the context of the exchange in the play and were able to discuss the language of King Henry's speech in detail, with its formality and structure. They also noted the significance of the inclusion in the extract of Prince Henry's final reply.