

LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 0397/01

Poetry, Prose and Drama

General comments

Examiners in this session found a very wide range of responses to questions. As always, at the upper end of the range, candidates' writing was assured and sophisticated, demonstrating detailed and thoughtful knowledge of texts and writers' techniques. At the lower end, however, there were candidates who seemed ill-prepared for the examination, with sketchy knowledge of texts and uncertainty about the demands of literary study.

Textual knowledge is the basis for all discussion; a thorough knowledge of the set texts is therefore essential for any answer. Knowledge itself is not enough for success in the examination, however; candidates need to be able to select from their knowledge precisely in order to develop an argument in response to the question on the examination paper. All questions are ultimately about the writers' craft, their presentation of characters and situations, their handling of ideas. The meaning of a poem, or what characters say and do in a novel or play, are the beginning of an answer, not its entirety.

In the same way, contextual and biographical material has no value in itself. Where it is used carefully and relevantly by a candidate to develop an interpretation or response to a text or question, then it can be very valuable.

Question on specific comments

1. John Keats: *Selected Poems*

- (a) While some candidates tried to answer this question about Keats' presentation of love with reference to the Odes, most successful answers referred to 'Lamia', 'The Eve of St Agnes' and 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', though other poems were successfully used too. As with previous years, the use of biographical material was problematic, as many candidates showed a far better knowledge of the vicissitudes of Keats' life than they did of Keats' poetry. However, some candidates were able to make reference to Keats' life very productively to show his position on love, tracing his concerns through well-chosen poems. Most candidates were able to illustrate Keats' presentation of love and its association with sorrow and pain in these poems while offering some evaluation. Some very strong answers featured a careful comparison between poems, suggesting, for example, that not all presentation of love in the poems 'leaves the heart high-sorrowful', using the union of the lovers on 'The Eve of St Agnes' to provide a contrast with misery and heartbreak.
- (b) 'Ode on Melancholy' was a poem that discriminated between candidates, as some who attempted this question struggled to give a clear account of their understanding of the poem's meaning. Others dealt with the poem chronologically, commenting on the imagery, dealing with the mood of the poem and linking it to elements in other poems. The most successful answers focused on this ode as an expression of inner struggle in Keats' mind between optimism and pessimism. Some showed a perceptive awareness of the central crux that joy and melancholy are inseparable or, as one candidate expressed it, 'like two sides of the same coin'. This led to a sophisticated response not only to this ode, but to Keats' poetry overall.

2. *Songs of Ourselves*

- (a) Candidates used a very wide range of poems to answer this question, though 'The Man With Night Sweats', 'Night Sweat', 'Rain' and the extract from 'Long Distance' were perhaps the most popular. The strongest answers noticed the imperative 'Compare' in the question and drew interesting links between the chosen poems. In many of the answers, contextual knowledge was used appropriately, as candidates showed how their understanding had been developed by use of background material. Strong answers also focused on the 'ways' of the question, looking at the poets' language, imagery and poetic structure.
- (b) 'Hunting Snake' proved a popular poem, attracting many answers. Nearly all candidates were able to show some understanding of the ambivalent nature of the narrator's responses (fear, awe, admiration) and how Wright's choice of words and use of form conveyed those responses. More confident candidates saw more in the final lines than just relief that the encounter was over, suggesting that a priceless, almost indescribable moment had been shared. There was some very good knowledge of the poetic techniques evident in the poem, such as caesura, enjambment and variation of metre and rhyme. Some candidates showed awareness of Judith Wright's background as a naturalist and this gave their answers an added edge, some seeing the poem as a plea for respect for the natural world; others found significant links to the aboriginal question in the writer's native Australia.

3. Stevie Smith: *Selected Poems*

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

4. Achebe: *Anthills of the Savannah*

- (a) The more successful answers to this question were able to demonstrate good knowledge of the three main characters but also show how their different perspectives of events, and of each other, made for a varied and interesting narrative. Some were quite perceptive in seeing what each represented – Beatrice as the voice of women, Ikem as the voice of the people, Chris as the increasingly questioning voice of the disillusioned. Some candidates gave an indication of the different styles of the character narratives, though few referred to the omniscient fourth narrator. Less confident answers offered little more than general character studies, often including incidental characters as 'narrators'.
- (b) The passage, taken from the novel's dénouement, offered ample opportunities to candidates, with the significance of the naming ceremony and the fact that most of the extract was dialogue. More successful answers focused on several aspects of significance, for example the role of women in the ceremony, the breaking with tradition, the ceremony as a symbol of new beginnings and new hope, the variety of participants present at the ceremony and what this signified for the future. References were also made to the perpetuation of Ikem's memory and the occasional elements of humour, which lighten the mood at the end of the novel. Very alert candidates demonstrated the social mix in the ways the ideas of the characters are expressed in different voices using formal English or pidgin and gave prominence to Beatrice's growing role as leader, who converses easily in both.

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

- (a) In a number of cases, answers here were narrative based, candidates struggling to progress beyond a summary of events in the novel to show that Tom and Maggie have both had a hard life. However, more thoughtful answers showed a careful weighing up of evidence in the novel and personal engagement with the question. Such answers acknowledged Tom's sense of duty but also demonstrated Eliot's presentation of Maggie's passionate and instinctive nature and the constraints placed on her by society. Some very good answers made reference to Eliot's narrative interventions, demonstrating how the omniscient narration directs the reader's sympathies towards Maggie.

- (b) This was a very popular question, attracting a wide range of answers. More confident answers focused clearly on the passage, focusing on Stephen and Lucy's relationship through the humour of their presentation created by Eliot's descriptions and dialogue. Candidates' responses varied: some found an attractive early romance between two attractive young people, while others discovered a shallow, society relationship without real feeling or substance, despite the flirtation. A number of candidates confused Lucy's King Charles spaniel with Stephen, which had unfortunate results for their reading of the passage.

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

- (a) Many candidates answered this question, and it was often very well done. It provoked interesting discussion of the stories – while *The Woman at the Store* and *Frau Brechenmacher* were the most popular, followed by *Millie* and *The Little Governess*, some candidates also gave subtle individual readings of stories such as *Her First Ball* and *Prelude*. While the violence, physical or sexual, is quite apparent in a number of these stories, and was discussed often with care and close reference, the most successful candidates were those who paid attention to the words 'underneath the surface' and showed how violence is hinted at in imagery or setting, or gradually revealed through narrative structure.
- (b) Quite a number of answers on the passage from *Bliss* suggested that the candidates were unaware of the rest of the story, which severely hampered the understanding of the passage itself. Those candidates aware of the story were able to contextualise the passage and relate it directly to Bertha's later discovery of the affair between her husband and Miss Fulton. Many answers concentrated on the relationship between Bertha and Miss Fulton, ignoring the question's instruction to comment on Mansfield's presentation of the women – too many answers ignored Mug and Face. Successful answers illustrated Mansfield's satirical portrayal of the women, none of whom emerge from the passage with much credit. Most candidates concentrated on the section about the pear tree, which was discussed through a number of interpretations, often symbolic, frequently sexual. The most alert candidates were able to point out that Bertha's own interpretation of her epiphanic moment is mistaken, undercutting her perception with irony.

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) This question stimulated a lot of personal response from candidates, most of whom responded thoughtfully to Miller's ambivalent presentation of Eddie. Candidates showed knowledge of key aspects and pertinent episodes of the play; the strongest answers referred precisely to these to show how they shaped the candidates' response to Eddie. Many made informed comments about the dramatic ways by which Miller manipulates an audience's response at different moments of the play.
- (b) There were some unbalanced responses here, where candidates wrote a general essay, rather than follow the question's instructions and focus on the set passage. This was unfortunate when the passage offered a wealth of opportunities. Most candidates placed the passage in a context, with doubts in Catherine's mind fuelled by Eddie, and successful answers dealt with the central issue carefully. Such candidates wrote perceptively about an audience's fluctuating response to the scene through Miller's construction of the dialogue.

9. William Shakespeare: *Julius Caesar*

- (a) Shakespeare's characterisation of Antony provoked strong views. While Examiners saw quite a lot of unexceptional narrative treatment, better answers selected moments from the play for comment, such as his reactions to Caesar's murder and the funeral speech, his treatment of Lepidus, rivalry with Octavius and his honouring of the dead Brutus. Many candidates commented on the change in his character once Caesar has been murdered and the development of his political expediency, treating the commoners and Lepidus with contempt once he has gained his position. Most candidates made a balanced judgement, noting his generosity to Brutus in victory, but also noting the ways Shakespeare hints that he is no real political match for Octavius.

- (b)** There were some unusual answers to this question on the presentation of the relationship between Brutus and Cassius, quite a number arguing a homosexual relationship between the two. While such a reading might be legitimate, it was seldom helpfully applied here; the more successful candidates were those who looked closely at the developing dynamic Shakespeare creates between the two characters in the scene. Such candidates identified the changes in the relationship compared with the early scenes of the play, illustrating from the language of the extract Brutus' high-minded hypocrisy and Cassius' self-dramatisation, for example.