

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/61
1900 to the Present

Key messages

- Candidates should acquire a detailed knowledge of the texts, including quotations and close reference.
- They should be able to demonstrate how a writer shapes the meaning of the text by his/her use of language, structure, dramatic features and form. Beyond spotting features such as alliteration or anaphora, it is important to identify the effects such features create.
- While detailed reference to the text is essential, narrative summary does not constitute successful response.
- The candidate must keep the question in mind to select relevant details and ideas to address the question, rather than writing everything he/she knows about a text.
- Making a short plan before writing the answer is often a good idea; these should be kept concise so that a candidate can make good use of the time they have for writing their response.
- Personal response is a requirement; this considered, candidates should beware of drifting off the discussion of the text into general personal reflection.

General comments

The questions elicited many thoughtful, informed and engaged responses from candidates who shared their enjoyment of the texts studied. They wrote coherently and fluently, sometimes showing a freshly original personal response.

Most candidates were able to complete two essays of moderate length within the given time. Some second answers were incomplete, and this was often where a candidate had spent much time in their first essay on side issues such as biographical and contextual details, or they embarked on a general overview of a text before beginning on the details of a passage question. Introductory comments are a good idea, especially if placing a passage within its context; such introductions should be brief, allowing sufficient time for detailed consideration and analysis of the passage.

It is important to move an essay along from one point to the next in a logical sequence. Many candidates do this well; others spend a large portion of their writing focussing on the same idea, often supporting the same point with many examples, where they would do better to move on.

A feature of weak responses is repetition. Some responses came across like political speeches, with points being driven home by means of repetition, particularly when giving a personal response or opinion. While it is acceptable and often satisfying to end an essay with a paragraph summarising the points made in the argument, there is no need to keep repeating points throughout the answer. Ideas will be credited if expressed clearly once.

Candidates should understand the virtue of concision. Writing at great length often involves repetition and the time constraints can prevent the candidate from writing legibly.

There were occasional rubric infringements where candidates did not attempt a second question or they wrote both answers on the same text. The instructions on the question paper clearly state that candidates need to attempt two questions, each on a different text.

It is noticeable that candidates are in general using critical opinions to better advantage, helping to move the argument onto a new point or in partial support of the opinion they are expressing. Critical opinions should not be used alone as a substitute for textual support. For example, if a candidate quotes a critic who believes that Amanda is a tragic figure, there needs to be a quotation or close reference to the text to support this opinion.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Americanah*

Most candidates demonstrated knowledge of the main concerns of this text and able candidates could move around the text, selecting pertinent details to support responses. Less successful responses referred more generally to these concerns, especially in the passage question, or focused on plot and character. The **(b)** passage question was far more popular than the **(a)** essay question.

- (a)** Weaker candidates struggled with the concept of structure and tended to base responses on topics such as hair or race. Better answers picked out features such as flashback, narrative perspective and the use of the blogs, discussing the effects they produce. Some candidates explored the power of shifting settings such as run-down hair salons, white people's houses, England, Nigeria and how they reflected racial differences and prejudices. Others discussed the shifting pattern of relationships entered into by the lead protagonists, showing how their disillusionment sets up the desire to 'come home' to each other both literally and figuratively after they have gained in self-knowledge. Many discussed how satisfactory they found the inconclusive ending and the moral implications of Obinze's discarded marriage.
- (b)** Most candidates were able to locate the passage contextually, often linking the episode to the development of Ifemelu's identity. They identified the overarching concern of racism, relating this to other experiences and incidents in the wider text. They commented on Laura as representative of everyday American racism in terms of generalisations and stereotyping. Many commented on the contrasting upbringing of children in Nigeria and America, with some links to Ifemelu's childhood or to Dike's problem of adjusting to different sets of values. The idea of Ifemelu as privileged was discussed, with reference to the hardships she experiences in America or Obinze's difficulties in England. The contrast between American Africans and African Americans was dwelt on by some, noting how much easier it is for educated black people to succeed in Africa than in America. A few able candidates commented on 'the pashmina of the wounded' as Laura's mantle of martyrdom, showing how the aggressor has now become the victim in order to regain the moral high-ground, with some analysis of the luxurious and comforting connotations of 'pashmina' and of Kimberley revealing her anxiety through her punishment of the salad. Weaker candidates tended to remain within the passage, commenting on Ifemelu's reaction to Laura's remarks, often needing to demonstrate a fuller understanding subtleties such as the implications of Laura's complimentary remarks about the Nigerian doctor. Very weak responses tended to give a simple account of the passage with some paraphrase, e.g. 'Laura does not know what the history books look like.'

Question 2

Eleanor Catton: *The Rehearsal*

The post-modern nature of this text makes it easier for candidates to view characters and plot as a construct, enabling them to separate the author from her work. Though it remains less popular than the other novels, candidates were able to answer with some engagement on both options.

- (a)** Weaker candidates were able to provide some examples of events in the plot where they found difficulty in discriminating between 'reality' and 'fantasy', such as in the relationship between Julia and Isolde, some of the discussions between the saxophone teacher and the mothers of her pupils, or the central affair of Victoria and Mr Saladin. The absence of names for the teachers and the mirroring of events at the girls' school by pupils at the drama school reinforce the lack of realism. Some wrote confusedly about what 'really' happened. Stronger candidates wrote about Catton's use of postmodern techniques, such as the parallelism of characters creating unrealistic patterns in the structure of the novel. (Julia, the saxophone teacher, Mr Saladin and Stanley all embark on relationships meeting the disapproval of conventional society, all involving the exercise of power

and/or role playing.) Characters within the novel are shown to be confused between what is real and what is not, such as the speculation about Victoria and Mr Saladin and Stanley's confusion about the Theatre of Cruelty experiment while other characters such as Julia appear to be wilfully straying from reality. The use of performative language, music and lighting effects were all recognised as contributing to the blurred distinction between reality and fantasy.

- (b) Weaker candidates tended to write an account of the scene with some interpretive comment and paraphrase. Better answers included some discussion of the masked nature of the Head of Acting, sometimes with reference to the presentation of other teachers. The harshness of Oliver's public reprimand was linked to other areas of the text where the drama school teachers are presented as unsympathetic or deliberately causing discomfort to the students. The isolation of one individual in a crowd was also recognised as a characteristic feature of this novel. The illogical nature of being instructed to perform an intimate scene 'you would be unwilling to share' was noted by some, as well as the way retelling and sharing a scene can turn tragedy into comedy, connecting to the central theme of performance. Some linked this episode to the scene in which Stanley acts as his father, which led at least one candidate to suggest that we are all to some degree acting out imitations of our parents, teachers, siblings or peers, choosing our characters from a limited range of stereotypes. This is exemplified earlier, when Stanley feels that other students have already taken all of the most interesting or attractive roles in their quest to invent a personality for themselves.

Question 3

T.S. Eliot: *Four Quartets*

A pleasing number of centres selected this text, undeterred by its challenging nature. Texts of this density offer opportunities to all but the weakest candidates to write coherent and often original responses, producing good results. Many answers showed evidence of intelligent understanding of the text and of the various ways Eliot creates meaning. Candidates also showed engagement with some of the central philosophical and religious ideas of the poems.

- (a) Few attempted this question, though it offered scope for candidates to select from various aspects of humanity with which Eliot is concerned, such as our concept of time and its significance, the importance and unreliability of memory, our preoccupation with the future, our feelings about death, our journey through life, the sense of futility which can be engendered by the routine of urban living and the way religious belief and humility impact on all of these. The text provides copious support for all these topics. Some weak candidates used the question as a starting point for general personal reflection on life, the universe and many other topics, and needed to make more sufficient reference to the text. Successful answers discussed the ways Eliot expresses his ideas.
- (b) There was some generalisation about spiritual journeys and some tendency to paraphrase or explain the passage. More able candidates were able to contextualise the passage in relation to the other Quartets and demonstrate connections, relating the end of this journey to 'In my beginning is my end'. Some candidates explored the imagery of Pilgrimage with the use of the echoing words 'came' and 'purpose', the reference to Charles I, Eliot's ancestors and the ways the past superimposes itself on the present ('Now and in England'). The tendency of everything to lead to the 'tombstone', the imagery of the husk and the shell, the contrast between banal and mystical language (the 'pigsty' and putting off of 'sense and notion'), the use of anaphora and the inclusive use of 'you' throughout the passage were fruitful opportunities for close analysis of language. Some candidates wrote inappropriately about context and related most of the extract to the Second World War, taking the word 'shell' to refer to bombardment by the enemy.

Question 4

Athol Fugard: *Townships Plays*

Candidates demonstrated pleasing engagement with these plays and some appropriate knowledge of context, particularly of life under the apartheid regime in South Africa. It should be noted, though, that *The Coat* is not on the list of set texts. Some candidates included material based on this play in their answers and while it could be considered as related wider reference and they were not penalised, they were likely to waste time if they focused too much on this play at the expense of the other plays on the syllabus.

- (a) Candidates were asked to refer to at least two plays in their answers but some chose to refer to four, with the result that such essays tended to lack depth and detail. Better responses were concerned with more than plot and characters, exploring effects of language and dramatic features. Most focused on the hardships of life under apartheid, as illustrated in the plays, such as the side effects of extortion and gangsterism in *No Good Friday* and the evils resulting from the system of books/ID cards in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*. They explored the ways these tended to crush the dreams of those migrating to the city for work as they could be forced to live in particular settlements where they would be exploited, murdered or forced to make moral compromises to survive. It was noted how most characters fail to achieve their dreams, including Queeny, to whom some candidates took a feminist critical approach even though part of her dream is to have a man to take care of her. Able candidates identified *The Island* as the most optimistic play despite its gloomy setting, as it demonstrates how the prisoners and other victims of a cruel political system can achieve a dream of freedom of sorts through Drama, Art or imagination in general, enabling them to transcend the walls of their prison if only spiritually and mentally.
- (b) Most candidates who tackled this passage were able to demonstrate some understanding and knowledge of the context. They were able to draw parallels between the situation of the prisoners – and indeed all those suffering under apartheid – and Antigone suffering under the ‘temporary and arbitrary law’ of Creon. The most successful candidates were able to use details to connect the passage to the wider text and the other plays, such as the way imagination allows John and Winston to ‘escape’ for a while from their cell when they hold an imaginary telephone conversation with a friend. Many saw the ‘you are only a man’ speech as a challenge to the man-made apartheid laws. Better answers saw this passage as the climax of the play, contrasting the dignified ‘performance’ of Winston with the more jocular scenes with their sexist banter, where he is inveigled into acting as a woman, challenging gender stereotypes. Able candidates identified and discussed the effects of theatrical techniques such as the play within a play, the use of stichomythia and the breaking of the fourth wall when the characters step out of their roles to confront the audience themselves. Some weak candidates gave a general account of the scene and needed to relate it to the text as a whole in order to be more successful.

Question 5

Kuzuo Ishiguro: *Never Let Me Go*

This proved to be the most popular novel and gave rise to some very pleasing responses. Candidates were able to engage with the text and its very controversial ideas. Many appeared to have done some background research into the history of cloning, starting with the creation of Dolly the sheep. They had also read interviews given by Ishiguro, to which they were able to refer relevantly in the course of their answers. Some candidates, in describing Kathy as an unreliable narrator, seemed to imply that there could somehow be a reliable, accurate account of the events described; such candidates would have done better to treat the novel and its characters as constructs of the author. Unusually, more candidates attempted the (a) essay question rather than the (b) passage option.

- (a) There were some very good responses to this question, with excellent use of detail from the text about the treatment of the clones, their characterisation and relationships with each other, the euphemistic language such as ‘donations’ and ‘complete’, the ways the clones appear to be brain-washed into acceptance of their fate and make no attempt to rebel or escape, the perpetuation through rumours of fear of what lies outside Hailsham, the lack of surnames, the use of symbols such as the tape (a mass-produced item), the boat and the donating of Art work to the gallery. Some argued that the treatment of the clones put the humanity of those in control in question. There was good use of critical opinions, including some of Ishiguro’s own ideas, comparison of the ‘othering’ of the clones to colonialism, racism and slavery, while some took a Marxist approach. The certainty of death, the way the children ‘are told and not told’ and the necessity of accepting the inevitable were recognised by very able candidates as components of an analogy of our own human lives. Less good responses were often well engaged with the question, but gave insufficient detail from the text to support arguments and allowed themselves to drift away from the text into general essays on repression or human rights. More able candidates paid attention to Ishiguro’s methods and their effects.
- (b) There was some intelligent discussion about Kathy’s bland, retrospective and accepting narrative, and the hesitant piecing together of the ways the clones gradually become aware of their purpose in life, with the donation of their art work viewed as preparation for the donation of their vital organs. Others focused on the less sinister purpose of trying to prove that the clones have souls, as

evidenced by Miss Emily later in the text. The passage was also linked to Tommy's belated interest in producing works of art and the rumour that this could help to obtain a deferral. One candidate noted that Miss Emily's invalid condition when visited by Tommy and Kathy might have indicated a recent or impending organ transplant. There were comments on the way the banal style of the passage with its gossipy speculations and reliance on hearsay mimics the children's attempts to make sense of their world, cut off as they are from 'Outside' where 'they sell everything'. The controlled conditions where they are brainwashed into accepting that 'Someone's going to hear us soon' were compared to totalitarian regimes and other dystopian fiction such as 1984. This was reinforced by the ending of the passage, where the children's embarrassment in mentioning the gallery demonstrates their collaboration in upholding the system of which they are victims. Again, weaker responses drifted from analysis of the passage into personal response about the cruelty of farming the clones to rob them of their body parts and eventually of their lives, needing to make more sufficient reference to the passage and the wider text.

Question 6

Derek Walcott: *Selected Poems*

This text is still a minority choice, though there is an increase in the numbers selecting it. Stronger candidates demonstrated at least sound knowledge and understanding of Walcott's poetic concerns and the ways he shapes meaning. There is still a tendency to assume that every poem must refer to the West Indian history of oppression by colonial rule and slavery.

- (a) Very few attempted to write about Walcott's presentation of his feelings for the islands, though many poems in the selection would have furnished suitable material for this question. Most poems refer in some detail to the scenery and especially to the sea, often used symbolically, and contextual knowledge of the colonial history of the islands could have been appropriately deployed in discussing such poems as 'Ruins of a Great House', 'Veranda' or 'The Almond Trees', while comment on Island life at a later date is found in poems such as 'Parades, Parades', 'Homecoming: Anse La Raye' and 'Sabbaths WI', in which aspects of modern politics, commercialism and tourism are discussed with Walcott's characteristic ambivalence.
- (b) 'Nearing Forty' was tackled by more candidates, most of whom could aptly discuss the poet's mood of retrospection and his complaints about the ravages of time, particularly his loss of poetic inspiration. The use of pathetic fallacy (rain which 'seems to weep'), the pun on 'vision', the water/sea imagery ('ebbs') and the use of regular meter and rhyme were recognised by able candidates as characteristic of Walcott, some of whom made reference to other poems to support 'characteristic'. Some found the use of sexual imagery ('bedsheet', 'guttering rainspout') indicative that his sexual potency is fading along with his poetic creativity – the contrast between the 'searing meteor' and the 'dented kettle'. Others noted the more consolatory tone of the final lines, conveying a sense of the cycle of nature in its reference to the seasons and the 'steadier elation' with which the poet resolves to 'set [his] lines to work'. The interesting change from first person 'I' in the first twelve lines to 'you' in the rest of the poem could be suggestive of the poet exhorting himself to persevere. Others recognised that Walcott may be making false claims that his creativity is waning when he produces this tour de force in one thirty-two-lined sentence. Many missed the opportunity to comment on the relevance of the epigraph and the 'stability of truth'. Some wrongly assumed that John Figueroa and Samuel Johnson were contemporaries.

Question 7

Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*

This has replaced *Death of a Salesman* as the most popular text on the Paper. Candidates found the language and ideas of the play accessible and were able to empathise with the characters as well as showing understanding of the social and economic context. There was some reference to the genre, plastic theatre, though at times understanding of this term needed to be more clearly demonstrated. Candidates were able to refer appropriately to critical opinions and made connections between the text and biographical details of Williams's life. Candidates should be careful not to over-use biographical material; such responses tended to include assertive comments that needed textual support. Weaker answers tended to refer to characters as if they were real people. There was a great contrast in the performance of those who really knew the text well and those who seemed to have a very superficial knowledge, based perhaps on the film.

- (a) There were some good answers on varieties of escape, taking into consideration all of the characters including Jim. They were able to discuss metaphorical escape such as the fire escape and the photograph of Mr Wingfield constantly reminding the audience and the play's characters of his 'love of long-distance'. Laura's menagerie, Amanda's reminiscences of her life in the Deep South, Tom's drinking, visits to the movies and final departure were some of the more obvious aspects of escape mentioned by most candidates. More subtle examples included Amanda's ambition of finding a husband for Laura to enable them to escape from their economic problems, the use of imagery such as the escape from the coffin and the breaking of the unicorn's horn, which (some argued) sets Laura free from being different from everyone else. Tom's writing and his dreams of becoming a great writer and Jim's escape from the banality of his life by recollecting his glorious past and flirting with Laura were also mentioned. There was some over-use of links to biographical material, though perhaps seeing Tom's evasiveness about his evening disappearances from the house as an oblique reference to a homosexual secret life was an acceptable point. Good answers referred to dramatic effects such as the plastic theatre features, legends and images on the screen, music and lighting to highlight Laura's delicacy and other-worldliness, Amanda's out of date appearance, especially in the scene with Jim, and Mr Wingfield's photograph lighting up in apparent confirmation of the idea that one can escape from a coffin. Some candidates took the view that Tom's escape is made final through his cathartic experience of composing his Memory Play while others concluded he could never truly escape from his remorse and guilt at abandoning his family.
- (b) Competent candidates wrote more than superficial accounts of the scene, making some observations about Amanda's overbearing behaviour and the timidity of Laura. They made reference to the wider text and the reason for Amanda's confrontation of Laura, i.e. her failure to attend her typing classes. Better answers referred to the elements of plastic theatre here, such as the blue roses (some making a link with Jim and the mistake he had made about Laura's illness). Laura's fragility, emphasised by her costume and the ivory chair, was contrasted with Amanda's pretentiously showy but largely fake and dated costume. Many commented on the use of dramatic pauses, repetitions and patterns of questions with painfully withheld answers. There was comment on Amanda's theatricality here and elsewhere in the text, her dramatic ripping of the typing chart and the deliberate withholding of the reason for her wrath, reducing Laura to a semi-mute, passive response. Able candidates noted how Amanda asks, 'What is going to become of us?' showing that her fate is closely bound up with Laura's, leading to her plan to find a gentleman caller who will marry Laura. Response to Amanda varied between disapproval of her treatment of Laura to sympathy for a single mother living in a society where it was difficult for women to find work.