

# LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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**Paper 9695/71**  
**Comment and Appreciation**

## Key messages

Good answers:

- Demonstrate that candidates have read and considered their chosen poem or passages as a whole before starting to write.
- Do not rely upon narrative or paraphrase, but focus upon the form, structure and language of the poem or passages, and upon how these shape meaning.
- Show how literary devices and techniques are used by the writers to create particular effects and responses.
- Use personal responses to reflect the ways in which the poem or passage is written, not simply to what is said.
- Maintain a tight focus on the poem or passage throughout the response, and do not discuss other writers or other ideas.

## General comments

There was as usual a very good range of responses to the three questions in the Paper, and most candidates had clearly read the poem and passages carefully before starting to write about them, so that they were able to see each of them as a whole, and most therefore did not omit the significance of the closing lines or words. There were relatively few responses which relied solely upon simple paraphrase or narrative, and there was plenty of critical discussion of language and structure, especially with the poem. A few candidates spent unnecessary time comparing the printed poem or passages to what they had read by other writers, or speculating about what influences might have been brought to bear on the writing by historical conditions at the time of writing; both of these factors were unhelpful, and very rarely added any value to the close reading that must be expected. The best responses ensured that they focused entirely and solely upon what was printed on the question paper.

The majority of responses explored not just what each writer says, but more importantly how they creates meaning and effects, and where appropriate how characters are formed and presented. There was inevitably some small element of narrative or paraphrase in many responses, but this was for the most part quite minor, and was introduced as a way of working towards critical exploration. The language used by each writer was of course the most significant aspect of this exploration, with particular focus upon imagery, but also upon such devices as alliteration, assonance, similes, metaphors and so on; some candidates used more unusual technical terminology, which was sometimes helpful, but also appeared at times to be there for its own sake rather than as a means of explaining or elucidating a point. There is usually less use of rhythm or rhyme in a piece of prose, but where it does help create a particular effect then it is certainly worth commenting upon, but no credit can be given for simple 'alliteration spotting', or for just noticing the apparently common 'rule of three'. It is likely that there will be more examples of such techniques in poetry, though where there is no regular rhyme or rhythm – as is very clearly the case in the poem set for **Question 2** – then no credit can be awarded for just saying that these are not present; and the difference between blank verse and free verse was not always acknowledged by candidates.

Almost all candidates completed their two responses fully and properly; a few were clearly rushed towards the end, and once or twice they were very obviously unfinished, but these were few and far between. Time management was considerably better this session than it has sometimes been in the past. Arguments were in most cases at least reasonably clear and were often well structured, so that candidates' ideas could be seen to develop as they progressed, and were in most cases the result of careful reading and planning; there were occasional instances where new ideas were suddenly thought of, and some candidates relied a little

too much upon asterisks and arrows to indicate where these new ideas fitted, but such responses were relatively uncommon.

However, as in November 2017, there were many comments on handwriting and it was clearly one of the most significant concerns. All examiners understand the pressure that candidates are under during a timed examination, and that having chosen which poem or passages they wish to write about they have only a short time in which to do this, but if as a result their handwriting is so hurried and untidy that it is difficult to read then they are doing themselves no favours at all, and may in fact be doing harm. No penalty is ever imposed simply for poor presentation, but when a response becomes hard, or even in parts impossible to understand, then clearly it is unlikely to attract the marks that it may deserve. The instructions on the question paper say '*You are reminded of the need for good English and clear presentation in your answers*', and it really is absolutely essential that candidates follow this requirement.

As in most past sessions, a few candidates worried unnecessarily about the titles of the texts from which the printed passages were taken. Sometimes they made quite sensible comments – Helga Crane in **Question 1**, for example, is trapped by the school and by Dr Anderson in a kind of quicksand – but sometimes comments led to speculation and candidates are much better served by focusing firmly and fully upon the passages or poems given.

It was noted this session that candidates frequently wanted to see the passage or poem within much wider contexts. For example, the passage in **Question 1** was sometimes seen as mainly political in its 'message' – Dr Anderson and his school were seen as embodying all that was wrong with American society in the 1920s, and he in particular was often said to be a prime example of how men held all the power (in a so-called patriarchal society), while women were inferior in every way, a somewhat sweeping statement. **Question 3** was very frequently seen as illustrative of a post-colonial country, with the boy representing the ex-imperial British, and Somi and Ranbir members of the new and increasingly independent India; relatively few responses saw the passage as a simple tale of one rather isolated and lonely boy who happens to meet two cheerful and welcoming young men, who simply want to be friendly. Too much focus was placed upon wider political ideas instead of upon what is actually being presented in the two passages concerned; some candidates spent far too much time and energy on these matters, to the exclusion of close critical exploration of what is written.

## **Comments on individual questions**

### **1. *Quicksand*- Nella Larsen**

This was a popular question, and there were some sensitive and thoughtful responses to writing. There are two strong characters in the passage, and candidates were almost all able to see how the writer creates them and how she illustrates their differing determination; most also saw how the passage is structured, and were able to comment with some confidence about how this is designed to surprise and perhaps please its readers.

Helga Crane's opening speech makes her strength of character very evident from the start; she is courteous in saying '*I have to confess...*', but her one-word conclusion ('*Today*') makes her intention absolutely clear. While she certainly shows some doubts as the conversation continues, her language becomes increasingly strong, culminating in the repeated word '*hate*', and her likening of the school to '*some loathsome, venomous disease*'. There was no doubt in the minds of virtually every candidate that she wishes to be severely and honestly critical of a place that she has – for reasons that she goes on to explain – come to feel truly bitter about. In striking contrast, Dr Anderson is presented as an equally strong but very different kind of person, seen by some candidates as kind and supportive, but by others as manipulative and cunning, even toying and playing with the young woman as he persuades her to change her mind. The language and images used in relation to both was frequently well considered: Helga's bitterly angry words in lines 13–17 were often isolated and critically assessed, as were Dr Anderson's much quieter and calmer replies in lines 4, 7 and 9 for example; a few noticed the subtlety of the closing two words in line 9, as possibly indicative of a much harder purpose beneath his apparent calm. There was an interesting range of interpretation about how the writer presented the Principal: some saw him as impressive, wise and kindly, whereas others were equally sure that he was arrogant, patronising and complacent.

The discussion continues in an almost dramatic fashion, building towards something of a peak in line 33 with Dr Anderson's cool and arguably discourteous question. As several responses pointed out, he must know Helga's age, given that he presumably appointed her to the teaching post, so the question is not quite as neutral as it might appear; his longer speech in lines 36–42 has a strange effect on Helga, almost as if she is

being hypnotised by the charisma of the man; this was shown to be the case when candidates said that she felt 'a mystifying yearning which sang and throbbed in her.' One or two suggested that there is a kind of sexuality here, but this is not in any way explicitly the case; it is shown by the writer to work, however, and Helga agrees to stay – in fact, rather than just agreeing to stay she positively resolves to do so. Dr Anderson makes the mistake of referring incorrectly to her background and family, when the passage is given a final twist; interestingly, the final words are a kind of echo of the opening, with Helga saying 'This afternoon. Good-morning', recalling her abrupt 'Today'.

There is plenty of material in the passage to explore, and many candidates did so with confidence and some insight and perception; very few wrote as if the two characters were real people, and made it quite clear that they were fictitious creations, exploring Nella Larsen's writing with some degree of critical sophistication.

## 2. *You Will Forget*- Chenjerai Hove

How a candidate addresses a poem is often a particularly good test of her or his critical confidence, and this poem was no exception. It is worth noting that only a few candidates accurately quoted from the poem, in most cases simply ignoring the poet's use of line breaks and writing as if the words were prose, which does show a slight lack of sensitivity to how the poem is written. The poem here lacks many of the characteristics that might be expected in poetry as there is no rhyme and no conventional rhythm, perhaps arguably none at all and there is not a regular pattern to the stanzas; it does, however, have some very striking repetition, of two phrases in particular, and some powerful images, pulled together by alliteration and assonance. There is in fact a great deal to discuss in the way the poet writes, and how he conveys his message – and for once this word is fully justified – to his readers. The shift in tone at the end of the poem by contrast gives some suggestion that those readers who live in comfort may even, in some ways, be worse off than those who do not. A lot of responses speculated as to who 'you' is, some arguing quite confidently that it might even be the poet himself, though in a way this is just speculation, not really adding critical insight.

Repetition is central to the structure, and as every candidate pointed out there is repetition of one or both of the main phrases in every section, giving a kind of musicality and rhythm to it, especially if read 'aloud' in the mind. There is much alliteration, too, always to draw attention to some particularly striking thoughts, as for example in line 3, lines 8–9, line 18, lines 29–30, and many candidates commented with sensitivity on these and other examples, not just identifying them but making clear how and why the poet uses this technique. There is also some very striking language: what, for instance, are the purpose and impact of the word '*bald*' in line 4, or of '*the sinewy neck*' in line 7? There were candidates who wanted the poem to be simply about feminism and the dreadful suffering that women in under-developed parts of the world have to face, and of course this is partly what the poet says, but there is also the consideration that the men suffer too – they die in the mines, they fight and die in battles.

However, there is something of a turn at the end of the poem, which only a few candidates seemed to notice – perhaps because of time pressure, but perhaps too because these lines may at least in part contradict what is said earlier. Lines 31–33 seem to suggest that although there is much – too much – that is simply dreadful suffering there is also some warm connection between bare feet and the soil; women and nature are not totally at odds. And while the sense of the closing two lines may not be immediately obvious after the relative simplicity of the rest of the poem, the idea is expressed that living in wealthy comfort may actually mean that you forget the fact that despite everything there is also an almost inexpressible harmony between the turning seasons and the animals who help cultivate the land. The end of the poem may have a kind of half-spoken positivity which in comfort too long you will also forget.

## 3. *The Room on the Roof*- Ruskin Bond

As with the other two questions, this is not necessarily a passage about political concerns; the fact that it is set in India, some ten years after that country's independence from Britain, does not necessarily mean that this is its central issue. Candidates who wrote simply about what was there on the printed examination question paper were much more successful than those who wanted there to be some other, 'hidden' meaning which goes beyond the scope of what they see printed on the examination paper. It may be just the start of a story about a lonely English boy who meets a friendly Indian boy and then his friend, who despite their personal and cultural differences become acquainted and confident with each other; candidates who treated it in this way almost invariably wrote better and critically more successful responses than those who tried to make it much more racially and culturally significant.

Many responses worried that the boy is not given a name by the writer, forgetting perhaps that this is just the opening page or two of a much longer novel. Others, more helpfully, saw his namelessness as part of his

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lonely and isolated nature as the passage opens; he is happy in his own way, enjoying being in the rain and in the countryside, and clearly prefers this to being either at home or in Dehra. His appearance is not immediately attractive, but probably not significantly so, and there is no evidence that his rough face and loose and heavy lip are the result of physical abuse by his parents; it may just be that the writer does not want a conventionally good-looking or 'heroic' character to be central to his tale. His appearance may also just reflect the kind of person the writer wants to contrast with Somi, or even to suggest that his outward lack of handsomeness is a reflection of his inward ordinariness. He is in his own way, too, a happy boy, as is stressed in line 3 of the passage, significantly where the smile is in his eyes, not just his mouth – he is genuinely content. An interesting idea appeared several times: the rain that '*rode on the wind*' in line 1 was suggested to be a precursor of the arrival of Somi on his bicycle, together with the way that the writer describes the '*soft, swishing sound*' of the tyres on the wet road.

When he does meet Somi, of course, the writer stresses the differences in their physical natures, as well as their general demeanours; Somi is outgoing, lively, riding not walking, and keen to be helpful and friendly; there is no criticism whatsoever of the boy in what Somi says or does, and it is important that the boy finally agrees to sit on the bicycle, attracted by Somi's warm nature.

There is some momentary uncertainty when they meet Ranbir, who is not just larger physically but also '*the best wrestler in the bazaar*', a phrase which might have worried the boy, whose views on the bazaar are made clear at the start of the passage. But Ranbir too is friendly, and the fact that after just a few minutes the boy can feel jealous when the conversation continues in Punjabi does seem to imply that he is already much happier and settling into a new friendship. Many candidates were puzzled by the apparently odd spelling of the word '*Hullo*', expecting it to be '*Hello*', but both spellings are perfectly normal, and there is nothing significant about the former – and certainly not evidence that the two Indian youths are members of a child trafficking gang, using a special password.