

# LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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

## Key messages

- good answers show that candidates have read and considered their chosen poem or passages as a whole before starting to write;
- good answers focus on the form, structure and language of the poem or passage and on how these shape meaning, rather than relying on narrative or paraphrase;
- good answers identify some of the literary devices and techniques in the poem or passage, and discuss how these are used;
- good answers show personal responses to the ways in which the poem or passage is written, beyond to what is said;
- good answers maintain a tight focus on the poem or passage throughout their response, without discussing other writers, other texts or other ideas.

## General comments

This was in most ways a pleasing session; all examiners reported that they saw some good and often very good work. It was clear that the great majority of candidates were confident in addressing two previously unseen pieces of prose or poetry, and they wrote about them with some degree of thoughtful insight, often showing quite personal perception. To do this in a very limited time is not easy, a factor that all examiners are fully aware of, and while a small number of responses were unfinished or hurried at the end these were relatively rare; the majority showed an ability to see their chosen texts as wholes, ensuring that the final lines were explored with the same closeness as the opening ones. Few responses relied upon simple narrative or paraphrase, though where this was the case the marks awarded were inevitably low. Weaker responses occurred where candidates introduced comparison with other writers or texts, an approach which is less helpful or relevant in this paper compared to others; others relied heavily upon personal responses to the contexts (real or imagined) within which texts were written, and would have done better to respond instead to the ways in which they were written. The best responses, and indeed the majority of the less confident ones, focused firmly upon what was written, and made sure that their critical discussions stayed clearly and consistently upon this.

Handwriting was once more a concern for all examiners; it is essential that Centres make it clear to all candidates that if an examiner has difficulty reading a response then assessment will be problematic, and it may indeed be that some points being made are simply not legible. Most scripts were perfectly sound in this respect, but there were enough to suggest that not all candidates are aware of what is printed on the front of the examination question paper: '*You are reminded of the need for good English **and clear presentation** in your answers*'.

## Comments on specific questions

### **Question 1 – *An American Tragedy***

This passage was addressed by a large number of candidates, who almost invariably demonstrated a sound or good understanding of how the writer, Theodore Dreiser, creates the two characters, and in particular how he helps to manipulate his readers' responses so that when reading the passage we are never completely sure how we should respond to Clyde. Initially we are encouraged to share Clyde's nervousness, emphasised by the fragmented and breathless writing in the first two paragraphs. There is a nice contrast in lines 9–10 between the singing of the birds and Clyde's 'peering' and 'peeking'; the alliteration in these verbs, and their close similarity, were noted by many candidates. At this point, not knowing why Clyde is so nervous, we surely feel sympathy for him and his situation.

Stronger candidates will have written about how Deputy Sheriff Kraut is introduced as a slightly mysterious character, whose appearance is perhaps almost spectral; but he very rapidly proves himself to be firm and determined, his revolver adding to the 'definiteness and authority of the man' (line 20). Still, our sympathies must lie with Clyde, who is very shaken at this point, again emphasised by the broken syntax in lines 21–24. However, it soon becomes clear that there is more to Clyde's terror than initially meets the eye; he may be a murderer, or at the very least involved in the death of Roberta Alden. The fact (line 44) that Kraut knows her name and address shakes Clyde even further, so that while we are still encouraged by the writer to sympathise with Clyde's terror this is surely now undermined to some degree by the possibility that he is a killer on the run.

Kraut's authority becomes more definite when he brings out the handcuffs, a move which causes Clyde to 'shrink and tremble' (line 56), a point at which the writer surely makes it clear that while he still wants us to have some fellow-feeling for Clyde this is very different from how he presents him at the start. He regrets not having fled into the forest, but if he truly is involved in Roberta's death then his terror now is not merely understandable but deserved.

Most responses drew attention to many aspects of the writer's craft, supported by textual quotation. Some took the need to respond personally a little too literally, suggesting how they felt that the writer should have made Clyde a more determined and brutal killer, rather than – as some saw him – a weak and rather feeble man. A few suggested that his calm manner at the end was simply a bluff, and that he was planning to make a run for it because he was not being handcuffed. Some felt that Kraut was unbelievable, in that no sheriff would act in such a gentle and even kindly way. Such reactions to what candidates felt could or even should have been written were less successful than reactions to what was actually written. A quite substantial number made the assumption (unfortunately unfounded) that Clyde was half of the infamous Bonnie and Clyde partnership, and that the writer was thus misrepresenting him. In the same way, several candidates criticised the writer for not following the conventions they expected from a modern-day thriller; awareness that conventions have likely changed between 1925 (when the text was written) and today would have helped candidates in this respect. Speculative responses such as these are evidence that a candidate needed to make better use of their time by maintaining a tight critical focus upon what is printed on the examination paper; this is something that Centres need to emphasise very strongly for future entrants.

### Question 2 – *Pay-Packet*

Some of the points made towards the end of the previous paragraph apply very pertinently to this passage, in that many candidates used it as a springboard to talk about and condemn the kind of psychological and physical abuse that is presented by the writer. Such a response, while of course understandable, needed to maintain focus on how the writer presents the two characters Iba and Bertrand and their relationship. This passage is, like that in **Question 1**, a relatively straightforward one in its contents, with no unduly complex ideas or writing; there is however plenty of material to consider and explore for a thoughtful critical discussion.

Many responses pointed to the first two words of the passage – 'left alone' – as truly significant; Iba is indeed isolated, shunned at home by her husband, and with apparently little or even no contact with her parents, and she has indeed been at least metaphorically *left* by Bertrand. She is in the sitting-room, where conventionally she should be able relax and be happy, which of course she certainly is not. Several then noted that she regarded her shopping as a 'spree', a word implying something denoting pleasure and even excitement; in reality, as the ending shows, she has bought little for herself, but food, baby things, and a shirt for Bertrand.

The contrast that the writer draws between Bertrand the public man and the private man was seen and discussed by all candidates, with some aptly selected textual citations. Two or three made an interesting comment on the words in line 16, where Iba had once considered 'spilling the beans' about Bertrand: a very common expression, and indeed a metaphor; these few candidates insightfully suggested that if you spill beans you make a dreadful mess, so if Iba had done this then her marriage and her apparently good relationship with her husband would become a public mess. Most then noted the very strained conversation that the two characters have over their meal, followed by the next day's waiting 'for the storm to erupt', another very powerful metaphor that was picked up in almost all responses.

Iba's growing anxiety from line 40 onwards is powerfully presented by the writer. Many candidates noted her use of 'B' when speaking to her husband, presumably an echo of an earlier term of affection and used here to try to soften Bertrand's likely fury. Many also noted that in line 65 he calls her, quite brutally, 'woman'. A few candidates drew these two points together, highlighting the way the writer shows the cruel difference in

the way that husband and wife think of each other. Iba's growing courage is evident as the passage draws to its close, but we are left with the conflict unresolved; will Bertrand be pleased about the shirt, or will he revert to physical brutality?

The writer uses third person narrative in the passage, but interestingly, although this form normally leads to a generally balanced view of the situation, the emphasis here is very clearly upon Iba and her feelings; we see Bertrand through her eyes only and never from a truly objective viewpoint. A number of responses referred to the writer as using free indirect discourse, and in a few cases it was referred to as subjective third person narrative. Either of these terms is valid; what was valuable was when a candidate saw what the writer was doing, and what effects were created.

As said at the start of this section, weaker responses spent too much time talking of the evil of abuse – psychological and physical – and several spent much time talking of particular cultures where such abuse is, or at least was, endemic. While such comments are of course personal and valid, stronger responses focussed on discussion of what the writer presents in this passage specifically.

### Question 3 – *New Delhi 1974*

Although on the face of it this is quite a demanding poem, a large number of candidates addressed it. Those who did almost always saw something of what the poet expresses and responded to the ways in which he presents his – or at least the speaker's – feelings about how the city developed and changed. There were some very interesting and thoughtful discussions of some of the images used in the poem, and some useful thoughts too about its overall structure: it is a kind of sonnet, perhaps – fourteen lines – but with no rhyme and no strict regularity of metre. It is, however, categorically not blank verse; it may arguably be called free verse, though it is really too formal for the term to be correct here. More interesting, however, were some of the reasons proposed for the use of seven pairs of lines, together with the plentiful use of enjambement within each pair and indeed between each pair. It is a structurally interesting poem.

The overall mood was captured by almost every candidate: it is despondent and pessimistic to the point of despair at the end. The first six words present a kind of neutral, almost factual idea, but immediately there are words of severe criticism – *futile, garish, shuffled, heaped, sparse, indifferent, brittle* – which make very clear that the speaker is seriously unhappy with how the city has grown and how its nature has changed. There were plenty of interesting reactions to the images presented in the first six lines, often very personal but almost invariably grasping the poet's unhappiness.

The focus changes in line 7, where although it is probably not quite the case that the city is personified, it is certainly the case that the poet's focus shifts towards some kind of metaphorical human decay. Line 7 sees the saddening effects of old age, but not just because the city is itself old – it is after all 'new' and growing – but because 'each hair has lost its root', an idea developed in the next two lines, where what one must assume are references to spiritual, religious and traditional voices are lost and 'elsewhere'. Monuments – further images of the old and by inference the valuable – are now black and losing their shape; the green plains have become grey with dirt. Progress has not improved the city in any way.

The last three lines are perhaps a little puzzling at first, but quite clear on reflection: the old inhabitants have nowhere to go in a city which they have not built – the new building was done by younger people; but like all young people they in turn are impatient with life as it changes, but do not know where they too should go. The change to the city has led to rootlessness and unhappiness for all, young and old alike.

Many weaker candidates misread this poem as one about climate change; published in 1994 – when climate change was not widely known about or considered – and about a situation in 1974, it is a poem not about weather but about how a particular city has been changed and perhaps in some respects destroyed. The poet may have general twentieth century growth and development in mind, but we cannot know what his intentions were in writing the poem. Stronger candidates were rewarded for literary criticism, which focuses on what is written in the poem and the way it is written, rather than on speculation.