

H472/02 Comparative and contextual study

General Comments:

Candidates were generally well prepared for this paper and many seemed to relish the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise in their chosen topic area. There was take-up for all five topics, although the 'Immigrant Experience' option was less popular than the other choices. The top answers were eloquent and knowledgeable, impressively confident in literary discussion and adept at selecting contextual material in its support. Weaker responses were inclined at times to use contextual material almost as a substitute for engagement with literature.

Candidates were required to complete a critical appreciation of an unseen passage and a comparative essay. The contrast in question-types meant that some candidates performed significantly more strongly in one answer than the other. Candidates were sometimes inclined to introduce a substantial amount of prepared material into the critical appreciation at the expense of exploring the unseen passage, although analysis of the set passage attracted most of the marks. Weaker scripts were sometimes dependent on a few examples taken from texts and contexts which they deployed in both their answers; although there is no penalty for repeating material, these scripts were inevitably among those attracting lower marks.

Some answers were unnecessarily lengthy. In these responses, candidates often needed to be more selective and to give more time and thought to developing an argument, rather than just building up large amounts of material. Longer answers sometimes suffered from illegibility too; centres and candidates are reminded that answers should be clearly presented and legible, and that more candidates should perhaps take advantage of the opportunity to word-process their scripts.

Comments on Individual Questions:

Q1 Passage from *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson.

Answers to this question usually demonstrated understanding of the passage which was competent or better. Some were outstandingly good, identifying subtle qualities of Anderson's prose and eloquently demonstrating its effects. Knowledge of the topic frequently led to some sophisticated readings, such as the significance of the westerly direction of the view from Jesse's window. All candidates tended to characterise Jesse as a patriarchal figure, using as evidence his harsh treatment of his young wife; hardly any, oddly, linked his patriarchal nature to his youthful interest in the Bible or his patriarchal name. Links were frequently made to *The Great Gatsby*: candidates found Jesse and Jay to be alike in their commitment to hard work and success, and better answers also pointed out that there are differences between them too in terms of character and milieu. Links were also made to *The Grapes of Wrath*, often identifying Jesse's hard-pressed employees with the suffering Okies.

Q2(a) *The Great Gatsby*
'Characters in pursuit of money lie at the heart of much American literature.'

Answers to this question were usually successful, although some candidates found it difficult to make the question work well with *The Grapes of Wrath*; they were sometimes reduced to drawing a very simple comparison between the pursuit of wealth and the desperate quest to stay alive. Many candidates chose *The Age of Innocence* to compare with *Gatsby*, one showing an impressively detailed knowledge of the text and concentrating on Sillerton Jackson, Julius Beaufort and the van der Luydens. Effective context about the Roaring Twenties was supplied by the majority.

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Q2(b) *The Grapes of Wrath*

‘American literature often depicts a society which is cruel to its most vulnerable members.’

This question was often answered with reference to the two core texts, and usually George Wilson was identified as the vulnerable character to be compared with the Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Q2(c) ‘Much American literature is characterised by the importance of hope in adversity.’

Again, the core texts were both popular choices here, with *Gatsby* perhaps offering more in relation to hope and *The Grapes of Wrath* supplying plenty of adversity.

Q3 Passage from ‘A Night in the Catacombs’ by Daniel Keyes Sandford.

Answers to this question generally focused on a range of Gothic details and effects. Weaker responses were inclined to find details which they used as triggers to enable discussion of prepared material; these candidates usually glossed over the events of the passage and seemed to have a limited sense of its events. Better answers stayed closer to the passage, only introducing contextual discussion where it helped to illuminate the text. Gothic context was sometimes reduced to a range of familiar tropes which were often merely asserted to be characteristically Gothic; better answers could refer to named authorities (for example Ann Radcliffe on terror and horror) or seminal Gothic texts (such as *The Castle of Otranto*) to support their discussion.

Q4(a) *Dracula*

‘Gothic writing frequently explores the battle between good and evil.’

Answers employed *Dracula* to good effect in discussion, usually choosing to compare it with *The Bloody Chamber* or *Frankenstein*. Candidates were often adept at identifying doubt and ambiguity relating to good and evil in their chosen texts.

Q4(b) *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories*

‘In Gothic writing, female characters are generally presented as victims.’

This was the most popular comparative essay question. Candidates had given a lot of thought to the role of female characters in the Gothic, and usually chose to compare *The Bloody Chamber* to *Dracula*, *Frankenstein* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Some answers focused on feminist issues and were inclined to lose sight of the Gothic context. Candidates were expected to reference at least three Angela Carter stories in their answers, and most met this expectation.

Q4(c) ‘Suspense is a key feature of narrative in Gothic writing.’

At the time of writing, no work had been seen in response to this question.

Q5 Passage from ‘Is This Your Day To Join The Revolution?’ by Genevieve Valentine

Answers to this question necessarily spent some time demonstrating that they understood the situation presented in the story. In weaker answers, this sometimes led to a response based heavily on the first part of the passage, and some candidates didn’t even reference the passage’s dramatic crisis with the interruption of the film and the police chase. Better answers commented on details throughout the passage’s presentation and drew parallels with many other examples of dystopian fiction.

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Q6(a) *Nineteen Eighty-Four*
‘Dystopian writing is driven by the voice of protest.’

There were many excellent answers to this question, usually starting from the premise that the writers of their chosen texts (often the two core texts, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Handmaid’s Tale*) were inspired by contemporary events and situations to produce their dystopian works. Knowledge of context was often excellent, and at its best where closely tied to the texts and to literary issues.

Q6(b) *The Handmaid’s Tale*
‘Dystopian writing frequently suggests that men, not women, are responsible for society’s problems.’

Answers to this question usually referenced second wave feminism as a contextual factor for *The Handmaid’s Tale* and put some work into sharing out the blame for society’s problems; oddly, some suggested that women were at fault for precipitating the crisis in fertility in the Atwood novel. Links to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were often made, and better candidates made some capital about the relative scarcity of female characters in this novel.

Q6(c) ‘Social and religious conformity are key areas for dystopian writers.’

Answers to this question usually focused on the oppressive forces which require conformity in dystopian fiction, and pointed out that the human instinct for self-expression and rebellion creates the drama in these texts. The two core texts were again the popular choices, although work was also seen on most of the other listed alternatives, often in addition to the first two.

Q7 Passage from *The Edible Woman* by Margaret Atwood.

Answers on this passage were usually pleasingly attentive to AO2 detail, noticing the lack of balance in the dialogue (Joe dominating over Marian) and the effects of the social setting, with Marian in a feminine role as hostess and Joe approaching her from ‘the men’s territory’. Some were not alive to the humour of the passage, and some even praised Joe for his sensitivity to the problems women face. Very good answers took on the remarkable image of ‘large globular pastry’ floating above Joe’s head in Marian’s vision, and offered a range of plausible interpretations.

Q8(a) *Sense and Sensibility*
‘Female characters in literature are unfairly restrained by social convention.’

This was not a very popular choice, but attracted some excellent answers, for example one which paired the set text with *Jane Eyre*. A discriminator at the top end was whether or not candidates registered the word ‘unfairly’ in the question.

Q8(b) *Mrs Dalloway*
‘Women in literature are engaged in a search for identity.’

This was the most popular comparative essay choice for this topic, and candidates often paired *The Bell Jar* or *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* with *Mrs Dalloway*. As with other questions in this topic area, examiners often found that candidates wrote more thoughtfully about women’s roles than they did in some other topic areas such as the Gothic or Dystopia.

Q8(c) ‘Female characters in literature are depicted as each other’s strongest supporters.’

There were a few lively responses to this question, and candidates often came down in the middle, finding that Clarissa Dalloway in particular is not necessarily ‘one of the sisterhood’ and

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that the female characters in *Sense and Sensibility* are split in this regard. Again, answers were more nuanced in this area than is often the case in A Level literature responses on the role of women.

Q9 Passage from *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid.

At the time of writing relatively little work has been seen, but some responses registered the surprise of the air being cold when the sun is shining and picked up on the pessimistic colour imagery of 'black, blacker, blackest'. There was a tendency to assume (wrongly) that the passage relates to a move from the West Indies to the UK in the 1950s.

Q10(a) *Call it Sleep*

No work seen.

Q10(b) *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

'Immigrants in literature are often depicted as isolated figures.'

Some work was seen in response to this question, usually pairing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with *Small Island* by Andrea Levy. Candidates were inclined to limit their discussion to a comparison between Changez in the first text and Hortense in the second.

Q10(c) 'The literature of immigration explores the fascination of a new world.'

Very little seen.