

AS ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/01

Passages for Comment

General comments

Candidates produced some solid and thoughtful work across the range. There was a clear sense of differentiation and a mixture of approaches. Some candidates had honed and practised analytical skills and adapted to the diverse challenges of the passages: others still tended to rely on an approach based on the identification of specific features – such as personification and alliteration – which, although sound and essential in itself, does not go beyond the level of basic understanding if not complemented by an attempt to comment on the effects of such features, the moods and qualities they evoke at particular points in the passage. It helps candidates if they work through the passage progressively, looking for similarities or contrasts between them. It should also be noted that technical accuracy comes into play in the directed writing tasks: a number of candidates tended to confuse tenses, for example. It should also be noted that a certain level of proficiency in the level of English is desirable for entering this paper: occasionally, some candidates seem to lack confidence because of issues of comprehension and technical fluency.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

- (a) This passage produced some perceptive and focused analyses with candidates working through the passage in a structured and measured way, noting, for example, how a child's viewpoint shaped the language and how there were contrasting patterns of light and dark, entrapment and freedom. The material proved accessible to most candidates and even those relying on a feature-spotting approach seemed to engage with some of the poetic qualities on view. More general answers seemed to identify matters such as simple and complex sentences and punctuation without really exploring their effects.
- (b) There were many engaged and imaginative responses here. Candidates wrote with flair and imagination at best, creating another world which combined fear and mystery with wonder and magic. The choice of rooms varied, including the original one from the passage to a very eerie bathroom. The challenge also seemed to tune in to some of the candidates' own memories. However, some potentially successful answers lost some reward because of technical inaccuracies [such as confused tenses] and it may be worth pointing out to candidates that a little more care in checking final answers may be beneficial.

Question 2

- (a) This question established a strong sense of differentiation. Perceptive candidates explored the sense of irony and mild satirical tone thoughtfully and sensitively. They noted the military imagery – such as the giving of orders and the reference to the cannon in the last paragraph – and its role in creating the comedic effects. Answers in the middle range tended to focus on characterisation and established some reasonable ideas about the protagonist's nature and personality. Responses at the lower end of the range tended to copy out the rubric from the beginning of the question and proceeded to try and spot feature from a prepared checklist without really engaging with the essential content of the material.
- (b) This task, too, saw quite a wide range of responses: from those who misunderstood the challenge and wrote in third person to those who picked up on the character's sense of self-worth and aspiration. More successful responses featured the narrator's sense of bluster and frustration very well indeed. Some even regarded Hermann as someone who lacked self-knowledge and as a manipulative individual. A number of approaches could be taken and many proved effective.

Question 3

- (a) There were some imaginative and purposeful creative pieces here. Answers that proved most effective drew on the contrasts in mood – from a brewing chaos to a sense of calm and peace – in a skilful and succinct manner. Competent answers established some of these qualities and, perhaps, got drawn into a slightly narrative approach. Again, some candidates did not check their writing for technical accuracy. Answers which were clearly responding to key words and phrases from the original tended to score highly because this indicated that the candidate had analysed the original extract first before creating the directed piece: in effect, this meant that writing the commentary had been planned in advance – perhaps a technique worth reminding candidates about.
- (b) There were some sound and competent analyses here but some candidates tended to focus on their own piece at the expense of commenting on the original extract. Solid answers noted the tone of the narrator and the contrasting moods that structured the passage: they explored how they had sought to establish similar qualities in their own writing. Successful answers also used brief and relevant quotations from both pieces to evidence and elucidate their points – a trend that seemed to be underpinning a lot of the analysis on the paper as a whole and a practice worth noting.

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Paper 8693/02
Composition

General comments

The paper seemed to cater for a wide range of ability and differentiation was clear. Many candidates were often ambitious and displayed an impressive use of technical accuracy. They were keen to use language metaphorically to achieve their aims. Imaginative work was at best marked by a clear sense of voice and an attempt at originality; other effective pieces were often strong on generic conventions. At the other end of the scale, many responses in the lower range of marks were distinguished by a highly derivative format or by a sense of a lack of effective planning. The need for technical accuracy [such as the correct use of tenses and single/plural agreement] is very marked at this level and candidates need to ensure that they keep this need in mind. The answers in the second section varied from focused and cogent material to narrative/personal responses lacking in secure thought and direction. Candidates should be versed in the use of appropriate formats – such as setting out letters and the styles of different types of articles – so that they feel confident in dealing with these should they be set on the paper. Time management was handled effectively on the whole and the major rubric infringement occurred on **Question 3** where a number of candidates did not seem to note the essential need for a drama-script in the rubric. As usual, the paper produced some excellent and enjoyable material for the most part and most candidates seemed to relish the opportunity to write their answers. There were, however, still a number of candidates who failed to write the minimum of 600 words on each piece – a self-penalising process.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

The most effective answers here established a good balance between physical description and personality. They showed subtlety in characterisation and a strong sense of contrasting elements, often with incisive suggestions for any changes. Language was employed skilfully, combined with a strong sense of voice and a variety of sentence constructions. Responses in the middle range were often thoughtful and imaginative but could be a little florid and overwritten – a kind of ‘trying too hard’ syndrome. Less secure answers tended to offer insufficient contrast between the pieces and were drawn in to a rather narrative approach or offered an unequal balance between appearance and outlook: such answers seemed a little mechanical and stereotyped.

Question 2

This proved to be an effective and popular choice. Successful answers offered focused and controlled writing and were often moving in the ways in which they dealt with personal dramatic experiences. Such poignancy, though, did not rely on general outpourings but was accompanied by structured and effective planning. Less effective answers tended to offer general autobiographies which did not deal with a specific event, nor did they really attempt to evoke a particular sense of atmosphere. It is worth reminding candidates to highlight the key aspects of the rubric.

Question 3

This proved to be a less popular choice. There were some very effective scripts about a topic which was clearly understood and responded to. Such answers handled the assignment with great skill and used it as a medium for some excellent description and suspense building. However, there were quite a few candidates who did not seem to read the rubric properly or who did not know how to set out a drama-script [such as the need for stage directions in the present tense, for example]. This led to a degree of self-penalisation.

Question 4

This question elicited different approaches to the subject: these took in gangster stories, the horror and even psychological worlds. There was some intriguing and skilful use of setting, complemented by a sense of narrative voice and attitude in the most effective answers. Less secure answers tended to be highly derivative in content and approach: the writing here appeared mechanical and unplanned, often relying on references to vampires and werewolves.

Question 5

This was a very popular choice. Although most candidates would be limited in terms of other experiences they could compare schooldays to, they often used foresight and the words of other people as a basis for exploring the topic. Effective answers created objective and balanced consideration of the topic. However, less effective responses tended to be subjective and narrative in approach, often diffuse and sentimental without evaluating the main idea of the piece. Such answers were personal recollections masquerading as discursive writing. Candidates need to bear in mind the nature of the writing expected in this section of the paper.

Question 6

Effective answers were written in a style suitable for teenagers, employing apt strategies and vocabulary. They captured the implicit register and tone skilfully and with considerable flair. There was a clear sense of argument and exemplification in such material. Less secure answers did not really convey a clear sense of an intended audience and would have benefited from some specific examples of good reading experiences.

Question 7

This was also a popular choice. Effective answers, in particular, tended to avoid the more cliché possibilities – money, world peace, the end of all disease – and explored original ideas in a fluent and mature fashion. Arguments were measured and reasoned. Reflective and philosophical choices were commented on with a sense of voice and perception. Less secure answers seemed rather predictable and, at times, superficial in the ways they trivialised the subject.

Question 8

Discussion of environmental issues in relation to progress and development struck a chord with quite a number of candidates. Effective responses included a range of subtle arguments on both sides and were expressed clearly. They employed the correct format and constructed paragraphs clearly. Less effective answers ignored the need for a format and struggled to establish detailed arguments for the chosen scenario. They made a few obvious points which were simply mirrored in the opposing letter.