

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/01
Passages for Comment

GENERAL COMMENTS

Responses were wide ranging with some very good answers. Where candidates struggled with English, the answers showed a lack of understanding of the passages. There was some excellent teaching evidenced where candidates were able to comment clearly on the texts with understanding and a personal response. There was also some evidence of candidates being taught a wide range of high level literary terminology but some had little understanding of what these meant or how to relate them to the passages.

In the commentary sections many candidates showed a good grasp of ideas and made perceptive comments but needed to give closer detailed attention to the text in order to attain higher grades. Most saw the progression through the passages in terms of mood or tone, more so than last year, and structured their responses fairly well. Closer analysis of individual words and phrases was needed at times. Some candidates were fairly methodical with half of the passage but ran out of steam half way through so could not satisfy the “conveys a view of the passage” criterion. Many were familiar with the term ‘imagery’ but did not always show a clear understanding through examples.

The directed writing responses, as usual, elicited some sophisticated and highly imaginative and focused answers, combined with a strong degree of technical accuracy. Less effective answers tended to misunderstand the task or adopt fragmented or stilted forms of expression.

COMMENTS ON SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

Question 1

- (a) This was quite a popular question. The passage prompted some good responses. It offered plenty of opportunity for candidates to write about style, literary devices and language. Good answers were able to comment on the use of metaphor, simile and rhetorical questions and their significance and the change in tone midway through the passage from fascination to anger. A small number of candidates commented on the ‘challenge’ and the parallel of the Wild West. Good candidates also drew some conclusions about the significance of the ending

Most saw the repetition and rhetorical questions and the progression of mood through questioning curiosity, sarcasm, envy mixed with admiration and anger, and images for the wife; many seemed to find the passage overwhelmingly humorous; the use of third person at the start and ‘we’ and ‘us’ generating a sense of isolation for the bankrupt man. However, some candidates did not grasp the second section in any detail, not seeing the circus images and power ones of him eclipsing the sun; the bankrupt’s ability to spider “up the rigging to the dizzying spotlight tip” and to build “castles in the air”; and how such descriptions were supported by images of height, and how later he “transcends” in contrast to the narrator’s “craven and shrivelled” image. Some responses grasped the relevance of the “characteristic magnanimity” and “protective embrace”, the fact the tables have been turned. The philosophy surrounding the man supported at the end by the “makes America grow” was only grasped by the better candidates.

There was some generalisation in comments on language: for example, most saw the images used for the wife, for instance, but not the glittering ones of the fairy tale figure. Many grasped the positive message that a “poor” person can be happy and positive; fewer that he is tricking society and “deals from the bottom of the deck”; that their anger is based on jealousy to some extent.

- (b) On the whole, the directed writing task produced some perceptive, sensitive writing with clearly mature expressions of experience. Indeed, the question gave the opportunity for candidates to produce some very good answers. Many candidates adopted the style of the author exceedingly well. The chosen subject tended to be a miserable rich man; others chose the story of a happy poor man. Candidates, in such responses, appeared to appreciate that their own point of view ought to be of a character that “provokes strong feelings” in the author.

However, some candidates struggled with writing about a suitable character. A few wrote about another bankrupt person, a rich person who was not happy or a very ill person, or a poor person. Their writing, as a result, was stilted as they struggled with the concept. The length of responses varied from the stated word count to long essays. Generally the better answers were those which were succinct.

Question 2

- (a) This was a very popular choice with most candidates choosing this as one of the questions. The passage gave plenty of opportunity for the candidate to comment on the effectiveness of various literary techniques, style and attitudes. A significant number of candidates appreciated the differing perspectives in the passage – not just between the brothers but also between the child and the adult writer.

There were some good, perceptive responses which picked up on the fact that the writer was reflecting back on his experience as a child and trying to capture that. The different attitudes to the event were clearly brought out through identification of the language used for each. Literary effects were commented on well and, on a few occasions, the effects of the writer’s use of alliteration clearly explained. The significance of the last paragraph was thoroughly grasped. Good answers identified the writer’s use of the senses in describing the event.

Less secure answers thought the writer used “too complicated words” for a child. There were those who retold the extract and, once again, literary terms were used but not always with understanding or with any comment on their significance and effect. Some failed to pick up that the brother and his friends did not want to go, but rather thought that they had just not wanted to take the author with them. Some misunderstood the character of the Indian and felt that prejudice was displayed in the passage. Yet even such less secure candidates were, on the whole, able to comment accurately on the narrator’s innocence in the past, although not all noted how the retrospective aspect was signalled by the use of the past tense and a mature vocabulary. They also noted the numerous points of contrast between the narrator and his disaffected older brother.

- (b) In the directed writing, better responses grasped the autobiographical style and showed some regret on behalf of the brother for his thoughtless behaviour on the occasion in question. Indeed, a number captured the tone and attitude of the brother (from outright oafishness to sensitivity emerging from beneath an affected veneer of sneering “cool”) well and also included an element of reflection on their own behaviour from a more mature perspective. They used a good range of vocabulary. Less secure candidates tended to lift phrases from the extract or did not draw on the text and wrote about the whole event as opposed to the opening section.

Question 3

- (a) This question produced some good responses and allowed for clear differentiation between the candidates. There was consideration of the development of the extract and also a good understanding of the tone of the extract. The extract allowed for candidates to show a good understanding of features which dominated the passage. Many picked up on the writers’ lifestyle and the benefits of the setting to facilitate their writing. The idiosyncrasies of the landlady were well observed and their amusement at her noted. Such candidates were also able to respond with discrimination to the effects of the descriptions of Senora and her possessions and to perhaps make judgemental comments on the narrator’s self-interest (that no other guests would arrive) rather than primarily examine the first paragraph’s physical descriptions of setting as less secure candidates tended to do.

In fact, most candidates noted the shift in tone from lavish praise for the house’s location and gardens to mocking condemnation of the writer’s hostess; most saw the progression of the passage through the positive pleasure at the start and more negative aspects of the house and owner later.

Responses at the lower end of the range were characterised by reference to features of the text and literary terminology that bore little relation to the extract itself. Many felt sorry for the narrator and felt that she was bullied. Such responses failed to observe that the authors were on holiday but were travelling and writing.

- (b) This was an interesting task that might have potentially hinged on how candidates viewed the passage's narrator in juxtaposition to the question's information that the Senora wants her establishment described "in the best possible light". Only a few candidates decided that they should write a description that was solely a realistic depiction of the house (thus ensuring there would be no other guests!) rather than one that would be objective and without self-interest at heart and thus attractive to the reader of the advertisement, a potential client. Thus, for the vast majority of candidates, this was a straightforward directed writing task that they appeared to be familiar with and thus one that also catered well for candidates of all levels of ability.

Good answers glossed skilfully over the weaknesses of the accommodation. Indeed, the majority of candidates were able to assess the purpose of the task and were able to write in an appropriate style and use appropriate language. Less effective answers wrote a description, lifting phrases from the original extract, or failed to refer to the information in the extract. Some made up a different location entirely. The idea of an advert was missing.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Paper 8693/02
Composition

General Comments

On the whole, there were some pleasing performances, with some scripts demonstrating superb imagination, technique and structure. The questions seemed to establish intended differentiation. However, Examiners felt that the technical accuracy of some candidates warranted a degree of concern: particularly noted were the confusion of tenses, subject-verb agreement and idiomatic inaccuracies. This is an AS standard paper where a strong degree of accuracy is a prerequisite for effective and skilful use of the language. Such errors impede understanding and their effect was sometimes that candidates struggled to produce effective and successful pieces of writing or to achieve the threshold pass mark.

Candidates seemed to use their time well on the whole and there was little sense of rubric infringement, except in one particular area: length of responses. Centres are reminded that candidates are required by the examination rubric to offer responses of between 600-900 words; failure to do so is self-penalising.

Candidates, in general, displayed a strong sense of appropriate vocabulary – perhaps a few, at times tending towards an overwritten or flowery style in the first section – and a secure sense of audience and purpose in the second section.

Comments on Specific Questions

Section A

Question 1

Effective answers were characterized by an ability to diverge from simple fantasy and the derivative or expected (such as tropical islands) and to involve themselves in more profound explorations: for example, a paradise in which grief caused by the loss of a family member or friend was healed or the difficulties in a relationship gave way to harmonious reconciliation. Such answers were marked by a strong sense of structure and concept, something more than pure description; they had thought and feeling behind them: an idea of the spiritual or the sense of elevated emotions or a sense of double narrative which juxtaposed material comforts against something more ethereal. Less successful answers used the format as a way of writing about a sport or hobby which the candidate was enthusiastic about or the delights of retail therapy where brand names would crop up at the expense of imaginative treatment of the topic. Such responses tended to interpret the title as an opportunity to describe in a quite simple way romantic or consumerist fantasies.

Question 2

Strong responses here attempted to point out marked differences between innocence and experience, naivety and cynicism, and then tried to reflect them in the writing style. They tended to be reflective, not just descriptive/narrative in approach: a bitter-sweet realization of how much of life is lived in School and how secure that life can actually be. This realization was worked into the answers in imaginative and, sometimes, witty and humorous ways. On the other hand, less successful answers sometimes lapsed into a kind of 'baby talk' for the first day of School: almost as if the memories of being an innocent abroad had overcome the candidates.

Question 3

There were some imaginative and interesting responses here marked by a keen sense of setting and atmosphere (through description) and character (through the narrative and perspective given). The best responses were underpinned by a strong familiarity with sci-fi conventions, their awareness of dystopian elements and their ability to employ ingredients of cognitive estrangement. There were few misconceived pieces: a few tended to simply bring out a sense of character because they became embroiled in spending too long on evoking a sense of setting.

Question 4

The most effective answers here gave a sense of fear and foreboding, especially by involving the first (or third) person into the account, a process which created a feeling of a personal or human element. There were storms at sea, on land, on farms, hurricanes, monsoons and even one depiction of pathetic fallacy. Many candidates recreated descriptive details from their varied parts of the world with subtlety and meticulous detail. Less effective responses tended to forget the requirement to show an increasing sense of power and force and remained on one note throughout the answer.

Section B**Question 5**

Answers at the top of the range considered actual historical events – such as Napoleon's and Hitler's invasion of Russia – and explored the concept of whether people learn from history or not with focus and insight. Such answers were clearly informed by very sound knowledge – seen through detailed exemplification and explanation – and a strong persuasive voice. They distinguished between teaching and learning: history definitely teaches but do people actually listen and learn? Some answers skilfully questioned the reliability and viewpoints of particular historical accounts but balanced this approach with the idea of people needing to use a variety of sources to gauge what constitutes history itself.

Less secure answers tended to write about the candidate's own personal history or lacked relevant and informed knowledge that they could reflect upon. The need for exemplification is essential in titles such as this.

Question 6

In general, this was tackled with some gusto and proficiency at the higher end of the range, especially by those who offered detail in their reviews – detail such as narrative and characterization or design and technique – as evidence for praise or condemnation. Imaginative contrasts were clearly established and explored in depth, supported by knowledge of what makes an effective review. Such answers were characterised by differing perspectives of the same features, showing understanding of cohesion and the unreliability of opinion. There were some very satirical and witty responses at best. Less assured responses fell into the trap of simply re-telling a story or expressing strong agreement/disagreement with the subject matter at the expense of commenting on style and craftsmanship.

Question 7

This was quite a popular choice and proved to offer some very clear differentiation amongst the candidates. Answers at the top of the range demonstrated knowledge and thought, discussing the merits and flaws in a system of punishments. Again, useful and selective exemplification was employed in such responses. Less successful answers tended to ramble and made unsupported assertions, sometimes contradicting themselves. Perhaps a little more preparation on structuring discursive, ambivalent responses to controversial topics could be useful to candidates.

Question 8

This was a popular choice and candidates seemed happy with the material required for the question and the requested style. At best, ideas were handled very well, supported by a clear sense of the target audience and the appropriate choice of register to use. Such answers were clearly structured and resisted the easy temptation to offer gushing outpourings of emotion and outrage. Less secure answers tended to offer paternal or maternal advice in ways which may not have addressed the teenage audience effectively.