

FRENCH

Paper 8670/04

Texts

General comments

All questions were attempted, but relatively few candidates answered on *Le Chercheur d'Or*, *Becket* and *Le Diable au corps*. Predictably, Molière was the most popular author, closely followed in **Section 1** by Mauriac. Camus was the most popular choice in **Section 2**, followed by Bazin and Flaubert.

Whilst there were, on this occasion, few instances of candidates writing at excessive length, a surprising number of candidates failed to observe the rubric and attempted two answers on one book. It was noticeable, furthermore, that a number of candidates who wrote adequate answers on two books did not attempt a third question, thus denying themselves the possibility of reaching a satisfactory total mark.

The vast majority of scripts were legible and presentable. Examiners continue to draw attention to the fact that some candidates do not state, in **Section B**, which essay they are attempting, and it is not always easy to tell. There is no need for candidates to waste time copying out the title, but they should be told to write clearly the number and letter of the question they have chosen. Some candidates still do not seem to understand that there is no merit in reproducing objective information about dates of publication, first performances of plays, biographical details about the author, and other facts which, in most cases, have no bearing on the essay topic. An introductory paragraph which outlines the candidate's approach to the question and communicates a clear understanding of its implications is of much greater value.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

Mauriac: *Le Nœud de vipères*

- (a) Most candidates had no difficulty in identifying the boy as Luc, or in explaining the unusually positive responses that he engendered in Louis. Relevant parallels were drawn with Marie. The second part of the question prompted a good many candidates to digress and to pay more attention to Louis's character than to Isa's. The better answers referred appropriately to her weary cynicism and inability to register anything positive about him, with appropriate explanations involving the breakdown of their marriage at an early stage. Answers which focused on the uncharitable nature of her response were more relevant than those which went into unnecessary detail about the earlier stages of their relationship. It was, of course, appropriate to point out that relations between the two were characterised by a fundamental lack of communication, for which the fault lay on both sides. Candidates generally understood that Isa's remark quoted in the third part of the question was ill-judged and unfair.
- (b) The essay on Louis's harsh self-appraisal produced answers of greatly varying quality. The differentiating factor was not so much the ability to justify and explain the remark as the amount of relevant detail and the structure of the answers, which, in a good many cases, left much to be desired. An apparently random selection of examples of Louis's sense of isolation and lack of engagement with his family could not score as well as a closely argued essay with suitable textual references. That said, most candidates did well to point out the largely futile efforts made by Louis to change his behaviour towards the end of his life, and understood why he felt the need for some spiritual fulfilment.

Question 2Molière: *Les Femmes savantes*

- (a) Surprisingly, not all candidates established that Chrysale was talking to Bélise, whilst aiming comments at Philaminte, and not all mentioned his fear of confronting his wife. The principal weakness in answers to the first two parts of this question was an undue emphasis on the dismissal of Martine for making grammatical mistakes. The question offered candidates an opportunity to point out that Chrysale is complaining about the general domestic upheaval caused by unnatural behaviour. Candidates readily agreed that his complaint was justified, but many saw the problem in over-specific terms (Martine, soup and bad poetry) rather than considering what was meant by *ce mauvais air* in the household. The third part of the question required an analysis of Philaminte's use of the word *bassesse* rather than a repetition of her immediate priorities (Martine and Trissotin again).
- (b) It was pointed out in this report a year ago that many essays on this text did not focus on the main point of the play: to provoke mocking laughter at the expense of those whose pretensions are not matched by their performance. Examiners were surprised to find candidates who disagreed with the premise of the question, which is very clearly set out by Clitandre. A number of answers did not even refer to Clitandre, which was disappointing. An analysis of his role would have provided the basis for a relevant and appropriate answer.

Question 3Anouilh: *Becket*

- (a) Candidates' knowledge of the situation in this extract was often far from clear. Whilst they were aware, in most cases, that Becket had come to France to ask for protection in the wake of his refusal to capitulate to King Henry's demands, they were seldom able to give a clear picture of the state of play at this juncture. Answers to the second part of the question showed little or no understanding of the use of the word *cuisine* either here or elsewhere in the play. The notion of political expediency and its more unattractive manifestations is a key issue in this and other plays by Anouilh, and candidates are expected to be in a position to comment on it. As to Becket's reasons for visiting the Pope, some answers simply failed to identify them, and most others were sketchy. A few managed to refer to the scheming and self-interested nature of the Pope's deliberations with his cardinals, but the majority of answers did not communicate a grasp of the implications of the question.
- (b) The standard of answers to the essay question was generally disappointing. Whilst most candidates were able to explain that the King emerged somewhat wiser from the tragic sequence of events, surprisingly few dealt satisfactorily with Anouilh's central and recurring theme of self-fulfilment through self-sacrifice. They saw Becket's death as tragic rather than as the realisation of his destiny. This limited perception of the outcome made it impossible for Examiners to award much credit, since the resonance of the quotation did not seem to have been fully understood.

Question 4Le Clézio: *Le Chercheur d'or*

- (a) This text again produced sound work from most of those who chose the guided commentary. Weaker candidates confused Mananava with the location of the abandoned family home, thus revealing a lack of understanding about the place which evoked a dream world isolated from the trials of urban life. The role of Uncle Ludovic was generally well understood. Some were able to mention his lack of support for the father's scheme and his exploitation of the family's misfortune. Their sense of exile from their previous environment was clearly defined and explained by most candidates.
- (b) Only a few candidates tackled this question, and their answers varied greatly in quality. At the top end there was a clear perception of the path which led Alexis to adjust his scale of values in the direction of something more lasting and satisfying than gold. At the other end there was a limited response in terms of his learning various practical skills (e.g. fishing and sailing), which betrayed a somewhat superficial reading of the text.

Question 5

Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*

- (a) The terms of reference of the question were well understood. Most candidates established that Emma's pre-conceived ideas of romance, based on her reading, were bound to lead to disappointment in the face of reality. Some answers devoted unnecessary attention to her husband's inadequacies. Most were fair in their treatment of Emma, ascribing part of the blame to the male characters. Whilst the overall picture was generally accurate, a number of answers lacked the detail which is expected for a high score. For example, it was desirable to give examples of Emma's excitement at the very idea of having a lover, or of the behaviour she expected of them, based on her idealised vision of the relationship. Similarly, instances of the banality of what happened, and of the naïvety displayed by Emma in failing to see Rodolphe's cliché-ridden performance, would have enhanced otherwise sound answers.
- (b) Much the same observations hold good for this question. Candidates were aware that the ball represented, for Emma, the realisation of her dreams. One or two of the best answers alluded to the peasants looking through the window, and inspiring the determination in Emma to remain on the right side of the divide. Again, some answers dwelt at length on Charles's inability to satisfy her, whereas the thrust of a really perceptive answer should have been that this world was, in reality, anything but ideal. Candidates did not appear to have registered the fact that Flaubert's critical eye was just as active in his depiction of the upper classes as of the bourgeoisie, and Emma's inability to see the negative aspects of these people and their life-style was part of her problem.

Question 6

Bazin: *Vipère au poing*

- (a) The first appearance of this text attracted a number of Centres, but unfortunately the questions set were largely misunderstood by those who tackled them. Whilst many essays displayed a good knowledge of the text, they failed to address the issues raised by the questions. The social attitudes displayed by the Rezeau family were the main issue in a minority of answers. Where Examiners were looking for old-fashioned, even outdated values and practices, obsession with appearances, snobbery, superficial piety and so on, they all too often found a largely narrative account of Mme Rezeau's treatment of her children.
- (b) Most of those who chose this question did not consider the quotation in its context. They appeared to assume, wrongly, that the narrator was addressing himself personally to his mother, whereas the remark alludes more generally to his background and upbringing, of which his mother is certainly a significant part, but not the only aspect. Consequently, candidates generally gave an account of the battle between mother and son and failed to note that the narrator's apparent self-congratulation is related to his determination to put this damaging upbringing behind him and forge a new life with independent attitudes and values.

Question 7

Camus: *L'Étranger*

- (a) Many candidates used the description of Meursault as *un monstre moral* as a signal to follow the logic of the prosecuting authorities by condemning his behaviour as set out in the first part of the story. This was not the point of the question. Candidates who understood that the quotation reveals more about the prosecuting authorities than it does about Meursault were on the right track. The way in which the character's unconventional behaviour and attitudes are perceived as a threat to society should have been read as an indictment of that society, not of Meursault. Candidates are not penalised for expressing personal views such as disapproval of Meursault's treatment of his mother, his girl-friend, or even the Chaplain, but they are expected to show an awareness of the author's position too.

- (b) Answers to this question tended to be sketchy and anecdotal. The better essays established that the Court paid little attention to the attempts of Meursault's friends to influence his character. Only a few candidates were able to supply the relevant details and to point out that these individuals were not taken seriously by the Court because they were not 'respectable' people. Weaker essays included paraphrases of the testimony of the staff at the old people's home, who were not, in fact, Meursault's friends.

Question 8

Radiguet: *Le Diable au corps*

- (a) The heroic posturing of Radiguet's 'hero' is a major feature of the novel. Candidates who attempted this question were, by and large, unable to provide an analysis of this aspect. There are many examples of the adolescent boy trying, and usually failing, to behave like a Romantic hero. His tendency to review his own performance in this role enables the narrator to underline the hero's ineptitude and lack of experience. Candidates who pursued this line of enquiry were suitably rewarded.
- (b) Answers to this question were mainly more focused, although not always more detailed, than answers to **Question (a)**. Candidates showed a good understanding of the theme of freedom, as provided to the young in unusually large measure by the onset of war. Most commented on the fact that Marthe's husband was a soldier, but only the best answers engaged with the hero's ambivalent response to this, in the sense that he both took advantage of the enforced absence of his 'rival' and also felt some guilt and admiration towards the man.