

# FRENCH

Paper 8670/04

Texts

## General comments

The spread of marks was in line with previous sessions, with a few distinguished candidates at the top end and a significant number in the 'just passable' category. There were rather more candidates than in previous sessions who seemed wholly out of their depth. All questions were attempted, but relatively few candidates answered on *Le Chercheur d'Or* and *Le Diable au corps*. Predictably, Molière was the most popular author, closely followed in **Section 1** by Mauriac. Camus and Bazin were the most popular choices in **Section 2**.

The most significant problem encountered this session was the failure of some candidates with a good knowledge of a particular text to address the question set. Cases in point were the essay question on *Les Femmes savantes*, where many gave little or no account of the comic aspect, and the second question on *Vipère au poing*, which was not a wise choice for the many candidates who did not understand the word 'hypocrisie'.

There were few instances of candidates writing at excessive length, whereas some failed to observe the rubric and attempted two answers on one book. The candidates in question wrote very little and seemed altogether at sea. In a few cases, candidates made brief attempts at a substantial number of questions, without showing any knowledge of the texts. It was noticeable, furthermore, that a number of candidates who wrote adequate answers on two books did not attempt a third question, or wrote only very briefly on a third topic, thus denying themselves the possibility of reaching a satisfactory total mark.

The vast majority of scripts were legible and presentable. The message does not seem to have reached all Centres that there is no need for candidates to waste time copying out the questions, but they should write clearly the number and letter of the question they have chosen. Some 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

### Question 1

Mauriac: *Le Nœud de vipères*

- (a) Most candidates gave a competent account of Louis's sense of defeat with regard to his relationship with Isa. There was general agreement that his hatred was justifiable. In this part of the commentary, candidates easily found their level according to whether they adopted a 'black and white' approach by laying the entire blame for Louis's unhappiness at Isa's door, or whether they took a more balanced view by showing that some of the responsibility for the breakdown in communications might be apportioned to Louis himself or to the circumstances surrounding his marriage. That said, the most significant discriminator here was the third part of the question, which many candidates did not answer satisfactorily. It was not enough, in this section, to reiterate the elements of hatred and resentment. The best answers showed an awareness of Louis's recurrent but repressed sense of a spiritual dimension, and pointed out that his refusal to respond to this, largely as a result of the 'bad Catholicism' practised all around him, was a tragic flaw in his life.

- (b) Essays on the title of the novel invariably displayed a sound understanding of the text. Again, those who took the view that Louis alone illustrated the point were likely to be awarded more credit than those who took a broader view. The question offered good candidates the opportunity to discuss the image with reference both to Louis and to his family, and to provide a wealth of appropriate references from the text. Perhaps it was the complex structure of the novel which made it difficult for many candidates to structure their essays, as there was often little logic in their thought process. Typically, essays would describe completely different periods of Louis's life in apparently random order, dealing with his childhood, for example, towards the end of the essay. Thus, whilst many essays scored well on content, relatively few could be rewarded additionally for their structure.

### Question 2

Molière: *Les Femmes savantes*

- (a) Almost all who attempted the question were able to explain Clitandre's motives for speaking to Bélise at this juncture. Most, but by no means all, went on to explain the need to get Philaminte's approval for him to marry Henriette. The best answers added the reason for Philaminte's lack of enthusiasm for Clitandre as a potential son-in-law. With regard to the improbability of this dialogue having a successful outcome, much was made of Bélise's absurd assumption that she was an object of desire, but not all candidates explored the idea that Clitandre's apparent indifference to the objectives of the *femmes savantes* made it difficult to imagine that he would receive a sympathetic hearing from either Bélise or Philaminte. The second and third parts of the question were answered inadequately by many candidates. It was not possible to score well here without showing an understanding of the obsessions of *préciosité*. It was not enough to say that Bélise was embarrassed by what she saw as Clitandre's advances: her response was dictated by what she perceived to be the appropriate contempt of a *précieuse* for physical passion and marriage. Those who failed to explore this issue invariably added little or nothing to their answers in the third section. What was needed was an awareness of the literary style of the *précieux*, of which Bélise would have had an amusingly vague and ill-digested knowledge.
- (b) Year after year, reports have drawn attention to the widespread absence, in candidates' essays on Molière, of any reference to his comic techniques. On this occasion, the essay title unambiguously invited candidates to deal with the comic features of the relationship between Philaminte and Chrysale, but many essays showed a very limited perception of the relevant features. Much was made of the domineering personality of the one and the weakness of the other. Fewer essays dealt appropriately with their comically obsessive and diametrically opposed preoccupations. Many recounted the dismissal of Martine and the argument over Henriette's marriage but only the best answers focused on the comic contrast between Chrysale's confidence before the event and his predictable collapse in his wife's presence. Hardly any candidates explored the comedy of language with regard to Philaminte's exaggerated disapproval of Chrysale's attitudes and his disregard for refinement. The notions of comic inflexibility, predictability and incongruity were barely mentioned in the majority of answers.

### Question 3

Anouilh: *Becket*

- (a) A good many candidates did not correctly identify the subject of the dispute in this extract. Some were uncertain as to what office Becket occupied at this point in the play. Weaker answers tended to refer to the matter of excommunication, or to make general comments about Normans versus Saxons, whereas it was necessary to identify the problem as that of peasants going into monasteries in order to escape serfdom. On the other hand, Folliot's attitude towards Becket was easily identified. Weaker candidates simply paraphrased his remarks, with little in the way of commentary, but better answers explained the background to his aggressive behaviour. Most were able to offer some relevant observations about Becket's change of allegiance from State to Church.

- (b) The general standard of performance on this question was not impressive. Candidates were more inclined to paraphrase the text than to analyse it. The most clearly understood issue was the inadequacy of Henry's mother to provide him with emotional security in his childhood, and the consequences of that for his relationship with Becket. The most widespread omission was the role played by the Queen in driving Henry into Becket's arms, as it were, out of sheer boredom and frustration. Candidates were quick to identify what they saw as the subservience of women at that time, and unwilling to draw attention to the powers evoked by the mention of the Queen's family connections.

#### Question 4

Le Clézio: *Le Chercheur d'or*

- (a) In order to answer the first part of this question satisfactorily, it was necessary to refer to the description immediately preceding this extract. Those candidates who failed to do this made little sense of the phrase under consideration, whereas those who followed the prescribed agenda showed a good understanding of the various references in the book to patterns in the sky. Candidates who understood the first part of the question also made good sense of the second and third. Most answers showed a clear appreciation of the narrator's change of heart, as he accepted the futility of his pursuit of material gain in favour of a different kind of satisfaction. They were also able to comment positively on Ouma's influence on the narrator. In summary, answers were split between a minority who had little sense of the meaning of the extract and a majority who produced coherent analysis and, in some cases, relevant references to other parts of the novel.
- (b) Given the frequency of references to dreams in this work, candidates did not find it difficult to comment on this theme. Few were able to give an account which incorporated all stages of the narration: answers were particularly thin on the early references to dreams of the world beyond the confines of home, which were partly stimulated by magazines and pictures. Most gave a clear account of the narrator's dream of finding the treasure. Essays varied considerably in the quality of their organisation.

#### Question 5

Flaubert: *Madame Bovary*

- (a) Most who attempted this question showed a sound understanding of its implications. The discriminatory factors were the ability to reach a clear conclusion supported by relevant evidence, and also to structure the essay without appearing to select episodes from the story in random order. The danger here was to indulge in too much narration. The best answers referred to incidents in order to demonstrate their significance with regard to the question as to which character was an innocent victim. Those who saw Emma as a victim of her own naïvety and self-indulgence as well as of her difficult circumstances were suitably rewarded for their balanced judgement. Most candidates were able to justify greater sympathy for Charles than for Emma, whereas the more superficial answers were perhaps unduly harsh on Charles.
- (b) A limited number of candidates attempted this question and so it is not possible to provide a viable report. It can only be said that answers tended to show a very limited understanding of the issue.

#### Question 6

Bazin: *Vipère au poing*

- (a) This was a popular choice which enabled many candidates to show a thorough knowledge of the text. Weaker essays, however, lapsed into narrative and dwelt inappropriately on the unkind treatment by Folcoche of all her children. Most were able to cite the physical resemblance between the narrator and his mother, although there was some confusion with regard to the former's Rezeau characteristic, which was wrongly seen as being inherited from the mother. In terms of the two personalities, answers often provided a good account of the obvious similarities, and drew appropriate comparisons between the narrator and his siblings. The best answers went on to point out that there are also a few significant differences between Folcoche and Brasse-Bouillon, notably with regard to their attitude to religion.

- (b) Examiners are sometimes taken by surprise when a significant majority of candidates provide answers which betray a fundamental misunderstanding of the question. This one was based on the assumption that candidates would be aware of the meaning of the word 'hypocrisie' and would discuss the behaviour of the characters in this light, paying particular attention to social and religious attitudes. Very few followed this agenda. Most apparently misinterpreted the title and treated the concept of hypocrisy as though it meant more or less the same as unkindness. In these cases, Examiners had no choice but to award a mark in the descriptor band which refers to 'not much understanding or ability to answer the question'.

### Question 7

Camus: *L'Étranger*

- (a) This essay title offered the opportunity to follow a chronological path through Meursault's contacts with representatives of the legal profession. Examiners were puzzled by the number of essays which went back and forth in a way which sometimes made the candidate's argument difficult to follow. It was logical to deal with the *juge d'instruction* and Meursault's own lawyer before considering the reactions of the trial judge. Nearly all candidates showed a sound understanding of the effect of Meursault's unconventional behaviour on members of the legal profession. Weaker essays recounted his mother's funeral, his time with Marie, and the shooting, all of which was superfluous if not supported by references to the interpretation of these events by the lawyers. Due emphasis was placed on Meursault's indifference to religion, but some essays strayed into the meeting with the chaplain, which was not relevant here. As usual, those who provided appropriate details scored higher marks than those who wrote in general terms.
- (b) There were fewer really convincing essays on this topic than on the previous one. The object of the exercise was to show Meursault's sudden awareness of the relative value of his integrity and independence of spirit as compared with the unquestioning acceptance of the meaningless codes offered by society. Candidates should perhaps be discouraged from using the term 'existentialist', as its use is seldom helpful in the context of this work. Many essays successfully conveyed the chaplain's agenda, although more emphasis might have been put on society's need to tie things up neatly under its own terms of reference. Candidates had a broad understanding of Meursault's change of behaviour here and his affirmation of the value of life as he had lived it. What was often missing was an analysis of his objection to the chaplain's air of certainty: the confident complacency of bourgeois Catholic morality.

### Question 8

Radiguet: *Le Diable au corps*

- (a) This question produced answers of greatly varying levels of perception. The issue was one which dominates the novel: human communication is hampered by immaturity, dishonesty, play-acting, misinterpretation of messages and signs sent by others, and so on. Examiners were surprised to find that some who had studied this work interpreted the question on a purely literal level: physical distance, social barriers and the like being cited as the problems. It must be said that few candidates who answered this question showed a real understanding of the author's intentions, and equally few managed to produce a structured, detailed and convincing account.
- (b) There was some appreciation of the hero's self-delusion, but, as in answers to the previous question, there was little evidence that this text had been mastered by more than a handful of those who chose to answer on it. Those who found it difficult to write about the lack of self-awareness displayed by the 'hero' stood no chance of comparing this with the half-truths uttered by the narrator about himself as a younger man.