

# FRENCH

Paper 8670/04

Texts

## General comments

All questions were attempted, the most popular texts being *Le Noeud de vipères*, *Les Mains sales*, *Vipère au poing* and *L'Étranger*. Few candidates answered the essay question on *Le Chercheur d'or*, the second question on *Cyrano de Bergerac*, or the second question on *Le Diable au corps*. Very few candidates wrote at excessive length.

Candidates who achieved lower marks often copied material from the paper, or paraphrased the passages set for commentary, with no reference to the question or evidence of textual knowledge. There were also a significant number of scripts in which candidates gave brief and often incoherent answers to more than three questions, or in which only two questions were attempted. Candidates need to bear in mind the time allowed in the examination: some showed a tendency to spend too long on two questions and write very little on the third.

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.

## Comments on specific questions

### Section A

#### Question 1

Mauriac: *Le Nœud de vipères*

- (a) Almost all candidates successfully identified Rodolphe as the subject of the first question. Most were also able to give a coherent account of Louis's jealousy. The second question generated a large number of answers in the 'black and white response' category, generally censoring Isa and agreeing with Louis's complaints. Higher marks were awarded to those who went for a more balanced account, and showed an awareness of Louis's inability (or refusal) to communicate with her after the mention of her relationship with Rodolphe. The third part of the question proved to be effective in discriminating in favour of candidates who saw beyond the need for vengeance. Whilst many answers confined themselves to this approach, a few appreciated the need on Louis's part to be understood.
- (b) Most who answered this question showed some ability to see both sides of the argument, but many essays were unduly biased against one party or the other. The features which distinguished the relative quality of these essays were the structure and amount of relevant detail. A good many answers referred to different stages of the story in apparently random order, for example discussing the episode in St Germain des Prés before going back to talk about Louis's youth. Paragraphing was often weak, and some candidates would be well advised to spend more time thinking about the logical order of their points.

#### Question 2

Voltaire: *Candide*

- (a) This was a new text for 2008. Answers were generally vague and lacking in detail and mere paraphrase of the passage was all too common. Not all candidates were able to refer to the Inquisition and its interpretation of heresy, and many did not understand in any depth why the characters were being persecuted. In the second section, there were a few commendable references to Voltaire's cynicism about Catholic superstition and fanaticism, whilst a good many answers could only point out the obvious fact that the auto-da-fe has not had the desired effect.

Candidates were generally aware of the effect on Candide of the teaching of Pangloss, but most answers showed a challenge to this teaching posed by the series of negative experiences, but most answers were limited and dealt with the issue in a somewhat superficial way.

- (b) Answers on the subject of the role of Martin tended to be rather sketchy. There was a fair level of awareness of the notion that he is the opposite philosophical pole to Pangloss, but answers which could illustrate this in any detail were few and far between. Candidates tended to realise correctly that Voltaire was not encouraging them to embrace his views unreservedly, but only the best answers pointed to the inflexibility of his (and Pangloss's) views as being reprehensible.

### Question 3

Sartre: *Les Mains sales*

- (a) Most who tackled the commentary found it difficult, particularly in the first part of their answers, to focus on the relevant material. Much was written here about the class distinction between the characters, and the emotions triggered by this, whereas the situation which candidates were asked about was the one which gave rise to the argument, i.e. the reasons for Hugo's presence in the house and his consequent anxiety about the possible discovery of his gun. In the second part, candidates variously supported Slick and Georges for doing their job (the majority) and Hugo for sticking up for his human rights. There was very little critical analysis of the tone of Hugo's remarks, which, it might have been argued, only served to exacerbate the problem. Candidates held differing views as to Hoederer's success in getting the characters to stop quarrelling, and in some cases answers were factually incorrect with regard to the sequence of events later in the scene.
- (b) It was difficult to answer this question coherently without knowing (and stating) the context in which it was made, or, at the very least, that it was Hoederer who said it. Candidates generally offered very little on Hugo's background, and no answer showed an awareness of Sartre's own description of Hugo as typifying the young bourgeois anarchist struggling to cope with his identity and relationships. Answers were often judgemental rather than analytical, with few attempts at establishing what 'principes' were at issue or why they were being called into question. In short, the quotation was, on the whole, not well understood.

### Question 4

Le Clézio: *Le Chercheur d'or*

- (a) There were few attempts at the commentary, and little success in answering the questions with precision and relevance. Candidates had a general perception of the quality of Alexis's life as a child, but only a small minority of answers could provide much in the way of detail. Likewise, answers on the significance of the place names in the passage were often imprecise to the point of being interchangeable. It was surprising that a number of answers simply failed to register what happened on April 29. Those who knew the implications of the question were able to give a fair account of the consequences, albeit with varying degrees of detail.
- (b) Only one or two candidates tackled this question. The quality of answers tended to be at one end of the scale or the other: a perceptive account based on the idea that the conclusion is more of a success than a failure, or a largely narrative answer confined to a negative perception of the author's frustrations at not finding the treasure.

## Section B

### Question 5

Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*

- (a) Only a small number of candidates attempted these questions. Those who answered (a) showed a good knowledge of the plot and were mainly able to give a good account of Cyrano's positive qualities. Whilst some mentioned that there were certain less admirable characteristics, they gave little or nothing by way of exemplification, which resulted in rather one-sided answers.

- (b) Only one or two candidates attempted this question, and their answers were insubstantial, so that it is not possible to draw any useful conclusions.

### Question 6

Bazin: *Vipère au poing*

- (a) Most candidates who attempted this question were ill-advised to do so, in that they did not convey a grasp of its implications. Examiners found much irrelevant narrative and a widespread failure to convey the perspective of the adult narrator. Thus, they found very little reference to irony and satire, despite the fact that the novel abounds with sophisticated observations of which only an adult would be capable. Candidates had no difficulty in conveying the pain of the persecuted child, with manifold examples. The answers lacked awareness of the importance of the narrator's view of his own increasing cynicism, and the hypocrisy of the Rezeau and their like.
- (b) Answers tended to make only glancing references to the question, preferring to focus on M. and Mme Rezeau's behaviour. Some did comment usefully on the role of religion in this society, and on the parents' ostentatious snobbery. What was required was a broader view of this decadent class, including their treatment of social inferiors, their attitude to work and education, and their cynical exploitation of ecclesiastical enthusiasm for monetary donations as opposed to moral values.

### Question 7

Camus: *L'Étranger*

- (a) Candidates made various unsuccessful attempts to endow Meursault with a sense of motivation derived from such features as the sun, his mother, Marie or Raymond. Many were able to say what did not motivate him. A few essays showed effectively that he was susceptible to physical needs, and gave appropriate examples. Candidates also understood that he was committed to telling the truth. The opportunity to explain the effect of his interview with the chaplain, and his subsequent affirmation of a particular view of life, was often treated in a sketchy and uncertain way.
- (b) Few were inclined to disagree with the statement at issue. That said, essays mostly lacked structure and detail in assessing the ills of society as perceived by Camus. Candidates wrote at length on the funeral, the date with Marie and the killing of the Arab, but drew little on the essential material in Part 2 in which the representatives of society give their interpretation of events. There was no difficulty in identifying, in general terms, what was 'odd' and unacceptable about Meursault's behaviour, but not enough analysis of the terms of reference used by those who condemned this behaviour.

### Question 8

Radiguet: *Le Diable au corps*

- (a) Candidates were surprisingly, and perhaps misguidedly, enthusiastic about the narrator's boldness and sexual prowess. Candidates seemed either reluctant or unable to point out his many unattractive qualities, let alone to make it clear that he himself, as narrator, is critical of the hero's behaviour. This approach led to a somewhat 'black and white' perception of the text, rather than an account which reflected the different levels of awareness which constantly undermine the reader's ability to admire the 'hero'.
- (b) Only one or two candidates attempted this question, and no useful conclusions can be drawn from their answers.