

FRENCH

Paper 8670/04

Texts

General comments

The spread of marks on this paper was reasonably wide, with a fair number of candidates towards the top end, and a few consistently good performances. There were also a number of candidates who scored no points as their scripts were either blank, or consisted of material copied from the examination paper, or paraphrases of the passages set for commentary, with no reference to the question or evidence of textual knowledge.

All questions were attempted, the most popular texts being the Maupassant stories, *Candide*, *Les Mains sales*, *Vipère au poing* and *L'Étranger*. Few candidates answered on Giono, the essay question on Maupassant or the first essay question on *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Only a handful of candidates penalised themselves by writing at excessive length, but this infringement of the rubric continues to cause concern, in that it can lower a candidate's grade unnecessarily.

A problem that continually surfaces is that some candidates do not state, in **Section B**, which essay they are attempting, and unfortunately 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 1

Question 1

Maupassant: *Boule de Suif et autres contes de la guerre*

- (a) Almost all candidates successfully identified the context of the extract set for commentary. They showed a good understanding of the character's pain and indignation caused by the change in attitude of the other characters once their requirement had been satisfied. Many alluded to the irony of their failure to share their food, given Boule de Suif's generosity towards them earlier in the journey. Better answers also drew attention to her desperate attempt to maintain her composure, and the fact that she did not indulge in recriminations. The second part of the question was less well handled, in that most answers failed to focus on Madame Loiseau, preferring to comment in general terms on the hypocrisy of the travellers. There was a tendency to describe her, inaccurately, as part of the 'upper class' brigade in the coach. What was needed here was reference to her attitudes towards Boule de Suif earlier in the story, to underline the sheer nastiness of her inconsistency. Thirdly, comments on the role of the nuns mostly included justifiable accusations of hypocrisy and lack of Christian charity. The best answers gave an account of the role of the older nun in persuading Boule de Suif to satisfy the Prussian officer's demands with spurious biblical references in support of what was self-evidently an example of preposterous casuistry.

- (b) There were few attempts to answer this question. Those who chose it tended to rely on general knowledge and showed little or no understanding of Maupassant's use of satire, irony or caricature. As a consequence of this limitation, essays generally lacked appropriate examples, and those that appeared to be chosen because the candidate knew them, rather than because they offered suitable material in relation to the question.

Question 2

Voltaire: *Candide*

- (a) By no means did all answers correctly and clearly identify the two men killed by Candide. There was even some confusion about which one was Jewish. The most significant (and surprising) omission here was detail about the role of the Grand Inquisitor. Candidates could infer from the text that he was important, and that his death would bring recriminations, but very few could say why. There was very little commentary on the bizarre domestic arrangements in which Cunégonde had been living up to the moment of Candide's arrival, and unnecessary paraphrase and reiteration of her surprise at Candide's ability to show such aggression. Some of the best answers perceived Cunégonde's consistent preoccupation with her own comfort and welfare in contrast to Candide's overriding concern for her rather than for himself. Commentary on the life story of the old woman was generally sound, varying somewhat in accuracy but considerably in the amount of relevant detail provided. The third question generated many answers which went no further than a general comment on discrimination. Surprisingly few candidates were able to refer to the ambiguous status of Don Issachar in society. Given the vagueness of many answers in the first section concerning the Grand Inquisitor, it was inevitable that little was offered here by way of relevant comment on the regime of the Roman Catholic Church at the time.
- (b) The quality of answers on the subject of Candide's name was very variable. There was a high level of awareness of the notion that he is, at the outset, innocent and pure. That said, many answers dwelt at unnecessary length on material drawn from the opening chapter. Most made appropriate reference to Candide's belief in Pangloss's philosophy, and went on to say, correctly, that this belief was put to the test after Candide left the château. What was then required was an analysis of the way Candide's belief is gradually but systematically eroded by experience, as Voltaire exposes the inability of the Optimists to explain the real world. Surprisingly few answers gave a convincing account of this process.

Question 3

Sartre: *Les Mains sales*

- (a) Most who tackled the commentary had no difficulty in explaining what Louis was talking about at the beginning of the extract: the disposal of Hoederer. The variable quality of answers lay in the level of detail provided about the significance of this plan and the contrasting attitudes to power-sharing which lay behind it. In the second section, many weaker answers were able only to refer to Hugo's desire to be involved in direct action, whereas the better ones provided some insight as to the psychological explanation for this need. Overall, however, it seemed that few had a clear perception of these issues, which were set out by Sartre in his own commentaries on the play. The third section produced a wide variety of responses. As usual, candidates tended to dwell on the idea that Hugo killed Hoederer out of jealousy. Those who examined Hugo's bibulous soul-searching and exposed his fundamental unsuitability for the task were duly rewarded.
- (b) Answers to the essay question were generally fairly disappointing. Many candidates seemed uncertain as to what the answer was. They conveyed little or no understanding of Sartre's perspective on the matter, again clearly stated in his commentaries, which give all the credit to Hoederer for dismissing the idea that political virginity can be retained in the real world. Candidates seemed to fight shy of the important notion that it might have been more constructive, on balance, for Hugo to move on and make a positive contribution to the Party rather than to cling to an idea which, for all its idealism, smacks of an Anouilh heroine rather than of an existentialist. Bizarrely, there were few references to Existentialism in these answers, whereas they were legion (but often unhelpful), in essays on the Camus text.

Question 4Giono: *Regain*

- (a) There were few attempts at the commentary, and little success in answering the questions with precision and relevance. The first section produced a good deal of paraphrase, often not enough to display an awareness of Arsule's concerns about the derelict state of the farm. Candidates did show some understanding of Arsule's influence on Panturle's way of life, but weaker answers even failed to appreciate the significance of her recommendation that he change his shirt before going out. Not all answers explained the significance of the box of matches, with the result that credit could only be given in some cases.
- (b) Those who chose the essay question tended to fare rather better on this occasion. Most could appreciate the significance of the seasons, the harshness of the elements, the battle for survival in which nature might seem either hostile or benevolent, and the productive power of nature when effectively harnessed by the characters.

Section 2**Question 5**Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*

- (a) Only very few candidates attempted this question, and their answers were so insubstantial that it is not possible to draw any useful conclusions.
- (b) This question was attempted by almost all candidates who had studied this text. They generally displayed a good knowledge of the plot, and a clear perception of Cyrano's sacrifice in the interest of Roxane's love for Christian. There were many competent accounts of the aspects of the story which attract sympathy for Cyrano. Some pointed out, correctly, that certain elements of Cyrano's life generate our admiration as well as our sympathy. On the other hand, much uncertainty surrounded the issue as to what constitutes tragedy, and high marks were difficult to achieve because of this lack of understanding of the terms of reference. For example, candidates did not point out that a sense of wasted potential, or an acutely painful awareness of the cruelty of fate can elevate sad events to the level of universal tragedy. Such issues were not evoked in answers which, nevertheless, showed sensitivity to the character's predicament.

Question 6Bazin: *Vipère au poing*

- (a) Many who attempted this question gave elaborate explanations of the symbolism, dwelling at length on the opening scene and giving appropriate examples of the image of the viper applied to Mme Rezeau throughout the novel. There was a tendency to provide narrative accounts of her 'poisonous' behaviour and its effect on the lives of Brasse-Bouillon and his siblings. A good answer, offered by a number of candidates, needed to examine the ending of the story, rather than merely quoting it as a final reference to the image of the snake. To score well here, it was essential to appreciate the long-term damage to Jean's personality by referring to the fact that he becomes suspicious, cynical and aggressive. The negative implications of the title were not always understood, as many candidates took the view that his victory over his mother simply echoed the strangling of the snake at the outset, and that the hero bowed out to loud applause. A more balanced view, taking into account the damaging effect of the battle on his personality, was suitably rewarded.
- (b) Candidates were mostly more adept at asserting their solidarity with Brasse-Bouillon against his mother than justifying their answers as the question required. Many essays did little more than list Mme Rezeau's atrocities against her children. What was wanted for a good score on this topic was not merely an account of her regime and a statement that Brasse-Bouillon was right to object to it. The psychological development of the narrator should be seen as a systematic process of disfigurement. Many candidates seemed unaware that the question invited them to show that they were sympathetic to the narrator's violent and even shocking feelings and actions generated by his mother, because of the lasting damage these did to him as a human being.

Question 7Camus: *L'Étranger*

- (a) The mark scheme for this component has, for many years, included the idea that a 'black and white' perception of characters by the candidate is not worthy of high marks. Thus, those who saw this essay title as an opportunity to echo many of society's objections to Meursault's behaviour were consigned to the appropriate mark band. Whilst examiners would not, of course, penalise candidates for expressing disapproval of Meursault's indifference and lethargy, they expect to find some account of the negative feelings Camus wished to evoke about the conventions of this society and those who regard their contravention as immoral or criminal. Thorough answers also pointed out that Meursault's assertions of his personal values, as compared with the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of those who condemn him, can be seen in a positive light.
- (b) Many answers to this question were thorough, and showed a good knowledge of the text. The most common shortcoming was a tendency to spend too long expounding the examples of Meursault's undemonstrative behaviour towards those closest to him, at the expense of an analysis of his dealings with the representatives of the legal system. It is, after all, his inability to relate to these people, and his refusal to discuss his actions and relationships in the terms which they would dictate, which mark him out for eradication.

Question 8Radiguet: *Le Diable au corps*

- (a) Candidates were broadly aware that the statement contained in the question was true. However, most answers were superficial and inadequately structured. The narrator's dictatorial attitude was properly cited as a main cause of the problem, as were the war and the attitude of the adult world. Little was written about the artificial nature of the relationship in terms of the narrator's erroneous perception of his ability to play the Romantic hero. Many answers also lacked the required analysis of the part played by the telling of lies in undermining the relationship.
- (b) Only very few candidates attempted this question, and no useful conclusions can be drawn from their answers. The issue of role-playing is perhaps a subtle one, but is central to the idea of the flawed hero, and no answer on this topic conveyed its significance.