

# FRENCH

Paper 8670/41

Texts

## General comments

The spread of marks was reasonably wide, with a fair number of candidates towards the top end, and a few consistently good performances. However, a number of candidates scored very low marks or even no marks at all. 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. There was also a significant number of scripts in which candidates gave brief and often incoherent answers to two questions on each of two or three texts.

All questions were attempted, the most popular texts being the Maupassant stories, *Candide*, *Les Mains sales*, *Vipère au poing* and *L'Étranger*. Very few candidates answered on Giono. Only a handful of candidates penalised themselves by writing at excessive length. Indeed, far more marks were lost as a result of incomplete or insubstantial answers.

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.

## 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, and were able to show a measure of knowledge about the situation as the journey resumes and about the passengers' reaction to the singing of the *Marseillaise*. Better answers dealt not just with the issue of patriotism (or lack of it) but also with the political implications of Cornudet's choice of lyric. There were also some competent answers on Maupassant's depiction of Cornudet. Whilst most candidates understood the differences between him and the other characters, relatively few saw the ambiguities in Maupassant's portrait: sympathetic on one level, but perhaps more interested in beer and career than in sustained resistance.
- (b) The question as to which story the candidate found particularly memorable was frequently misread as 'quels contes' as opposed to 'quel conte'. This inevitably led to a relatively superficial treatment of the stories chosen. Those who focused on one story, as directed, gave responses which varied greatly in detailed appreciation and credibility of choice. Whilst it was pleasing to read essays which showed thorough familiarity with the plot and characters of a particular story, few candidates were able to provide an appreciation of the stylistic features for which the writer is justly admired. Any illustrations of powerful use of language and/or economy of means were given full credit.

## Question 2

Voltaire: *Candide*

- (a) Most answers successfully located the extract in Venice and showed knowledge of circumstances leading to Candide's melancholy. Better answers gave details of Martin's assessment of Cacambo's unreliability and the poor prospects of a happy resolution. Answers concerning the mention of El Dorado generally expressed the right idea, with varying degrees of relevance and detail. The more superficial answers did not give due attention to the fact that El Dorado is a fictitious idealised society designed by Voltaire to highlight the problems of the real world.
- (b) There were relatively few answers on the humorous qualities of Voltaire's writing, and such as there were showed a limited knowledge and understanding of the subject. The question invited examples of Voltaire's satire and irony, directed at targets such as the philosophy of the Optimists, Rousseau's 'noble savage', religious hypocrisy, snobbery, the *picaresque* novel, Parisian society, etc. Most were able to demonstrate the comic juxtaposition of Pangloss's assertions and the events which disproved them. Beyond that, there was little by way of appreciation of Voltaire's ability to generate wry humour from all manner of human activity. Obvious examples to cite would have been the Baron's mechanically repeated response to Candide's declarations of intent to marry Cunégonde, the religious 'zeal' of the Dutch pastor's wife, or the episode of the Oreillons and their dietary inclinations. Perhaps the difficulty was that the candidates were not sure about the terms of reference, i.e. satire and irony.

## Question 3

Sartre: *Les Mains sales*

- (a) This question produced a majority of competent responses. Candidates seemed generally to understand Jessica's exasperation with Hugo's procrastination over carrying out his mission, and her scepticism about his ability to do so. With regard to the relationship between the two, comments were often limited to paraphrase or general observations about the lack of affection and understanding between them. Some invented a reason for this, such as a difference in social background, whereas few saw the disharmony as being intellectual. The third section posed no difficulty to those who really knew the text, with the result that many answers accurately described the political issues raised by the meeting. Answers varied, of course, in their level of detail and coherence of expression.
- (b) Answers to the essay question were, in many cases, accurate in general terms but lacking in detail. In view of the confrontations between the characters in the play, a thorough response should have analysed the scepticism of Slick and Georges towards Hugo's commitment, based on their gut instinct that he would never be capable of understanding their point of view. Similarly, essays which took a rather critical view of Hugo's behaviour towards the two men might profitably have examined Sartre's ideas about the barriers between social classes for which neither side could be held entirely responsible. Closer attention to the remark « c'est une question de peau » might have produced, in a good many cases, a more balanced account.

## Question 4

Giono: *Regain*

There were so few answers on this text that it is not possible to provide any comments which would be of use to Centres.

### Question 5

Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*

- (a) There were relatively few attempts at this question. Candidates showed some knowledge of the letters written by Cyrano to Roxane on behalf of Christian, and better answers mentioned the scene at the end of the play in which Cyrano is able to quote by heart the letter supposedly written by Christian from the battlefield. Answers were mostly sketchy, lacking the kind of detail and understanding required for a good mark.
- (b) Much the same can be said of the small number of responses to this question. Answers tended towards the justifiable conclusion that Roxane's losses outweighed the gain of acknowledging her feelings for Cyrano. Likewise, they felt that Cyrano's years of frustration and sense of inadequacy could not be made to seem worthwhile by the developments immediately preceding his death. The main weakness of these answers was their undue attention to episodes earlier in the play, as opposed to the use of this material to illustrate their commentary on the ending.

### Section 2

### Question 6

Bazin: *Vipère au poing*

- (a) Those who chose this question produced, on the whole, better answers than those who chose (b). The majority of candidates understood that a 'black and white' response did not do justice to the author's characterisation, and particularly to the narrator's self-awareness. Those who relied on a narrative account of Folcoche's cruelty in an attempt to justify the quotation fell well short of those who attempted to give a more balanced answer. It was necessary to give some credit to the decent adults. Better answers also saw that the key to this issue lay in the reprehensible behaviour of the children, whether acting as Folcoche's spy or going to horrifying lengths to reap revenge. It was necessary to see that the narrator himself is a flawed character, and by no means all answers conveyed this.
- (b) Candidates who attempted this question were all too content to narrate the sufferings of Brasse-Bouillon at the hands of his mother and/or the enjoyment he derived from thwarting her regime. An understanding of this novel can only be conveyed by referring to the narrator's account of himself at the end of the narrative. Whilst some credit could be given to those who recognised and illustrated his pain at the hands of mother and teachers, and also, to an extent, his amusement at the success of a number of his acts of retaliation, Examiners looked for a response to the outcome of all this: an embittered and warped individual whose personality has been permanently damaged by the experiences described in the narrative. The fact that he is painfully aware of this at the end of the novel was seldom given appropriate attention.

### Question 7

Camus: *L'Étranger*

- (a) There were all shades of response to this question. Those who landed firmly on one side or the other gave less convincing accounts than those who attempted a balanced response. It was, of course, preferable to focus on Meursault's rejection of hypocrisy and his preference for execution over submission to a morally bankrupt system than to catalogue his 'anti-social' behaviour and put it down to weakness. That said, only a minority of perceptive answers saw the 'heroism' as instinctive rather than combative, and the 'weakness' as his lack of engagement rather than his tendency to indulge in sensual pleasure. Thus, answers which congratulated him on his support for the social outcast Raymond or castigated him for smoking, drinking coffee and having sex, were only able to convey a limited understanding of the text. Some outstanding answers argued cogently that neither adjective is wholly appropriate to the character.
- (b) Candidates who take the same moral position as the lawyers, the jury or the chaplain cannot provide an adequate response to any question on this text. The predictable narrative accounts of the first part of the novel were followed, in some cases, by the necessary comment that Meursault's behaviour is interpreted by people with whom the reader is not invited to agree. A good mark was

only available to the few candidates who analysed the hypocrisy, false logic and judgements of those who concluded that Meursault was a threat.

**Question 8**

Radiguet: *Le Diable au corps*

- (a) There were two possible responses here: one could be justified by the text and the other could not. Consequently, those who laid the blame for Marthe's fate entirely at the feet of the narrator were not able to produce a convincing case. Most answers properly described the selfish actions of the narrator in his relentless quest for gratification. The quality of the answers depended simply on the amount of detail the candidate could offer to illustrate the young man's need for admiration and compliance. Better marks were reserved for those who saw, to a greater or lesser degree, that Marthe was under no obligation either to be seduced by an adolescent boy or to go on playing the role of the admiring and submissive 'mistress'.
- (b) Only very low number of candidates attempted this question, and no useful conclusions can be drawn from their answers.