

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/11
Drama and Poetry

Key messages

1. Learners should show evidence of literary analysis in discursive option **(a)** essays, as well as in passage-based option **(b)** questions.
2. Essays should include some form of contextualisation to support the learner's arguments.

General comments

This session, once again, responses were seen at every level of assessment, with some learners reaching the highest level on nearly every text on the paper. Some scripts were disadvantaged by rubric errors, most often because the learner had attempted more than the stipulated two questions or had answered two questions from the same section. Only a very few learners appeared to have time problems, causing the second essay to be either rushed or incomplete. The vast majority of learners followed the rubric accurately and with a clear balance between the two answers. The standard of written English was also at least satisfactory with all but a few learners adopting an appropriate style and register. Nearly every candidate was able to show at least a basic knowledge and understanding of two texts and many learners showed evidence of a real engagement with and enjoyment of them.

There are two specific issues to be addressed in this session:

1. Assessment Objective 2 from the Literature in English syllabus states that learners should 'analyse ways in which writers' choices of language, form and structure shape meanings and effects.' Learners attempting option **(b)** passage questions often showed evidence of meeting this Assessment Objective in their responses to the given passage. However, learners attempting option **(a)** questions, the discursive essay, also need to provide evidence that they are able to do this, by quoting or referring closely to specific moments in the text and considering the dramatic or poetic methods chosen by the writer. Learners may then explore the effects of those choices, showing how they support the arguments in their essays in response to the specific question.
2. Learners responding to option **(b)** passage questions, who are able to briefly place the passage within the wider work it is selected from, often write more focused and relevant answers. This is often, and possibly best, done at the start of the essay. With drama passages, learners should consider the significance of the passage to the play as a whole – this might be in terms of characterisation, plot or important revelations. In poetry answers, the context might be some aspect of the background to the poem, possibly biographical or historical, which is important to the learner's interpretation. Learners should be encouraged to consider this approach, as it will give a context to their interpretation of the passage itself, as well as providing evidence of knowledge of the text.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Drama

Question 1

ERROL JOHN: *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

This was the least popular drama text, with most learners choosing the **(b)** passage option.

(a) This was the least popular question in the drama section. Most learners had at least a basic knowledge of Rosa's part in the play. Weaker answers tended to summarise her relationships with Epf and Old Mack and her pregnancy. Better answers discussed her role in more detail, noting the 'significance of her pregnancy to the plot, especially Epf's determination to go to England,' as one learner noted. Other sound answers explored the contrast between 'her naivety and Mavis's practicality and experience,' as one essay suggested, with other answers noting the similarity between her situation and Sophia's. More successful answers developed these connections by considering John's methods of characterisation, especially language and action, noting, for example, that her 'softness of speech, contrasted to the hardness of Mavis, suggests she might turn out like Sophia in the end,' as one learner argued. Good answers often noted the progression in her characterisation from 'the simplicity noted by Sophia to the hardness that tries to reject Epf and settle for Old Mack,' though for some learners this development in her role was not convincing. Where such arguments were supported by close reference to the text and some awareness of John's dramatic methods, the answers did well.

(b) This was the more popular choice on this text. Nearly every learner was able to place the passage in context – the robbery at Old Mack's café. Weaker answers retold Charlie's narrative, often in detail, though with too little attention on the passage. Better answers linked the audience's previous knowledge to his revelations here to Sophia, with some suggesting he 'wastes yet another opportunity by his drunken stupidity,' though most learners were more sympathetic noting 'the irony of his theft being for a good cause, Esther's education,' as one commented. More competent responses analysed his relationship with Sophia, the 'genuine concern that each shows the other,' as one learner suggested. His remorse and awareness of his guilt were seen as positive attributes, though, according to some, 'caused by his reliance on drinking to cope with his sense of failure in his cricketing career.' Better answers looked closely at John's dramatic methods – Charlie's language, his tears of remorse, Sophia's unexpected understanding and Epf's concerned involvement were all well explored. Other successful answers looked at the dramatic action: for example, how Old Mack, through his words and deeds, is contrasted to the 'likeable Charlie.' Other responses noted the movement on the stage leading up to the 'dramatic entrance of the policeman and the lowering of the lights,' all of which 'present Charlie in a positive light while building a sense of tension and anxiety in the audience,' as one summarised it. Where such arguments were supported by close reference to the passage the answers did very well.

Question 2

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Measure for Measure*

This was the second most popular drama text, with a more or less even split between the two options.

(a) Nearly every learner was able to select relevant material with which to address the task, showing at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the text. Weaker answers often approached the question with a character-by-character structure, focusing appropriately on the Duke, Angelo and Isabella. At this level some answers slipped into summarising the events in which these characters were involved – Claudio's arrest and sentence, Angelo's hypocrisy and the Duke's machinations to keep Claudio alive – with too little focus on either the law or Shakespeare's presentation. Better answers, at least implicitly, were able to contrast their attitudes – Angelo's and Isabella's strictness with the Duke's laxity, for example. Competent answers developed such points into a consideration of Shakespeare's methods of characterisation, noting, for example, that 'all three of them change their attitude when faced with temptation – Angelo's lust, Isabella's desire to save her brother and the Duke's wish to act like a leader,' as one learner summarised it. Other competent answers considered the range of attitudes Shakespeare presents. The different social ranks, gender and age groups were all well contrasted and often clearly supported by close reference to the task. More successful answers analysed the language as well as the characters, with very good

contrasts made in some cases between Angelo's 'legalistic pomposity in his exchanges with Escalus and Isabella and his clear self-awareness in his soliloquies,' as one learner noted. Other good responses contrasted Lucio's 'coarse, though often appropriate language criticising the state and the law' with the more balanced words of Escalus. Very good answers looked at the dramatic effects of the clash between the different attitudes – notably Angelo and Isabella but also Lucio and the Duke. These were seen by some learners as the 'driving force of the plot,' often citing Claudio's acceptance of his wrongdoing but 'evident desire to stay alive' as indicative of the effect of the 'legal confusion on the ordinary citizen,' as one learner argued. The most successful essays developed these points through close reference to the text and a perceptive grasp of appropriate contexts, very often the court or writings of King James 1st.

(b) This was the slightly more popular option on this text. Nearly every learner had some knowledge and understanding of Claudio's situation and was able to place the passage in an appropriate context. Weaker answers often detailed the events leading to Claudio's imprisonment and were sometimes distracted into discussing Angelo and Isabella in too much detail, with a consequent loss of focus on the task and the passage. Basic answers were aware of the dramatic situation – the Duke's disguise and Isabella's rejection of Angelo's proposal, for example – and explored at least implicitly some of the ironies that Shakespeare presents. Better answers identified the emotional shifts in Claudio's reactions – 'from courage and acceptance of death to fear and desperation,' as one learner summarised it. More competent answers analysed how Claudio's emotional journey is presented by Shakespeare through dialogue and timing (for example, the arrival of Isabella) to shape audience sympathy and highlight his internal conflict. Good answers also explored the use of metaphor and rhetorical questions, with some considering the significance of Isabella's moral challenge and Claudio's moment of shame. In answers at this level, there was often a focus on the presentation of Claudio's 'attitude towards his impending death,' as one candidate wrote, often contrasted with Isabella's attitude towards his plight. Other good responses noted the 'persistent string of questions' that Claudio asks that have the effect of 'convincing himself to accept his death' while at the same time pleading with Isabella for her intercession, 'clear proof of his bewildered mental state,' according to one learner. Many candidates at this level examined Shakespeare's methods in detail, for example the macabre simile at lines 60 – 61, often interpreting it as the strongest suggestion that 'Claudio has become resigned to die and Shakespeare will let him during the course of the play,' as one essay suggested. Others remembered the setting and staging, often discussing the 'disguised and hidden duke overhearing their private talk,' which for some learners was 'symbolic of his shadowy role in Claudio's experiences throughout the play.' Where such arguments were supported by close reference to the passage and the wider text the responses did very well.

Question 3

JOHN WEBSTER: *The Duchess of Malfi*

This was a minority choice, with a more or less even split between the two options.

(a) Most of the responses were able to select relevant points from the text with which to address the task. Weaker responses summarised the relationship between the Duchess and Antonio often in detail. Basic answers, at least implicitly, had some understanding of their attitudes to marriage, 'her defiant and determined focus on getting her man, contrasting with his fear and reticence,' as one learner noted. Answers at this level tended to focus on the characters, rather than Webster's portrayal of attitudes to marriage. More competent answers did explore the different attitudes more closely, with some sound discussions of the differing responses from the Cardinal and Ferdinand to news of the Duchess's marriage. Better answers considered the effects of these differences, often developing arguments by referring to contextual matters such as contemporary attitudes to women and the 'public nature of marital decisions, seen as significant both politically and socially,' as one learner suggested. Such ideas were developed by analysing the contrasts created by Webster through the 'private nature of the Duchess's decision turning into the public tragedy of her murder and Bosola's subsequent revenge,' as one candidate wrote. Very good answers argued that the different attitudes to marriage were fundamental to the 'play's conflicts and hence its structure,' though for some learners, marriage was 'a euphemism for sexual desire,' and the Duchess's decision to marry Antonio was seen 'as a defensive measure to counter the interference of her brothers,' as one learner argued. Very good responses supported their arguments with close reference to the text and a perceptive awareness of Webster's dramatic methods, particularly his poetic language and use of setting and action.

(b) This was the slightly less popular choice on the text. Weak answers were unsure of the context and situation at this point in the play, for example, misreading Bosola's cynicism as sincerity and a desire to serve his superior. Basic answers often summarised Bosola's role and character in the play generally, with only intermittent focus on the passage itself. Better answers at this level were aware of its significance in terms of Bosola's (and the Duchess's) futures, noting that 'his acceptance of the job is the first step towards the death of the Duchess, her family and Bosola himself,' as one learner suggested. More competent responses displayed sound understanding of Bosola's sarcasm, moral conflict, and reluctant complicity, with some learners linking this to his presentation elsewhere in the play. Stronger answers explored the power dynamics between the two men, aware of the social context and in some cases of the 'tradition of the malcontent,' as one essay put it. Very good responses were alive to Webster's dramatic methods, for example Bosola's use of metaphor and irony, while others noted how Webster creates 'dramatic tension in Bosola's conflicting ambition and integrity,' as one essay argued. Candidates at this level often commented on Webster's use of language, satirical tone and the imagery of corruption and moral decay, which for some learners were 'typical of the perverse atmosphere of the play generally.' Answers at this level were confident in linking Bosola's characterisation here to the wider text, often supporting arguments with apposite quotation and perceptive analysis of the effects of Webster's choices.

Question 4

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

(a) Nearly every response chose relevant material with which to address the task. Weaker answers summarised a selection of the relationships often in accurate detail, most commonly Maggie and Brick and Big Mama and Big Daddy. Better answers at this level had some basic ideas of the changes in these relationships, such as the effects of Maggie's liaison with Skipper and Big Daddy's cancer. More competent responses considered how Williams explores the impact of these events on the relationships, with nearly all learners arguing that it was negative and, in some cases, supporting this view with reference to appropriate biographical contexts. Sound answers also looked at a wider range of relationships, parents and children, brothers, and, though rarely, sisters-in-law. Textual support was nearly always appropriate at this level and, at least implicitly, contrasts between the relationships were made, as well as some appreciation of Williams's dramatic methods. As one learner summarised it, 'it is the changes he creates on stage that leads to the conflicts that in turn leads to the drama.' More successful answers analysed Williams's methods in detail, particularly his use of stage directions 'as a tool of characterisation,' as one essay noted, and 'his use of language ranging from Maggie's flippant anxiety to Big Daddy's coarseness and Brick's disengagement.' Stronger answers were comfortable in discussing the dramatic action, such as the slapping of the child, as well as Williams's use of symbolic props such as Brick's crutch ('a very sharp symbol of the changes in him and therefore his marriage') and the legal briefcase ('which symbolised how Gooper's role in the family and his relationship with his parents had changed'). Very good answers supported such arguments with close analysis of key moments in the play, with awareness of appropriate contexts, but directly considering 'how Williams by his exploration of the effects of changing relationships creates an engrossing drama.'

(b) This question was the most popular on the paper. Nearly every learner had at least a basic knowledge of the situation and offered, at least implicitly, an appropriate context, often referring to Big Daddy's 'false diagnosis of a spastic colon, instead of cancer.' Most answers discussed Big Daddy's mood and attitudes here, particularly towards Big Mama. Some learners considered his 'disgust of her as typical of males of the period,' with more successful answers offering appropriate contexts in support. Other answers at this level had some understanding of the tensions in the family, and how 'by the discreet withdrawal of the rest of the family, Williams indicates Big Daddy's outburst is neither unusual nor unexpected,' as one learner argued. More competent responses considered some of the dramatic methods, particularly the use of stage directions and their effects, as well as Williams's choice of language, which 'emphasises Big Daddy's coarseness as well as Big Mama's genuine shock at his behaviour,' as one learner saw it. Other sound answers argued that Big Daddy is 'revealing his vulnerability here, in his fear of death or even becoming secondary to Big Mama,' which better answers developed by reference to the wider text, most often his conversation with Brick. Good answers were alive to the nuances of Williams's choices: the repetition of 'dying', the emphasis on Big Mama's size, the effect of the fireworks and Big Daddy's 'selfish use of I and me,' were all popular points of analysis. Very good answers structured such analysis with apposite references to both passage and wider text, with supporting contextual points well integrated into the arguments, but always closely focused on the range of Williams's dramatic methods and, crucially, their effects on the audience.

Section B: Poetry

Question 5

MAYA ANGELOU: *And Still I Rise*

This was a popular choice in this session, with the large majority choosing the passage (b) question.

(a) Nearly every learner selected appropriate poems with which to address the task, though some weaker answers struggled because of a restricted knowledge of the text. Other weaker answers discussed more than the required two poems with a consequent lack of depth in the interpretation and the analysis. Popular combinations were *Phenomenal Woman* with *Men*, *Remembrance* with *Woman Work*, and *A Kind of Love* with *Still I Rise* or *Country Lover*. Basic answers tended to offer paraphrases of the poems, with general comments about empowerment or victimhood, often lacking close textual support or sufficient appreciation of Angelou's poetic methods. As learners showed more understanding of some of Angelou's key themes such as race, empowerment and objectification, and were able to link them to her presentation of different attitudes to sex, so the answers became more successful. Competent responses discussed how sex 'intersects with power, race, and identity in Angelou's poetic voice,' as one learner summarised it. Stronger responses examined how Angelou reclaims sexual agency, celebrates female desire, and critiques exploitative or objectifying male attitudes. These responses included confident discussions of voice, tone and metaphor, as well as references to Angelou's social and historical context. For example, one learner suggested that in *Still I Rise*, 'the image of "diamonds at the meeting of my thighs" is bold and celebratory, suggesting a self-possessed and unapologetic embrace of her sensuality and sexuality, even in the face of oppression.' Other very good responses analysed tone, voice and rhetorical strategies (repetition, sensual imagery and biblical allusions were all perceptively discussed). Answers at this level were always confident in knowledge of the poems and understanding of Angelou's poetic concerns. Where such responses also offered perceptive insights into her poetic methods and their effects, the answers did very well.

(b) This was the second most popular question in the poetry section. Weak answers offered a range of misinterpretations, assuming Bailey to be a sister, a friend, a lover, or 'someone' rather than Angelou's brother. This reflected a lack of knowledge of the poem and its context, suggestive of discussing the poem as an unseen. This led to surface-level commentaries such as 'the speaker is sad' with no textual support or analysis. Basic answers recognised the nature of the relationship, often with some awareness of Angelou's biography, which led to more convincing interpretations. At this level, learners tended to ignore poetic methods and focused on paraphrasing the content. Answers which were straightforward or above always understood the familial bond between speaker and Bailey and explored how it was 'rooted in trauma, memory, and resilience,' as one learner suggested. More competent responses analysed some of Angelou's poetic methods, particularly her language choices and use of imagery such as 'red rings/Of blood and loneliness' and mythological and biblical references (Sheba, Eve, Lilith). A more confident understanding of these choices enabled learners to offer a developed and nuanced interpretation of the relationship. Stronger candidates recognised the complex emotional tones – ranging from love and loss to frustration and longing – and analysed a range of poetic methods to support their more perceptive responses to the poem, including verse form and poetic rhythms showing how these techniques shaped the speaker's voice and attitude to her brother. Responses at this level had a firm grasp of the contexts to support their interpretations, with appropriate references made to the wider text and Angelou's typical poetic concerns.

Question 6

SIMON ARMITAGE: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

This was the least popular poetry text in this session, with the majority of learners choosing the passage (b) question.

(a) Nearly every response had at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the text. Weaker responses tended to recount the story or describe deception as a theme without, for example, clearly connecting it to elements such as character development, reader response, or Gawain's moral journey. Better answers at a basic level selected some of the key moments of deception in the text – most often Bertilak's dual role, the attempted seduction of Gawain by his wife and the

green girdle – and explained how they were important in the poem. More competent responses developed this approach linking into ‘the knightly codes of chivalry and honour,’ with some responses supporting their points with contextual references, as well as apposite quotations. Stronger answers explored how Armitage presents ‘Gawain’s internal conflict through his self-deception over the girdle, which challenges his chivalric ideals,’ as one learner summarised it. This was further developed in some essays into recognising how ‘the real deception in the poem is the codes of chivalry, which Armitage presents to be flawed,’ as one essay suggested. At this level there was some perceptive discussion of Armitage’s methods, such as narrative voice, structure and language, particularly the use of ‘green’, variously interpreted as a sign of growth and renewal or symbolic of witchcraft and evil. Other strong responses considered Armitage’s use of irony and courtly romance conventions. There were only a few responses that were confident in discussing Armitage’s alliterative verse, which was a limiting factor in otherwise confident essays. Those learners who could discuss Armitage’s poetic methods with insight and appropriate textual support did very well.

(b) Most responses had sufficient knowledge and understanding of the text to discuss the significance of this exchange to the presentation of the relationship as well as the text more generally. Weaker responses, with less secure knowledge tended to treat the interaction as a light-hearted exchange without deeper understanding or sufficient grasp of the context. Basic answers were able to discuss the wager and also the role of the lady with some understanding. More competent responses considered the Lord’s characterisation either as ‘proud, brave and sociable’ or a ‘king-like warrior and hunter’ or ‘a boastful and exuberant host.’ Gawain’s characterisation was often seen as careful, judicious, prudent, ‘a chivalric knight but a shrewd one,’ as one learner suggested, though for some ‘the lord’s joviality contrasts with Gawain’s growing discomfort,’ according to another. Stronger answers considered Armitage’s methods and concerns in detail, often analysing the symbolic value of exchanged gifts and kisses. Other responses at this level engaged with diction (‘game’, ‘wager’ and ‘gain’) to highlight the moral ambiguity of the relationship. Very good responses explored the performative politeness between the two men, and underlying tension thereby created. At this level there was often confident, even perceptive, analysis of Armitage’s alliterative verse and how he uses it to enhance the ‘overt friendliness and underlying conflict between the two men,’ as one learner suggested. Where such interpretations were supported by quotation from the passage and some awareness of the context, the answers did very well.

Question 7

WILLIAM BLAKE: Selected Poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

This was a minority choice of text with the large majority of learners choosing the passage (b) question.

(a) There were only a small number of responses seen on this question. Nearly every learner selected relevant poems with which to address the question and most learners considered animals, with *The Lamb* and *The Tyger* being very popular choices. Other learners saw humans as ‘living creatures’ with *London*, the two chimney sweeper poems and *The School Boy* all popular choices. Weaker answers tended to interpret animals literally, without considering their possible symbolic depth and often the poem selections limited comparative insight or development of Blake’s contrasting concerns in the innocence and experience sections. Better answers at this level knew the poems well and could explore some of Blake’s concerns, such as his social criticisms or his presentation of religion and education. More competent responses were aware of the way Blake used animals as symbols for divine, moral, or natural states, with some learners able to reference Blake’s belief in dualities and link this with support from the innocence and experience poems. Stronger essays analysed their chosen poems, often with perceptive awareness of Blake’s use of verse-form and ‘simple but loaded diction,’ as one learner suggested. Where such responses supported their ideas with apposite quotation and appropriate contextual references, the answers did very well.

(b) This question was much more popular than the discursive essay question on Blake. Candidates were asked to compare Blake’s presentation of the little boy in the poems *The Little Boy Lost* and *The Little Boy Found*. At the outset of the marking standardisation process it was noted that, while it is standard for (b) questions to be set on a single poem, on this occasion we had set two. This was a deliberate decision. The poems *The Little Boy Lost* and *The Little Boy Found* are presented sequentially in the selected edition of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and it was thought that these relatively brief poems would most likely be taught as a pair. Moreover, the ways in which they may be considered as either two distinct pieces or a single unified whole is a lively source of discussion within the academic discourse. However, because this

does not align with the guidance in the syllabus document and therefore may not have matched candidates' expectations, we issued special marking instructions to examiners for the marking of **Question 7(b)**. Examiners were instructed first, to mark the question according to standard procedures. Then, where the mark awarded for **7(b)** was lower than the mark awarded to the candidate's Section A essay, **7(b)** was given an uplift in marks such that it matched the mark given to Section A. The candidate's total mark therefore became exactly double their mark for Section A. The original mark for **7(b)** was noted in a comments box which appears on the annotated script. In this way, we ensured that no candidate would be disadvantaged by the difference between this question and the guidance given in the syllabus document.

Very weak answers seemed unsure of the meaning of the poems, offering personal, but ultimately assertive interpretations, as though responding to unseen poems. Basic responses did have appropriate knowledge and understanding and often found the comparison of the poems a useful structural tool in shaping their interpretations. These were often spiritual or religious, though some learners more basically saw both poems as straightforward stories of parental neglect. More competent answers recognised the symbolic role of the father (both human and divine), the spiritual journey motif, and the simplicity of diction reflecting a child's voice, with many responses exploring the dark/light contrasts and Blake's presentation of children generally. Stronger answers analysed Blake's poetic methods, noting, for example, the use of the 'child's voice in the first poem to emphasise the vulnerability and abandonment,' while other responses saw 'the symbolic power of God returning the child to its mother.' Very good answers also explored Blake's use of rhythm, enjambment, setting and voice, often supporting the analysis with telling reference to the poems. At this level learners were confident in exploring of Blake's larger themes of innocence, experience and spiritual abandonment, supporting points with references to wider text and appropriate historical contexts.

Question 8

Songs of Ourselves, Volume 2

This was the most popular poetry text in this session but the vast majority of learners who studied it chose the **(b)** passage question.

(a) This was the least popular poetry question. Most learners selected relevant poems with which to address the task, with popular choices being *In the Park*, *Stabat Mater*, *Surplus Value*, *Growing Old* and *Father Returning Home*. Weaker answers summarised their chosen poems or paraphrased them, with little focus on the terms of the task. Some basic answers selected key elements of the poems to discuss, including the way that regret is conveyed through reflection on either lost time or unspoken emotions or strained relationships. Learners who selected more thoughtful pairings to contrast personal and social regret, for example, were able to show a more straightforward understanding of the poets' concerns. Competent answers developed such points by considering some poetic methods, particularly language, imagery and tone, with stronger responses at this level contrasting the poems by judicious quotation. Good responses integrated close textual analysis with emotional and psychological insights, often supporting interpretations with carefully selected contextual points and developing arguments with insight and perception.

(b) This was the most popular poetry question in this session. Weaker answers struggled with some of the references to education and some of the imagery, suggesting they were responding to an unseen poem. Basic responses did have some knowledge and understanding of the poem, but at times offered opinions more generally on Singapore education and 'Tiger' mums, rather than focusing on the given poem. Personal response at this level varied between seeing the mother as abusive and some sort of monster to characterising the boy as 'lazy and unappreciative of the opportunities he is being given.' Better answers at this level did see the dual perspective and 'the significance of social pressures reflected through the mother's actions,' as one learner suggested. More competent responses developed such ideas by considering some aspects of Yap's poetic methods – his use of voice, the speaker's perspective and the switch to the boy's reactions. Language and imagery were often well explored and as learners showed awareness of the imagery drawn from education and music so did the responses become more successful. For example, some responses analysed word play ('adagio' and 'consonant-vowel figure') to show the emotional cost and explore how Yap undermines the mother's own education. Repetition, punctuation and structure were all well analysed at this level, with the strongest responses showing a perceptive grasp of the effects of Yap's choices, such as the predator-prey imagery which 'so clearly evokes the tone and nature of the relationship,' as one learner argued. Other very good responses

explored the 'underlying ironic tone conveying the sadness of such a flawed relationship between mother and son,' as one learner argued. At this level, contextual knowledge was well integrated into the arguments, with a number of learners wondering if Yap was the boy in the poem and 'hence why the tone is so poignant and bitter.'

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

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Key messages

1. Learners should show evidence of literary analysis in discursive option **(a)** essays, as well as in passage-based option **(b)** questions.
2. Essays should include some form of contextualisation to support the learner's arguments.

General comments

This session, once again, responses were seen at every level of assessment, with some learners reaching the highest level on nearly every text on the paper. Some scripts were disadvantaged by rubric errors, most often because the learner had attempted more than the stipulated two questions or had answered two questions from the same section. Only a very few learners appeared to have time problems, causing the second essay to be either rushed or incomplete. The vast majority of learners followed the rubric accurately and with a clear balance between the two answers. The standard of written English was also at least satisfactory with all but a few learners adopting an appropriate style and register. Nearly every candidate was able to show at least a basic knowledge and understanding of two texts and many learners showed evidence of a real engagement with and enjoyment of them.

There are two specific issues to be addressed in this session:

1. Assessment Objective 2 from the Literature in English syllabus states that learners should 'analyse ways in which writers' choices of language, form and structure shape meanings and effects.' Learners attempting option **(b)** passage questions often showed evidence of meeting this Assessment Objective in their responses to the given passage. However, learners attempting option **(a)** questions, the discursive essay, also need to provide evidence that they are able to do this, by quoting or referring closely to specific moments in the text and considering the dramatic or poetic methods chosen by the writer. Learners may then explore the effects of those choices, showing how they support the arguments in their essays in response to the specific question.
2. Learners responding to option **(b)** passage questions, who are able to briefly place the passage within the wider work it is selected from, often write more focused and relevant answers. This is often, and possibly best, done at the start of the essay. With drama passages, learners should consider the significance of the passage to the play as a whole – this might be in terms of characterisation, plot or important revelations. In poetry answers, the context might be some aspect of the background to the poem, possibly biographical or historical, which is important to the learner's interpretation. Learners should be encouraged to consider this approach, as it will give a context to their interpretation of the passage itself, as well as providing evidence of knowledge of the text.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Drama

Question 1

ERROL JOHN: *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

This was a minority choice of text with most learners choosing the **(b)** passage option.

(a) There were only a very few responses to this question and nearly every learner had at least a basic knowledge of the text on which to base their answer. Weaker answers structured their essays by treating different characters in turn, with Esther, Charlie, Sophia and Epf all popular choices. At this level learners summarised what each of the characters did in the play, with success dependent on how well relevant material was selected. Better answers at this level at least implicitly drew contrasts between, for example, Epf's 'positive but rather fanciful notions about education,' and 'Charlie's practical approach to funding it by stealing,' as one essay summarised it. The very few essays that reached competence often had a more inclusive approach to 'education', with one learner suggesting that 'Charlie's theft in order to support his daughter was a direct result of him learning in his cricket career that life is not fair.' Another sound argument was that Mavis is 'the most educated of all of the characters for she has learnt how to manipulate those around her to get what she wants.' These sound arguments were supported by direct reference to the text but did not reach higher as there was almost no awareness of John's dramatic methods with which to develop the responses.

(b) This was the more popular option on *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*. Most learners had at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the relationships, though weaker answers struggled with some of the connections, so that, for example, Sophia was Rosa's mother or auntie or even lover in some responses. Basic answers dealt with each relationship in turn, with some answers giving too much background context and losing focus on the passage. A more selective approach often led to straightforward answers, with some awareness of the significance, for example, of Rosa's tears at this point in the play. Some sound answers discussed the development of Sophia's attitude to Charlie here, finding it 'odd that when he is most in the wrong, she becomes the supportive and appreciative wife,' as one argued. The very few stronger answers considered some of John's dramatic methods noting for example his use of stage action (Esther running off stage and Rosa's tears) and dramatic devices such as the thunder 'which enhances the pathos of the exchange between Rosa and Sophia.'

Language was at least implicitly considered, although with little awareness of the effects of John's choices.

Question 2

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Measure for Measure*

This was a minority choice of text in this session, with most learners choosing the (b) passage question.

(a) Nearly every response chose relevant material with which to address the task, with most essays structuring responses around different characters. Weaker responses retold the narratives of their selected characters often in detail, though not always convincingly on the topic. Angelo, Claudio and Isabella were popular choices. Learners who contrasted them with Lucio and more minor characters such as Pompey and Mistress Overdone were more successful. More competent answers saw how Shakespeare contrasted Claudio with Angelo, whose 'hypocrisy is evident in giving way to lust and committing the same criminal act that has ensnared Claudio,' as one learner argued. More successful answers developed such character points into a consideration of Shakespeare's dramatic methods, such as the settings and particularly Angelo's soliloquies 'in which the effects of lust on a serious man are made evident,' as one essay argued. At this level, there was some clear understanding of how lust and desire are of significance to plot development, as well as awareness of 'the comic undercutting of the serious issues through the brothels and Lucio's humorous commentaries,' as one response suggested. Strong answers saw lust and desire as separate motivations in the play, for 'though Angelo's lust for Isabella creates the conflict and much of the plot, it is the Duke's desire for her that brings about the "happy" ending,' as one successful essay argued. Some essays saw a similar distinction in Claudio's situation 'for though his lust got him into trouble, his desire for life is what motivates Isabella and the Duke to find a solution.' Answers which supported such arguments with appropriate references to the text and some understanding of dramatic context often performed very well.

(b) This was the more popular question on *Measure for Measure*. Weaker answers were unsure of the context, with, for example, some learners thinking Claudio had been executed already or not understanding the nature of the relationships. More basic responses had sufficient knowledge to consider the significance of the action at this point in the play, with learners at every level united in the 'shock or even disgust at the way the Duke lies to Isabella about her brother,' which was seen as 'unnecessarily cruel and harsh, when he could have put all things right easily,' as one learner

suggested. Some learners did argue that deception was a necessary aspect of justice, 'manifested here by the Duke maintaining his disguise to manipulate the other characters to achieve the most just outcomes possible (the "unmasking" and sanctioning of Angelo, freeing Claudio),' as one learner put it. Other learners were less charitable and thought he wanted to 'facilitate his aspirations of securing a marriage with Isabella'. One candidate assessed the extract's central dialogue as a deliberate ploy by the Duke to 'stir her [Isabella's] anger' by eschewing her usual 'calm femininity' and eventually revealing the true opinion of the 'most damned Angelo' and being prompted to participate in the forthcoming bed trick to ensnare him. Competent answers also considered Lucio's role; 'his inability to see through the Duke's disguise creates dramatic irony and comedy as he slanders him again,' but others found him 'sympathetic and consoling, unlike his usual callous character.' Strong answers kept the audience firmly in mind and often linked this passage into other key moments in the play, exploring how the audience's view of, for example, the Duke 'might well be subject to serious reconsideration,' as one learner put it. Other strong answers analysed some of Shakespeare's dramatic methods closely, particularly his use of dramatic action, exits and entrances and language, with Isabella's violent words often being well discussed. Very good responses noted how this scene is 'preparing the audience for the final denouement and unveiling of the disguised Duke, by setting up Angelo, Isabella and Lucio for dramatic shocks,' as one learner summarised it. Answers at this level always paid close attention to the detail of the passage and the wording of the question.

Question 3

JOHN WEBSTER: *The Duchess of Malfi*

This was the least popular drama text in this session, with the majority of learners choosing the (b) passage option.

(a) There were too few responses to this question to be able to make a general comment on performance.

(b) Of the few responses seen on this question, nearly all of them had sufficient knowledge of the text to be able to discuss the significance of this exchange between the Duchess and Antonio. Weaker answers were unsure of some of the key details, such as the reference to the Duchess's brothers, for example, limiting the effectiveness of any commentary. Basic answers did explore the relationship, though were distracted into summarising the 'tragic outcomes for them and their children,' as one essay put it. Better answers at this level discussed the 'unusual power dynamics between them,' with some seeing the Duchess as 'a protofeminist' and often sympathetic to Antonio's reticence. More competent responses considered Webster's methods of characterisation, analysing how he creates the 'spirit of greatness' in the Duchess and 'Antonio's cautious, overwhelmed reactions,' as one learner suggested. Stronger answers considered the language in detail, analysing, for example, Webster's use of irony to 'undermine this happy event with a tangible sense of foreboding,' as one essay argued. Cariola's role in creating this tension was only discussed by a very few responses, but often to telling effect, especially where the points were supported by close reference to the passage and the text.

Question 4

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

This was the most popular drama text, with most learners choosing the (b) passage question.

(a) Nearly every learner was able to select relevant parts of the play with which to address the task. Weaker answers often had a secure basic knowledge of the text and some understanding of Williams's concerns. Success at this level was determined by how well the chosen material was shaped to the specifics of the task. Essays were most commonly structured around either the characters or their relationships, with Brick and Maggie the most popular focus, followed by Big Daddy and Big Mama. Weaker answers summarised the relationships and what happened to the characters with only passing references to 'secrets', whereas more secure basic and straightforward responses recognised that 'at the heart of each marriage and each character there is a dark secret,' as one learner noted. Most essays referred to Brick's shadowy past with Skipper and Maggie's entanglement with the two men. One noted that even 'as he complains about mendacity to his father, he keeps Maggie's affair with Skipper to himself.' Big Daddy's 'spastic colon' and the secret of his cancer were discussed in nearly every essay. Better answers explored

the dramatic effects of this ‘secret’ with strong answers alive to the dramatic irony it creates. Other responses explored ‘the shock of Brick deliberately revealing the truth to Big Daddy,’ and how Williams uses this to characterise both men. More competent answers had a secure engagement with ‘keeping secrets’, usually in the context of deeply conservative values in 1950s American society and the illusionary ‘perfect’ family. Thematic approaches to the task often touched on ‘appearance vs reality’ and, more aptly, mendacity and truth, with some appropriate contextual points made about ‘Southern values.’ Stronger answers were more wide ranging in their approach, with Gooper and Mae as well as the Reverend Tooker all seen as ‘hypocritical in the way they keep the secret of their desire for a share of Big Daddy’s fortune,’ as one learner argued. Answers at this level always considered Williams’s dramatic methods – the setting of the bedroom, for example, showing how ‘there could be no secrets in this family,’ citing Mae’s ‘sneaking’ and ‘spying’. Some learners focused effectively on props, for example, Brick’s crutch and the liquor cabinet, as ‘metaphoric clues in relation to his hidden homosexual inclinations,’ as one learner argued. Very strong answers analysed some of Williams’s use of plastic theatre and very commonly his use of stage directions, ‘which mean that there are no secrets from the audience and the actors,’ as one learner suggested, ‘because of Williams’ auto-diegetic presence through narrative interjection.’ Where such arguments were supported by close reference to the text and appropriate contextual points, the essays always did very well.

(b) This was the more popular choice on this text and nearly every answer had interesting points to discuss about the family party. Many candidates noted the significance of the birthday party setting as a ‘celebration of life against the looming notion of Big Daddy’s death,’ as one learner put it, while others saw ‘the family party setting as being presented as an outlet for the competition to win the inheritance,’ as another learner suggested. The extensive use of stage directions throughout the passage was used widely by nearly all learners as they engaged with Williams’s methods, and more competent responses recognised it as ‘part of his approach to characterisation and build-up of tension,’ as one learner put it. More competent learners often found evidence for ‘proving the Pollitt family is dysfunctional’, as one essay suggested. For example, for one candidate, ‘Gooper’s snarky, mocking remark “Look at Brick put it down!” is an ill-disguised attempt to denigrate his favoured brother in front of both parents, especially,’ the learner went on, ‘considering Gooper’s earlier attempt at bragging that he and Mae got the Hi-Fi with “three speakers” as a third anniversary gift for Brick and Maggie.’ Stronger responses noted how dramatic irony is immediately established by Big Daddy’s question directed to Rev. Tooker about ‘this talk about memorials,’ which some saw as ‘clearly establishing the dark undertones of the party to celebrate BD’s birthday.’ Other strong responses analysed the characterisation in detail: Big Daddy was ‘overbearing and dominating’ (citing the stage direction ‘*Almost instant silence*’) and ‘blatantly rude as he jokes at Big Mama’s expense.’ She was seen sympathetically; ‘her loudest laughs and attempts to “pick up or fuss with something” do not cover the hurt of her husband’s mean-spirited comments,’ as one learner argued. There were some perceptive observations about the nuances of these stage directions, such as one candidate noting the significance of Big Daddy’s instruction to silence the console gifted by Mae and Gooper, indicating his silencing of their attempts at winning his favour. Very good answers analysed some Williams’s language and imagery choices. For example, ‘the symbolism in Big Mama’s black and white dress mimics the dramatic irony of the family party itself, a celebration of life for someone dying.’ Other very good answers considered the animal imagery, often linking it to the wider text. The ‘great aviary’, for example, led some learners to Maggie’s comment about ‘sharing the same cage.’ Discussing the effects of such connections was a hallmark of the strongest answers.

Section B: Poetry

Question 5

MAYA ANGELOU: *And Still I Rise*

This was the second most popular poetry text, with most learners choosing the **(b)** passage option.

(a) There were only a small number of responses seen to this question. Most learners chose relevant poems, with popular combinations being *Through the Inner City to the Suburbs/Still I Rise*, *My Arkansas/Woman Work* and *Country Lover/Remembrance*. Weaker responses summarised the content of the poems, often with only implicit awareness of the settings. Success at this level was determined by the comparison and how well it was developed. More competent answers had the settings as the main focus, often showing sound understanding of how the setting is an ‘integral part of how Angelou creates a mood in her poems,’ as one learner suggested. At this level there

was an appreciation that the setting 'might be implicit, as in *Still I Rise* where the slave farm is the base from which the resilience of the black community develops,' as one learner put it. Stronger answers explored the way Angelou uses settings to 'celebrate black culture and vitality,' though others, for example, analysed some of the details in *My Arkansas* that 'create the brooding and ominous tone through the red earth and the poplar trees,' as one essay noted. The most successful answers analysed Angelou's poetic methods in detail, showing how her choice of setting was 'integrated with the rhythms and language to create effects.' Answers at this level were confident in knowledge and understanding of the poems and were able to integrate comparisons, as well as appropriate contexts, into a seamless argument.

(b) Most answers had at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the poem. A few very weak responses struggled with some of the language and references and appeared to be writing about an unseen poem. More basic responses often paraphrased the poem, with successful responses at this level recognising it was 'about the black experience and poverty,' as one learner put it. Answers became straightforward as they offered some appreciation of Angelou's poetic methods, for example the 'chant-like quality of the rhythm,' and 'the musical, bluesy sounds,' as one learner noted. Competent answers developed such ideas into exploring the tone of the poem, variously considered defiant, threatening, hopeful and determined. This led some learners into considering Angelou's purposes in detail, with some good analysis of her use of the 'racist and sinister past to suggest a different sort of future,' as one learner summarised. Very good responses explored the contrasts between the 'musical and dance like qualities so typical of black culture and the destructive racist white attitudes,' as one learner argued. At this level the full range of Angelou's poetic methods was analysed with apposite quotation and appropriate contextualisation. Where the essay also considered the effects of her poetic choices the answers did very well.

Question 6

SIMON ARMITAGE: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

This was the least popular poetry text in this session.

(a) There were too few responses to this question to be able to make a general comment on performance.

(b) There were only a small number of responses to this question. Most responses had at least a basic knowledge of the text and were able to give a broad context to the passage. Learners often saw the women as 'a way to test Gawain's virtue and reveal his flaws,' as one essay suggested, though others were concerned at the portrayal of the older lady 'as Gawain, in describing her with such vulgarity, lowers our expectations of him,' as one learner argued. More competent responses noted that the women 'are described from an omniscient viewpoint, through Gawain's eyes, implying the descriptions are what he thinks,' as one essay put it. Better answers were able to give a clear and precise context, explaining the significance of the women, in terms of their part in the narrative generally. The few stronger responses did look at some elements of Armitage's poetic methods such as 'the colour imagery and its connotations of purity and chastity, which will become rather ironic,' as one learner suggested. Others considered the language in detail, noting, for example, how 'the contrast between the descriptions of the two enhances the beauty of the Lord's wife, making Gawain's test all the more challenging.' Only a very few learners were confident enough to consider Armitage's alliterative verse and its complex rhythms, but these essays were very successful, especially if supported by integrated contextual references.

Question 7

WILLIAM BLAKE: Selected Poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

This was a minority choice in this session with most learners offering the (b) passage option.

(a) There were only a small number of responses seen to this question. Nearly every response was able to select two relevant poems with which to address the task. Popular choices were *The Tyger*, *The Lamb*, *The Little Boy Lost*, *The Little Boy Found* and *The Shepherd*. Basic responses paraphrased their selected poems, often in detail, with success determined by how well the summaries were shaped to the demands of the task. At this level, God was a 'positive force, though His church and his ministers were not,' as one learner put it. More competent responses selected poems that enabled them to contrast different sides of God's presentation, from the

'violent and strength of the tiger to the goodness and kindness of the shepherd,' as one learner summarised it. Essays at this level did better the more they could focus on Blake's style – his use of 'contrasting verse forms' and 'evocative language', for example. Stronger essays developed these points with close analysis that led to a careful consideration of the effects of the presentation. Where such responses included appropriate contextual references – Blake's attitudes to organised religion, for example – the answers did well.

(b) This was the more popular choice on this text. A few very weak answers approached it as an unseen, with only a generalised and restricted knowledge of the poem. More basic responses had appropriate knowledge and some understanding of the poem's meaning. Answers at this level tended to either paraphrase the poem or summarise some of Blake's concerns generally, notably the innocence of childhood and the 'wickedness of organised education,' as one learner styled it. More successful answers did look at some aspects of Blake's style, particularly the 'simple verse form, like a nursery rhyme,' and his use of the child's voice to 'create pathos,' as one essay suggested. Straightforward responses were able to develop such ideas by shaping them to the task, Blake's presentation, and supporting points with appropriate quotation. Competent answers focused on the detail of the poem, exploring the variety of Blake's concerns: nature, children, education, innocence and experience were popular discussion points. As these answers showed more confidence in considering Blake's style so they became more successful. For example, 'he presents a monologue through the voice on an 18th century English schoolboy who longs for the simplicity of childhood while struggling under a brutal and exploitative school system that strips him of joyfulness, youth and opportunity for genuine self-expression,' as one confident learner argued. Other strong responses noted 'Blake's powerful use of auditory diction and symbolic imagery' which reveals 'the disturbing and unjust experiences of the boy and the illusory nature of childhood,' and enables Blake to 'expose the lasting damage social institutions have.' Answers at this level consider a variety of poetic methods as well as imagery and verse form. Symbolism, especially the caged birds, and enjambement which in 'the final stanza shows desperation'. Answers which developed the analysis by considering the effects of Blake's choices did very well, especially where the points made were supported by appropriate quotations, links to the wider text and apposite contextualisation.

Question 8

Songs of Ourselves, Volume 2

This was the most popular poetry text, with the vast majority of learners choosing the **(b)** passage question.

(a) This was the less popular choice of question on *Songs of Ourselves, Volume 2*. Learners nearly always had at least a basic knowledge of their chosen poems on which to structure their answers. Popular pairings were *I hear an Army* with *Fears in Solitude*, *Father Returning Home* combined with *Australia 1970* or *The Hour is Come*. Particularly popular was *In the Park*. Weaker answers paraphrased the poems, though usually with at least a basic understanding of the type of 'suffering' involved. For some learners, 'suffering is the despair and pain of the soul that may be triggered by fear', whereas others saw that 'poets suffer from people becoming indifferent to war' or in relationships where 'they cannot change the outcomes, nor can they let go completely.' Where learners developed these points by considering some of the poetic methods, most often language and imagery, the answers became competent. At this level, there was a secure knowledge of the meaning of the poems, together with sound understanding of the poets' purposes. Stronger answers analysed a wider range of poetic methods such as the role of the speaker in the poem. Rhythm and rhyme were often well discussed and some confident responses considered structure and form, particularly the sonnet form and its various uses. Choosing contrasting poems helped some strong responses develop sophisticated arguments on how poets present emotions so that 'while this poet does not share suffering, but what caused their suffering,' another poet 'shows how suffering is a question of change, whether from within or from without,' as one learner argued. Such discussions were nearly always supported by apposite contextualisation, such as 'the fact that *In the Park* was originally published under a male pseudonym, Walter Lehmann, illustrating the argument that writing about female suffering even in 1961 was suppressed.' Such responses performed very well.

(b) This was the most popular poetry question on the paper, with answers seen at every level of the mark scheme. Weaker answers were not confident with the meaning of the poem, often ignoring the title and got very mixed up about rhyme schemes, many learners saying that the rhyme scheme was irregular or erratic, for example. Basic answers often found this a very accessible

poem and they maintained a clear focus on the presentation of mother and son, often summarising their story and showing empathy with the mother's (and the son's) situation. More straightforward responses offered varied interpretations on the mother's emotions and situations throughout its stages. For example, why the mother seemed 'small', somehow dwarfed by her husband's status or experience; why she was 'embarrassed' to admit in front of her son that she had ever been weak or felt less than; the fact that she was young and her husband was older than her own father and 'what this might mean emotionally and in terms of status in the world,' as one learner suggested. Competent answers looked at some of Hunt's poetic choices. Language was often well discussed, though learners disagreed about the implications of 'every other sort of name', with some seeing this as suggestive of fond and playful nicknames, whereas others saw signs of resentment and frustrations. Her formal inscription in the book was also variously interpreted as a 'mixture of suffering, love, admiration and perhaps even subservience,' as one learner summarised it. Stronger answers considered other poetic methods, with close attention often given to the rhyme scheme, which some learners placed a great deal of significance upon. Poetic structure was often more confidently analysed with 'the reversal of roles in the mother "guiding" him,' linked to the 'inevitable volta in the sonnet form,' as one learner noted. The sonnet form, and its 'romantic implications,' as one essay put it, was also well analysed, with many strong responses showing a perceptive grasp of form and structure. Strong answers also dealt with the implications of the title and its suggestions of devotion, suffering, or self-sacrifice, with some learners developing sophisticated interpretations of her role as mother and wife. A particular crux point was the final couplet, which all but the strongest responses found challenging, as Hunt 'changes the focus from mother to son yet links the speaker to the father in a convoluted logic,' as one learner argued. Where such interpretations were developed analytically and with appropriate textual pointing, the answers did very well.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/13
Drama and Poetry

Key messages

1. Learners should show evidence of literary analysis in discursive option **(a)** essays, as well as in passage-based option **(b)** questions.
2. Essays should include some form of contextualisation to support the learner's arguments.

General comments

This session, once again, responses were seen at every level of assessment, with some learners reaching the highest level on nearly every text on the paper. Some scripts were disadvantaged by rubric errors, most often because the learner had attempted more than the stipulated two questions or had answered two questions from the same section. Only a very few learners appeared to have time problems, causing the second essay to be either rushed or incomplete. The vast majority of learners followed the rubric accurately and with a clear balance between the two answers. The standard of written English was also at least satisfactory with all but a few learners adopting an appropriate style and register. Nearly every candidate was able to show at least a basic knowledge and understanding of two texts and many learners showed evidence of a real engagement with and enjoyment of them.

There are two specific issues to be addressed in this session:

1. Assessment Objective 2 from the Literature in English syllabus states that learners should 'analyse ways in which writers' choices of language, form and structure shape meanings and effects.' Learners attempting option **(b)** passage questions often showed evidence of meeting this Assessment Objective in their responses to the given passage. However, learners attempting option **(a)** questions, the discursive essay, also need to provide evidence that they are able to do this, by quoting or referring closely to specific moments in the text and considering the dramatic or poetic methods chosen by the writer. Learners may then explore the effects of those choices, showing how they support the arguments in their essays in response to the specific question.
2. Learners responding to option **(b)** passage questions, who are able to briefly place the passage within the wider work it is selected from, often write more focused and relevant answers. This is often, and possibly best, done at the start of the essay. With drama passages, learners should consider the significance of the passage to the play as a whole – this might be in terms of characterisation, plot or important revelations. In poetry answers, the context might be some aspect of the background to the poem, possibly biographical or historical, which is important to the learner's interpretation. Learners should be encouraged to consider this approach, as it will give a context to their interpretation of the passage itself, as well as providing evidence of knowledge of the text.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Drama

Question 1

ERROL JOHN: *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*

This was a minority choice of text in this session, with almost all of the few learners who chose it opting for the (b) passage question.

(a) There were too few responses to this question to be able to make a general comment on performance.

(b) The few learners who chose this question nearly always had at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the text with which to consider the significance of the extract. Most answers focused on the characters, particularly the boy, 'as a reminder of what Charlie might have been,' as one essay put it, Sophia, 'dressed to deal with authority' and Esther. Those learners who knew the situation and what Charlie had done were able to discuss the irony of the job offer at this point in the play, as well as analyse the contrasting responses of Esther and Sophia. Very few answers considered John's dramatic methods in detail but those that were aware of the dramatic action and the interplay of contrasting attitudes were able to discuss the extract competently.

Question 2

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Measure for Measure*

This was the second most popular drama text, with most learners choosing the (b) passage question.

(a) Weaker responses tended to retell all that they knew about the Duke and Isabella, with only intermittent reference to their relationship. More basic responses summarised the relationship, often in detail, focusing on their characters and 'how they develop until the very end when the Duke pops the question to her,' as one learner summarised it. More straightforward responses considered the effect they have on each other. For example: 'Isabella becoming more human in her rage against Angelo and manipulation of Mariana,' and the Duke 'more understanding of human behaviour, as he, like Angelo, falls for Isabella.' Competent answers linked the relationship to Shakespeare's concerns in the play as it 'incorporates another facet of justice and creates tension for an audience'. Their role in the plot of the play was often discussed at this level. 'The premise of the play is Isabella pleading Claudio's innocence, so the master manipulator uses a range of tactics to assist her,' as one learner put it. Stronger answers discussed the significance of 'his disguise as a friar and her intention to become a nun,' in terms of the play's presentation of religion, but some learners considered this a key effect in the play as the Duke is 'duplicitous in his disguise and therefore complicates the notion of her seeking justice'. The most successful answers explored Shakespeare's presentation in detail. Language, disguise, action and costume were all popular discussion points – 'He is dressed as a friar and she as a nun,' as one learner reminded us. Where these arguments were supported by reference to the text and some awareness of appropriate contexts, the answers did well.

(b) Nearly every learner was aware of the context to this passage and why Claudio is under arrest. Weaker answers summarised what happens to Claudio in the play at length, often including Isabella's part, with a consequent lack of focus on the detail of this passage. More basic answers responded personally to Claudio's situation and the perceived 'unfairness of his execution because his fiancée is pregnant,' as one learner noted. Most learners had sympathy with Claudio as he is 'logical and accepting of his guilt,' though others thought him 'a wise person who has just made a mistake' concluding that 'it's hard not to sympathise with him,' according to one. More competent answers considered his language, the role of Lucio as a 'comic counterpoint', undermining the seriousness of the situation, and Claudio's faith in his sister. The importance to the plot of his request for her help was well recognised and discussed, with some noting 'the accuracy of his description of her effect on men, showing how well he knows his sister,' as one essay argued. His summary of Angelo's rationale is 'logical and thoughtful,' as one essay noted. Stronger answers analysed Shakespeare's choices of language and imagery. For example, the repetition of "liberty" highlighting 'the negative outcomes from too much of it' and 'the "thirsty evil" as personification, showing temptation is always there, as Angelo is about to discover,' as one learner suggested.

Answers at this level considered tone, noting how ‘Lucio’s ironic comments undermine Claudio’s seriousness,’ though many saw Claudio’s language as suggesting he is ‘regretful and ashamed,’ and that ‘his animalistic imagery of the sexual nature in the “rats” shows his awareness of his fault, unlike Lucio who abandoned someone he impregnated,’ as one learner argued. Answers at this level were confident in their knowledge and understanding of the play and well able to explore the significance of the extract to Claudio’s characterisation and to the development of the play in general.

Question 3

JOHN WEBSTER: *The Duchess of Malfi*

There were too few responses to this text to be able to make a general comment on performance on either question.

Question 4

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

This was the most popular drama text in this session, with the majority of learners choosing the **(b)** passage question.

(a) Nearly every learner was able to select relevant material from the play with which to address the question. Weaker answers summarised each of the family units in turn, generally focusing on Big Mama and Big Daddy’s ‘unfair responses to Gooper and Brick,’ as one learner suggested. Others at this level summarised Gooper and Mae and their treatment of ‘the no-neck monsters, who are seen in material terms, such as Gooper’s ticket to the ranch,’ as one learner wrote. More competent responses were able to contrast the different responses, especially Mae’s ‘constantly thrusting her children to the forefront,’ with Maggie’s evident ‘dislike of her children, but desperation to have one with Brick,’ as one essay argued. Other sound interpretations noted that in ‘a play about inheritance, the children, grown-ups and infants, are central to the plot,’ with nearly every answer discussing the conflicts created by the different perspectives, ‘from Big Daddy’s slap to Maggie’s bow and arrows and Gooper’s jealousy of his younger brother,’ as one essay summarised it. The favouring of Brick by his parents and its effects on Gooper and Mae were well explored in essays at this level, with some understanding of Williams’s concerns leading to some answers usefully exploring the biographical contexts. Strong answers recognised Williams’s dramatic methods and how he uses the different attitudes to create the conflict, in the family, but also internally in characters like Maggie. Language was well analysed at this level, often contrasting Big Mama’s baby talk to Brick with ‘Mae’s ruthless but ultimately heartless parenting,’ as one learner noted. In strong answers, points were always supported by relevant quotation and appreciation of appropriate contexts.

(b) This was the most popular drama question on the paper. Nearly every response had at least a basic knowledge of the text and some understanding of the significance of this extract. Weaker answers either summarised the relationship throughout the play with only intermittent focus on the extract or paraphrased the events in the extract, interlaced with personal response to the characters, particularly Maggie’s desperation for Brick’s attention and his ‘determination to keep her at arm’s length,’ as one learner suggested. More competent responses saw that this exchange ‘sets the scene for the audience’s introduction to their relationship,’ which for some ‘showed that Maggie’s insistent longing for Brick’s approval makes her delusional towards her reality,’ as one essay argued. At this level, learners had a sound appreciation of Williams’s dramatic methods. The significance of the setting was a popular discussion point, as it is ‘the room/cage where all conflicts of the play unfold,’ and ‘it suffocates their ability to communicate,’ as one learner wrote. Stronger answers developed this by considering the lack of privacy, who had slept in the bedroom previously and the symbolic nature of the ‘lack of sexual activity in this place,’ as one essay noted. The naturalistic elements and Williams’s use of plastic theatre were often analysed well in stronger responses – the locking of the door, Brick’s crutch, the use of alcohol, and ‘her frenetic movements set against his stillness,’ as one learner suggested. Learners offered a wide range of different interpretations of the relationship, with those who explored it from Maggie’s perspective answering the question more directly. Some learners were sympathetic to her desperation, though those who remembered her ‘liaison with Skipper,’ tended to see her guilt in her language and actions. For some learners: ‘They each desire to be loved but are unable to be loved by one another,’ though others saw her anxiety as more ‘rooted in her fear of being rejected and therefore impoverished.’

Answers which supported such arguments with relevant quotation, brief references to the wider text and some awareness of contexts did very well.

Section B: Poetry

Question 5

MAYA ANGELOU: *And Still I Rise*

This was the most popular poetry text on the paper, with nearly all learners opting for the **(b)** passage question.

(a) There were only a very few responses seen to this question. Most learners had at least a basic knowledge of two poems on which to base their response, though there was a wide range of poems chosen. Weaker responses summarised the poems and offered personal responses as to why they were emotional. Better answers chose contrasting poems such as *Phenomenal Woman* and *A Kind of Love*, which helped them to develop a more nuanced response to Angelou's concerns. More competent answers had some comments on Angelou's poetic style, noting, for example, that 'the more emotional poems were often written in the first person,' as one suggested. Other responses noted how 'she uses racist imagery and tropes from the Black American counterculture to express both rage and hope,' as one learner argued. The stronger answers looked more closely at language and imagery, though other poetic methods were not considered. The strongest responses were confident in knowledge and understanding of the text and of Angelou's concerns, often using context to explain why the poems were so emotionally charged.

(b) This was a popular choice with most learners having at least a basic knowledge of the poem's meaning and some understanding of Angelou's purposes. A few weaker answers were generalised in their comments, suggesting they were approaching the poem as an unseen, but the large majority of responses were engaged in his story: 'Willie is presented as the living embodiment of hope, persevering through pain to ultimately inspire children and the world that being alive is inspiring, even in the face of defeat,' as one learner neatly summarised it. More competent responses considered Angelou's methods in detail. Language, tone and imagery were often well discussed and as learners considered other poetic features, such as the rhythm and the use of a changing voice, so did the essays become more successful. For example, one learner suggested that 'he rises with the pattern of the syllables and all new grown life holds a part of Willie'. For others, the 'change in voice, giving a new perspective, allows him to offer his own story and become more powerful.' Angelou's use of repetition, the language of pain and suffering and some 'loaded words of a racist past' were often well discussed, though only the strongest essays discussed her use of rhyme and rhythm with any degree of confidence. The strongest essays discussed the poem in the light of Angelou's wider concerns, often supporting points with apposite contextual references and perceptive links to the wider text.

Question 6

SIMON ARMITAGE: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

This was a relatively popular choice, though nearly every answer was on the **(b)** passage option.

(a) There were too few responses to this question to be able to make a general comment on performance.

(b) This was the second most popular choice of poetry question in this session. Most learners had at least a basic knowledge and understanding of the text on which to structure their response, though learners who could place the extract in the appropriate textual context tended to do better. Weaker answers tended to summarise the complete relationship between Gawain and the Lady, often focusing on the reveal at the end of the tale. This led to a lack of focus on the detail on the passage and limited the success of the responses. More straightforward responses did work through the 'cut and thrust of this dialogue,' as one learner styled it, recognising the 'challenges from the lady to Gawain's sense of honour and chivalry,' as one learner summarised it. Nearly every response recognised it as 'a form of seduction, aimed at weakening Gawain's guard.' This was developed by more competent responses who often considered it 'questionable behaviour from the lady,' leading to contextual discussions of infidelity, chivalry and honour in that era. Some learners thought that 'while Gawain shows restraint, he is weakened in the eyes of the reader' and that 'the scene has all

the hallmarks of a set-up, with the bedroom bolt offering a sense of entrapment' as one strong response argued. Other interpretations saw the irony of 'the paradox of good faith.' Stronger answers considered Armitage's presentation, linking this passage to the wider text through the imagery of 'hunting' and often referring to the 'wager' between Gawain and the Host. For other learners 'the repetition of honour throughout precisely describes Gawain's determination to uphold a strong and admirable reputation,' as one learner wrote, developed in some responses to seeing his words 'not nearly such a noble knight' as both ironic and comedic. Stronger answers explored the language, for example 'Armitage uses positive diction for her, to emphasise the temptation to Gawain,' as well as noting her sexual innuendos and 'almost aggressive suggestiveness'. Only a few responses were confident in exploring Armitage's use of alliterative verse and 'rhythmic cadences to highlight the temptations,' as one neatly put it. Where such points were supported by text and context the responses did very well.

Question 7

WILLIAM BLAKE: Selected Poems from *Songs of Innocence and Experience*

There were too few responses to this text to be able to make a general comment on performance on either question.

Question 8

Songs of Ourselves, Volume 2

(a) There were too few responses to this question to be able to make a general comment on performance.

(b) This was the third most popular poetry question in this session. Nearly every learner had at least a basic knowledge of the meaning of the poem with which to address the task. Most essays thought Tollet 'presents the unwavering and unconditional love the speaker is willing to give' which is 'successful in invoking admiration in the reader towards the speaker in their ability to have so much love for one person,' as one essay summarised it. More straightforward answers noted how 'Tollet is showing the speaker's support, dedication and loyalty by listing the hardships,' as one learner expressed it. Answers at this level often had personal engagement with the speaker and offered a personal response to some of Tollet's examples of suffering. More competent responses considered some of the poetic methods. For example, the word suffer is 'used as descriptive and yet also as irony,' or 'eternal snow' as symbolic of the lengths to which the speaker will go. Stronger answers picked up on some of the 'archaic' language such as 'thee' and 'thy' and explored the way Tollet uses nature to suggest 'the speaker's purity and innocence, as well as her determination,' as one essay argued. Stronger responses also considered a wider range of poetic methods, such as the use of rhyme, the imagery of hunting, and the use of alliteration to 'enhance the mood of selfless devotion.' There were few attempts to consider the rhythmic sophistication of Tollet's verse, but this was a feature of the most successful responses. Nearly all of the responses thought the poem 'reflects the idea that the love is continuous and without breaks or cracks in their dedication,' and those who analysed those features in Tollet's verse did very well.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/21

Prose and Unseen

Key messages

- Responses which rely on narrative summary are not successful.
- Successful responses focus on the writing of the texts and how the writer presents the meaning and content to the reader.
- Successful responses to (a) questions use analysis of specific references and quotations to support their points.
- Successful responses to passage-based (b) questions focus securely on detailed analysis of the writing in the selected extract.
- In **Section B: Unseen**, successful responses engage closely with the text type's literary features, discussing how they communicate the meaning and contribute to the reader's or audience's understanding of the passage or poem.

General comments

The Underground Railroad proved to be an enormously popular text to which candidates responded with enthusiasm and interest. That novel, alongside the Cambridge anthology *Stories of Ourselves, Volume 1*, dominated the prose answers in **Section A**. While candidates answering on Whitehead's novel often showed their grasp of the whole text by making thoughtful connections across it, which helped place the passage in context, there was often less confidence with a full knowledge of the stories chosen from the anthology. On the other hand, some candidates responded to the (b) passage-based questions by discussing the story generally, without the question's required close commentary on the selected passage. Successful answers will always focus on the writing of the text, considering ways in which the writers present their characters or concerns, and this is particularly important for the passage questions. These demand very close commentary on the extract from the text provided on the question paper, which means a good grounding in prose narrative techniques is needed.

Candidates need a wide prior experience of the key features of poetry, prose and drama texts from different historical periods to prepare for the **Section B: Unseen** section of the paper. The drama unseen options were popular, though many of the answers would have been improved with a greater awareness of dramatic conventions. Candidates should consider the role of speeches, character interactions, exits, entrances and stage directions and their theatrical realisation, as they do for the drama section of Paper 1 Drama and Poetry.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Prose

Question 1

KIRAN DESAI: *The Inheritance of Loss*

(a) Desai's presentation of the relationship between the cook and Biju was a popular option. Nearly all candidates who attempted it recognised that Desai depicts a strong emotional link between father and son, with the cook's aspiration and sacrifices for his son, and Biju's determination to make a success of his stay in America. Less accomplished answers discussed them as real people, recounting what they did and said in general terms. The successful answers focused clearly on

ways in which Desai presents this relationship, using a number of specific references to episodes in the novel. For example, there was thoughtful discussion of how Desai uses contrast, comparing the love and affection between the cook and Biju with the distant relationship between the Judge and Sai. Some noted Desai's use of Biju's letters, which are the cook's most treasured possessions when his shack is ransacked by the police. The long-distance phone call made an appearance in many essays, the most confident noting that on this occasion Desai uses comedy to highlight their affection, with the long expectation, the excitement and the disconnected phrases of conversation. Candidates sometimes commented that the phone call is a key symbol of their relationship, emphasising their emotional closeness while physically distant. Examiners also read interesting discussions of the role of deceit in the relationship, but deceit which has its roots in pride and love. References were made to the dialogue where the cook makes exaggerated claims about Biju's success in America, while Biju for his part constantly reassures his father that he is enjoying success, wanting to protect him from the truth of his humiliating experiences. Some essays argued that Desai also uses the relationship to highlight the different values of India and America, which culminates in Biju rejecting the American lifestyle and returning to India. There was thoughtful discussion of his return, with candidates suggesting that the robbery of his clothing and goods by the rebels represents the stripping away of American values. Many candidates referred to the joyous reunion of the pair at the gates of Cho Oyu. Despite the failure of Biju's temporary emigration to the USA, for which the cook made so many sacrifices, Desai depicts their excited meeting and embrace, indicating that their love is far more important.

(b) The passage depicting Gyan's house was also popular, though a number of responses strayed away from the question in order to pursue more general discussion. It was clear that many candidates were well versed in the postcolonial context of the novel, but often this was pursued either without specific relation to the passage or with asserted relevance that was not persuasive. Candidates should remember that the most important focus of the passage-based question is the passage itself, and the language and techniques of the writer demonstrated in that passage. Strong responses were able to link the historical and political contexts directly to the passage, considering the presentation of Gyan's family home as a representation of the unfulfilled aspirations of the marginalised Nepalis in post-independence India. Such answers made it clear that the third person narration focalises Sai's perspective, registering her shock at the disparity between Gyan himself and his home. There was good focus on Desai's use of visual and olfactory imagery in the description of the building, with the 'Crow's nests of electrical wiring', the 'windows barred with thin jail grill', the 'open drain' and 'sluggish plumbing system'. Candidates recognised that the language suggests disgust, which gives insight into Sai's feelings. Essays also noted, however, the details which Desai includes to show pride in the 'precious home', such as the 'Marigolds and zinnias' and the 'gilt clock'. The fourth paragraph drew comment, as Desai broadens the scope to show that Gyan's family home is typical for those who are 'just holding on desperately'. A number of candidates commented directly on Desai's technique of separating sections of the narrative with short lines. In this case it marks a shift in focus, to communicate Sai's perspective explicitly to the reader and helped candidates who noticed it to develop their response to the second part of the question. Alert candidates commented on her awareness of Gyan's gender role explored in the long sentence ll.27 – 29 and the portrayal of Sai's own sudden new perspective in the final paragraph. Some misread her 'shame', omitting the important 'for him' from the sentence, while confident candidates saw how Desai shows Sai's own shifts of feeling, especially in the 'distaste' she feels 'for herself'. Candidates commented that this marks a pivotal moment in Desai's presentation of Sai, who comes to recognise her own position of privilege.

Question 2

Stories of Ourselves, Volume 1

(a) Candidates interpreted threat and danger widely, reflecting the range of stories in the selection. Examiners saw essays on *Games at Twilight*, *The Prison*, *Tyres*, *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *Report on the Threatened City* among others. Candidates identified the different dangers to which characters respond in their chosen stories, but too often the essays comprised of narrative retelling of the various threats and descriptions of characters' behaviour. There were fewer confident answers which explicitly considered the ways in which those characters' responses are presented by the writers, as the question required. The essays relying on narrative recall were often compromised by the lack of detailed knowledge of the chosen stories, with frequent inaccuracies. Successful responses were based on detailed knowledge and secure selection of references to answer the question directly. More successful answers considered, for example, narrative perspective, looking at the aliens' expressions of incomprehension of humanity's attitudes in *Report*

on the *Threatened City*, or the decline in narrative coherence in *The Yellow Wallpaper* with the use of staccato phrases. Others considered the ways Desai presents Ravi in *Games at Twilight* overcoming his fear of Raghu by overcoming his larger fears of the 'dark and depressing mortuary' of the shed, which leads the climax of the story to consider the human fear of mortality. Some essays were alert to the ways in which the narrator of *Tyres* regrets the actions he takes in response to the threat of the Germans, apparent in his retrospective narration of his lost love affair as a result of those actions. Other strong essays considered setting, symbolism or structural techniques such as foreshadowing, leading to a clear address of the 'ways' in which the writers 'present' the response to danger.

(b) The passage from *The Son's Veto* proved to be very popular and elicited some thoughtful responses. A number of candidates, however, wrote about Mr Twycott and Sophy as a romantic and even passionate love affair, which suggested a lack of knowledge of the story and an inattentive reading of the passage. Most, though, followed the passage in a structured way, focusing on key phrases which demonstrate the development of the relationship. The rich passage offered candidates much to discuss and the strongest combined close reading with well-supported personal response. Many picked up the sense of Twycott's awakening to Sophy in the first paragraph. The phrase 'soft presence' drew comment, along with his perception of her as 'a kittenlike, flexuous, tender creature'. Candidates interpreted this in different ways, from suggesting that it is a touching description to those who saw it as demeaning, reducing Sophy to a pet. One or two saw the phrase as Hardy's Victorian expression of a sexual awakening. The determination of Twycott's imperatives, such as 'You must never leave me again!' was contrasted with the narrative acknowledgement that 'Sophy did not exactly love him', but with 'respect' and 'veneration' agrees to marry. Examiners saw some interesting discussion of narrative point of view, appreciating how the third person perspective explores both Twycott's and Sophy's thoughts, giving contrasting insights into the two characters' feelings. Some saw a mutual dependency through illness and injury, others suggested that Mr Twycott marries Sophy because of a sense of guilt about her injury. Confident candidates focused on some telling detail, such as the contrast between the idyllic surroundings of the marriage on a 'fine morning' with 'singing birds' and the service of which 'hardly a soul knew', as if it is a guilty secret. Similarly, candidates paid attention to the contrasting descriptions of the country and the London house and often focused this on the implications of the two words 'home' and 'house'. The two phrases 'Sophy the woman' and 'Sophy the lady' also drew comment as candidates recognised Hardy's criticism of the constraints of class and gender in Victorian society. This was linked with his use of the Christian name for Sophy through the passage and story, while employing the formal Mr Twycott. This was an area where many candidates were able to make appropriate use of contextual knowledge, with an awareness of class attitudes in late nineteenth-century Britain. Some extended this to Hardy's condemnation of such restrictions in his literary work and pertinently, many linked it to Sophy's relationship with Sam, a foil to Mr Twycott throughout the novel. The retrospective 'She had now been married more than fourteen years' in the final paragraph was noted by some, who then drew attention to the final line's foreshadowing of her son's social restraint which dominates the end of the story.

Question 3

EVELYN WAUGH: *A Handful of Dust*

(a) While some candidates mistakenly thought that Hetton represented London, most recognised that Waugh presents Tony's house as a direct contrast with the city. Most understood that Waugh uses satire and irony to portray London as a place of superficiality, moral decay, and emotional detachment, which was supported with references to episodes in the novel consisting of gossip, infidelity, drinking and a round of soulless parties. The strongest essays were those in which the references were detailed, often including quotations, to root the answers firmly in the text. Brenda's rejection of Hetton and desire for a London flat was often used as a sign of the attraction London has for the shallow and immoral, especially as the flat ('just a bedroom and a bath and a telephone') is part of her deceit to pursue her affair with Beaver. Candidates often referred to this affair, and London society's gossip about it and approval of it, as a sign of the city's lack of moral consciousness, which was frequently linked with Waugh's own religious views. Candidates made useful reference as well to Waugh's use of an epigraph from Eliot's 'The Waste Land', signalling the two writers' common concern with the moral decay of their society. Essays also discussed Waugh's use of animal names, such as Beaver and Rattery, as well as satirical names such as Polly Cockpurse, who John Andrew perceives as a monkey. Some interesting essays considered the final section of the novel in Brazil, suggesting that far from a contrasting location, Waugh draws distinct parallels between Brazil, to which Tony travels 'In Search of a City', and London, as places

without rules where deceit dominates. Again, detailed reference was a key to success, with some candidates specifically referring to sections where Waugh directly juxtaposes Tony's experiences in Brazil with Brenda's in London.

(b) This was a popular passage, though it was clear from some candidates' assertion that it presents a blissfully happy marriage that they were approaching it with limited knowledge of the novel. Stronger responses showed greater understanding, noting how Waugh begins the novel's presentation of Tony and Brenda with a foreshadowing focus on separation, as they lie in their separate bedrooms, Tony thinking of ceiling restorations and Brenda reading newspapers; Tony relishing the older features of Hetton while Brenda 'had insisted on a modern bed'; Tony in 'dressing gown and 'slippers' while Brenda 'lay on the dais' like 'a nereid emerging from fathomless depths of clear water'. The 'kiss' which becomes Brenda turning 'her lips away' was seen as symptomatic, though some candidates remembered that the same phrase about rubbing 'against his cheek like a cat' is also used later with Beaver. General descriptions of the passage, with some quotations to root the account in the text, tended to make limited or straightforward answers, but more successful candidates looked closely at the writing, including the form, noting the amount of dialogue in the passage and what it reveals about the relationship. Confident candidates suggested that the clipped, quite formal dialogue contributes to the sense of a lack of intimacy between the couple, despite the use of the endearment 'Darling'. Some noted how through Brenda's dialogue and Tony's responses, he is carefully manipulated into writing Brenda's speech and visiting Yorkshire. Candidates who read carefully to the end of the passage were able to comment on Brenda's carelessness of other people, where in her extracts from the newspaper, a closing theatrical production is read in exactly the same tone as the horrific deaths of 'Two more chaps in gas ovens' and 'a little girl ... strangled in a cemetery with a bootlace'.

Question 4

COLSON WHITEHEAD: *The Underground Railroad*

(a) There were few answers on Whitehead's presentation of abolitionists with some candidates appearing to be uncertain what an abolitionist is. Some referred to Dr Bertram and Dr Stevens in South Carolina, neither of whom could be considered an abolitionist, despite living in a free state. A number of essays focused on Cora, and while this approach could work if her character is seen as Whitehead's symbol of the desirability and possibility of abolition, a focus on Cora alone limited the address to the question. The most confident responses were carefully discriminating, identifying a range of abolitionists with varying motives, while exploring ideas of oppression and freedom. Answers looked at the agents of the underground railroad, though many ignored Fletcher who assists Cora and Caesar out of Georgia. Discussion of Sam in South Carolina tended to be much fuller, taking into account his reappearance in Indiana, while discussion of Martin and Ethel in North Carolina offered opportunities to discuss reluctant abolitionists who nevertheless offer assistance. Candidates showed their awareness of Whitehead's presentation of Martin's surprise discovery of Cora and his bewildered response – 'Oh dear, oh dear' – but his determination to fulfil the role left by his father. Ethel's role drew much comment as essays explored her disapproval of Martin's actions and her 'white saviour syndrome'. Candidates appreciated that this pair of characters contributed to Whitehead's suggestion that not all abolitionists were heroic or truly motivated by altruism. However, the violence of their deaths gives a graphic illustration of the dangers run by abolitionists, as Whitehead also indicates through Ridgeway's memories of his treatment of Carter. Candidates who knew the novel well were also able to explore the significance of Lumbly, who, as well as introducing the magical realism of the underground railroad itself, points out that much of America and its prosperity had been built on enslaved labour. Fully developed responses to the question also discussed the Indiana section of the novel and the tensions between Lander and Mingo at Valentine Farm, who offer different visions of abolition and freedom. Some thoughtful responses suggested that ultimately Whitehead's novel, through its blending of fiction and history, suggests that true freedom and true abolition remains a dream.

(b) The passage question on Cora's visit to the hospital in South Carolina was extremely popular. Many candidates responded to it with a close eye on Whitehead's presentation, blended with awareness of the whole text and a good grounding in historical contexts. There were, therefore, some very assured answers which demonstrated a perceptive understanding of the novel. Some considered the narrative point of view, which moves from a detached third person to focalising Cora's perspective, while many essays demonstrated a clear awareness of the tonal shift from optimism – 'a stepping stone to heaven' – to the violence of 'grabbed', 'stabbed' and 'howls' as the darker side of the South Carolina medical facility becomes clearer. Some candidates commented

on the anachronistic use of the Griffin Building as one of the ingredients of Whitehead's characteristic blending of fiction and different historical references to suggest the suffering of African Americans throughout history. That Cora 'survived' the elevator ride drew much comment about Cora's survival through the text, but also that the hyperbole here is almost comic and therefore contributes to the passage's change of mood. Candidates commented sensitively on Cora's fleeting moment of reverie while looking out of the window, interpreting it as a symbol of the freedom she yearns for, which is quickly interrupted by the harshness of her examination. The doctor's white coat, described as flapping 'like a cape,' was frequently interpreted as a symbol of false heroism, and many commented on the emphasis on the 'stark white uniform' of the staff contrasted by the 'colored men and women' waiting to be seen. While there were candidates who misidentified the questions in II.16 – 18 as rhetorical, and some were uncertain whose questions they were, more confident candidates noted the lack of direct speech and attributed this to Whitehead's writing creating a sense of how Cora is bombarded with questions about her ancestors which she has little chance of answering. While the absence of headaches is an optimistic sign of escaping her violent plantation past, candidates pointed out that she is immediately insensitively reminded. Some perceptive comments were made on the casual lightness of 'traced' and 'Hazarding a guess', contrasted with Cora's lived experience of the 'lashes'. The demeaning intelligence test drew comment, as well as the lexis of intrusion in 'probed', 'examined', particularly as this word is used with references to 'her privates', with no clear consent, and takes place 'with his tools'. Candidates suggested that the pain and shame Cora feels are different, but certainly reminiscent of her treatment at Randall. It was often noted that the doctor's 'speculations' are addressed to the nurse, excluding Cora, and there is no preparation or consent involved in the use of the 'imposing metal instruments', or 'We're going to take some blood', stated as a *fait accompli* rather than a request. Many candidates showed that they were well-informed about the contexts to which Whitehead alludes and wrote effectively on how he refers to historical medical experimentation on Black bodies, connecting the passage to historical atrocities such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and forced sterilisations. While there were certainly weaker descriptive responses to this passage, and some answers which demonstrated incomplete understanding, many found much to discuss and approached the passage with thoughtful personal response as well as literary skill.

Section B: Unseen

Question 5

Drama

The drama passage was the more popular of the two unseen options. Many wrote well about drama, some even giving directorial suggestions for performance which went beyond the requirements of the task, but there were also many candidates who lacked confidence with the conventions of dramatic writing. In addressing the content of the passage, not all candidates recognised that Mattie and the Reverend are brother and sister, so some missed that the 'sister' to whom Mattie refers in I.33 is herself. Candidates who paid attention to the opening stage directions and suggested that they indicated Mattie's recent arrival in the house gave themselves a solid foundation. Mattie's opening exchanges with Lilacs drew plenty of comment, most seeing her as a feeble old woman because she 'groans', is 'Hoarse' and speaks 'Feebly'. Others dismissed her as rude, sending Lilacs away. A few suggested that she is deliberately histrionic, exaggerating her response to being called 'Ant Mattie' with some humour. The opening lines led to some thoughtful discussion of the shifting use of her name: Mattie, Rusty, Ant Mattie. This was identified in stronger responses as a reflection of her fractured identity and the internal changes brought on by years away from home. Many commented that the changing identification contributes to the mystery surrounding Mattie, her past and her homecoming. Confident candidates recognised the tonal shift in the scene when Mattie addresses her bother, and the dialogue between Mattie and the Reverend was in some answers analysed as tense but layered, revealing both closeness and distance in their relationship. They noted the sense of nostalgia as well as the more prickly references to the past, including her own departure 'with a show man and him married' and her failure to communicate with her family. Here, successful candidates analysed the dramatist's punctuation choices, such as dashes and ellipses, to show how these create diversions and heighten tension within the conversations. They noted, for example, the evasiveness about her name ('Oh – lots o' things.') and crucially the big hesitation around Sadie. There was some speculation about the identity of Sadie and the nature of the relationship, with suggestions that the hesitant ellipses suggest shame, but many responses noted the Reverend's reassuring rejection of such feelings and Mattie's response seen in her direction 'Fondly'. In this way, stronger candidates recognised that although Mattie appears unfriendly or stubborn at first, her tone is often humorous and she demonstrates emotional warmth, including to the boys at the end of the passage. Toussant's repeated question, candidates argued, seems hesitant, perhaps

because of Lilac's treatment, but Mattie's responses are warm and encouraging. The passage repaid careful reading, giving candidates much to discuss in the changing emotional tone, the mystery about the past, the nature of the relationships and even possible historical and geographical placement through dialect. Those who read it in a more cursory fashion and did not look closely at the dramatic features of the passage, found it challenging to show a full appreciation.

Question 6

Prose

A number of responses to this passage offered only a general narrative summary, sometimes illustrated with quotations, while other candidates discussed how it reveals socioeconomic disparities and the effects of tourism on indigenous culture. Competent responses explored the poetic opening of the passage, recognising that the repeated use of 'blue' lends Isfahan a dreamlike, almost surreal atmosphere. They observed that the phrase 'Trees and grass had a precious look because of the arid earth' evokes a sense of beauty and scarcity which is undercut by the more mundane and disappointing realities of tourism. Carefully analytical essays noted that the third person narrative is focalised through Normanton's perspective, which create a distance between the narrator and the scene; some essays identified a detached or even mocking tone here which highlights the inadequacies of the tour. Many answers responded well to Hafiz, the only character to be given direct speech, enjoying the humour of his broken English and his smiling admission of his own deficiencies as a tour guide. There were some neat contrasts made by perceptive candidates between the perfect and hyperbolic English of the Iran Air leaflet he reads from and his own speech. In particular, most candidates took his part against the 'testy Frenchman'. A number of confident responses identified ways in which the writer presents the tourists as stereotypes: the 'wholesome-faced American girls' taking pictures, the sunburnt German couple, and Iris Smith 'teetering on her high-heeled sandals' – a detail that subtly emphasises her lack of preparation and her distance from the setting. These character sketches suggest that the tourists are passive consumers of culture, more interested in capturing images and sticking to schedules than engaging with the local environment. In the light of this, many candidates were critical of the demands of the Frenchman, contrasting his apparent wealth, privilege and sense of entitlement with 'poor Persian candidate' Hafiz. This led too to a number of responses which discussed ways in which the passage indicates a commodification of culture. Though the mosques packaged in the leaflet's descriptions are closed, another indication of the tour's lack of preparation, this commodification is most apparent in the carpet-weaving. A number of candidates responded vigorously to the depiction of President Kennedy, recognising that a traditional and ancient skill is being repurposed and cheapened in its attempt to fit into the tourist trade. This is, they argued, another example of the economic disparity between east and west, of which the writer is subtly critical. The 'cameras' and the 'moving camera' were also used with this argument, as candidates noted both the expense of the equipment and the sense of detachment which their use indicates. Many candidates noted that the passage ends with the cost of the tour. While most admitted they did not know the value of 'three hundred and seventy-five rials', they surmised by the climactic position of the phrase that it was a considerable amount. This was interpreted in varying ways; some argued that the tour was a colossal rip-off, while others suggested that it demonstrates again the wealth of those paying it.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/22
Prose and Unseen

Key messages

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- In **Section B: Unseen**, successful responses engage closely with the text type's literary features, discussing how they communicate the meaning and contribute to the reader's or audience's understanding of the passage or poem.

General comments

The Underground Railroad proved to be an enormously popular text to which candidates responded with enthusiasm and interest. That novel, alongside the Cambridge anthology *Stories of Ourselves, Volume 1*, dominated the prose answers in **Section A**. While candidates answering on Whitehead's novel often showed their grasp of the whole text by making thoughtful connections across it, which helped place the passage in context, there was often less confidence with a full knowledge of the stories chosen from the anthology. Conversely, some candidates responded to the (b) passage-based questions by discussing the story generally, without the question's required close commentary on the selected passage. Successful answers will always focus on the writing of the text, considering ways in which the writers present their characters or concerns, and this is particularly important for the passage questions. These demand very close commentary on the extract from the text provided on the question paper, which means a good grounding in prose narrative technique is needed.

Candidates need a wide prior experience of the key features of poetry, prose and drama texts from different historical periods to prepare for the **Section B: Unseen** section of the paper. The drama unseen options were popular, though many of the answers would have been improved with a greater awareness of dramatic conventions. Candidates should consider the role of speeches, character interactions, exits, entrances and stage directions and their theatrical realisation, as they do for the drama section of Paper 1 Drama and Poetry.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Prose

Question 1

KIRAN DESAI: *The Inheritance of Loss*

(a) Many responses to this question showed knowledge of the novel but were less secure in their approach to the question. Such responses were able to give an account of the two different settings of India and America and what happens in them, but the particular question focus on the effects of the switches between them was often overlooked. This was a question about the way in which Desai structures the novel and the effects she creates, but many responses considered only the novel's content. Stronger candidates analysed how the narrative switches serve to highlight contrasts in identity, displacement and cultural conflict. Many explored how the parallel storylines of

Sai in Kalimpong and Biju in New York deepen the reader's understanding of postcolonial experience, migration, and alienation. These candidates often considered how the structure emphasises both physical and emotional dislocation, drawing links between the characters' inner lives despite their geographical separation. Considering the concerns of the novel, the location switches were discussed as a way to expose inequalities, the illusion of the American dream, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Stronger responses also considered how Desai's use of time and location creates a fragmented, unsettled narrative that mirrors the characters' own instability. They often supported their ideas with precise examples and explored how Desai uses tone, imagery, and structure to move fluidly between worlds, evoking both parallelism and contrast. Examiners saw some thoughtful discussion of the contrast Desai creates between the wealth of New York and the poverty of Kalimpong and answers often noted that, despite this contrast, Biju lives in a state of poverty similar to that of his father. The most confident responses were able to refer to some of the specific switches and resulting juxtapositions in the novel.

(b) The passage about Nimi drew many thoughtful and sympathetic responses from candidates. Many candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of Nimi's emotional state and her marginalised position within both domestic and cultural spheres. Stronger responses explored how Desai uses vivid imagery, sensory detail, and irony to convey Nimi's isolation, the oppressive atmosphere of her marriage, and her gradual erasure as an individual. These responses engaged closely with the language of the passage, such as the oppressive stillness of the setting, the symbolism of the gate, and Jemubhai's dehumanising perceptions of her, to show how Desai evokes both pathos and critique. There was some interesting discussion of the clamour of the birds in the trees, representing the freedoms and sociability denied to Nimi, while perceptive analysis identified the simile 'like women in a sari shop' as being specifically Indian. This developed into discussion of the Judge's internalised racism and his furious disapproval of Nimi's 'hair oil', 'typically Indian bum' and the 'gaudy trinkets' of her beads, all cultural indicators. Candidates noted Desai's indications of Nimi's life of restriction, from the 'nineteen years within the confines of her father's compound' to the Judge's abandonment of her and the servants' mistreatment. Less successful responses often summarised the narrative of the passage or focused solely on Jemubhai's cruelty, with limited attention to Desai's methods. While engagement with the character was evident across most responses, candidates who addressed Desai's stylistic choices and their effects produced more nuanced and effective answers.

Question 2

Stories of Ourselves, Volume 1

(a) There were few answers to the question on the presentation of fathers in the stories. Some candidates wrote about *The Son's Veto*, which proved not to be a choice which allowed really successful address to the question. Far more effective were those essays which focused on stories such as *My Greatest Ambition*, *Of White Hairs and Cricket* and *Tyres*. Less successful responses relied on narrative summary of the chosen stories, with limited attention to the ways in which the fathers are presented by the authors. More successful essays were based on the careful selection of detail and a secure focus on the ways the fathers are characterised. These answers showed consideration of the quiet care of the narrator's father in *Tyres*, arranging his son's avoidance of war service and training him in his trade, while showing understated affection with regard to his son's burgeoning love affair. The father in *Of White Hairs and Cricket* was recognised as a representation of ageing, with the story charting the decline of his cricketing involvement while he refuses to show signs of ageing, with his refrain of 'Every – single – white – hair – out!' In *My Greatest Ambition*, candidates looked at the author's use of dialogue to show the father's sardonic humour, although some blamed him for dismissing his son's achievements. Features of successful answers were discussion of characterisation, narrative voice and tone, supported by specific detail from the stories.

(b) Many candidates seemed to enjoy the strangeness of this section from *Five Twenty*, though a developed response relied on an understanding of the whole story. Such answers were able to place the passage within the development of Ella's characterisation and her changing sense of identity and agency. These responses explored White's use of understated dialogue, the subtle shifts in tone, and the imagery which presents the awkwardness and significance of the meeting between her and the man from the Holden. Candidates who were alert to the subtleties of the excerpt addressed themes such as female sexuality, noting how White challenges conventional taboos surrounding the sexuality of older women. Some candidates perceptively interpreted the garden as a symbolic representation of Ella's repressed desires, with the colours 'cream, gold,

cerise, scarlet' evoking sensuality and inner longing. Ella's observations of the man's physical features were also analysed, citing the 'funny shape of his head' and his 'hare-lip', but noting that 'his eyes' are 'filled with kindness.' Candidates discussed how this contrast between deformity and perceived gentleness reveals her longing for emotional connection beyond surface appearances. This was often contrasted with Royal's treatment of Ella, where confident knowledge of the wider story was rewarded. These responses saw the passage as a poignant revelation of long-standing marital detachment and emotional neglect, underscoring the isolation that defines Ella's life. A number of interesting responses explored the strange, almost surreal nature of White's description of the garden and Ella's perceptions, including her 'muzzy' voice, suggesting that this passage can be read as a figment of Ella's imagination, a projection of her desires and emotional needs. In contrast, there were also answers which summarised the passage, sometimes with a lack of full understanding, suggesting that candidates lacked a confident knowledge of White's story.

Question 3

EVELYN WAUGH: *A Handful of Dust*

(a) Candidates were able to offer examples of a range of betrayals showing a secure knowledge of the text. Some responses offered exhaustive knowledge of various betrayals; while these often demonstrated good textual knowledge, they did not always explore Waugh's presentation and became a list of betrayals. Many answers focused primarily on Brenda's betrayal of Tony, but some stronger responses explored the multifaceted nature of betrayal in *A Handful of Dust* – not only marital, through Brenda's disloyalty, but also social and moral, as seen in the failure of traditional values and institutions. More analytical responses commented on Waugh's use of irony, satire, and detached narrative tone to highlight the absurdity and cruelty of the various betrayals in the novel. Examiners saw some particularly interesting writing on the Brazil section of the novel and Mr Todd's betrayal of Tony, consigned to reading Dickens after Todd deceives Tony's rescuers. Candidates who considered structure and technique were more successful than those who focused heavily on plot or character without connecting to Waugh's literary methods. Overall, most candidates demonstrated engagement with the novel's subject matter; more consistent attention to how Waugh shapes meaning would have strengthened many answers.

(b) Most candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of Mrs Rattery as a striking and unconventional character, with stronger answers analysing how Waugh uses description, dialogue and contrast to highlight her disruption of the traditional world of Hetton Abbey. These responses often commented on Waugh's ironic tone and the subtle satire in the characters' expectations versus Mrs Rattery's actual appearance and behaviour. The best responses explored the contrast between the title of 'Jock's blonde' and Tony's absurd imagined version of her as 'a chorus girl, in silk shorts and brassiere' with the reality of a pilot in a 'leather helmet'. This led to some perceptive discussion about Mrs Rattery's characterisation as a woman independent of her husband and from social conventions, being 'tall and erect' and speaking to John Andrew 'exactly as though he were man of her own age'. Some noted, though, that Waugh makes it clear she can afford such independence, with 'five trunks' of possessions, a maid and a habit of changing hotels 'once every three weeks'. In contrast to Brenda and the other London women, Waugh depicts her without stereotypical feminine frippery, with sheets that 'were neither silk nor coloured, without lace or ornament of any kind'. The passage repaid careful reading and noting of details. Some candidates missed opportunities to examine Waugh's style in depth, instead focusing on character summary or general impressions. A few also overlooked the humour and social critique embedded in the details of her arrival.

Question 4

COLSON WHITEHEAD: *The Underground Railroad*

(a) There were few responses to the question on the presentation of Royal, and some of these were lacking in the detail required for a persuasive answer. Conversely, stronger essays explored Royal's dual role as both rescuer and ambiguous figure, examining how Whitehead presents him as a source of hope and affection for Cora while also foreshadowing betrayal through subtle shifts in tone and dialogue. There was some thoughtful discussion of his role in helping Cora to heal from her past trauma, particularly the sexual assault. Successful candidates discussed how Royal's charm and confidence mask a deeper complexity, and how his death becomes a pivotal moment in Cora's journey, highlighted by his identification of the Indiana station. A few thoughtful responses also considered the broader symbolic function of Royal, particularly in relation to freedom,

resistance, and disillusionment. Less successful essays offered descriptive accounts of Royal's actions without analysing Whitehead's methods or Royal's significance to the concerns of the novel.

(b) Many candidates opted for the North Carolina passage presenting Cora's illness while hiding in the house of Martin and Ethel. Many responses demonstrated a strong understanding of the passage, effectively identifying Whitehead's use of vivid imagery to depict Cora's illness. Words such as 'lurched', 'rocked' and 'slammed' were frequently highlighted as examples of kinaesthetic and tactile imagery, emphasising a sense of constant instability that mirrors Cora's disoriented mental, emotional and physical state. More insightful responses went further, interpreting Cora's physical suffering as symbolic of the collective trauma inflicted upon an entire race through violence and dehumanisation. These responses recognised that Cora's feverish hallucinations serve not only as a depiction of personal agony but also as a representation of intergenerational trauma. The dream sequence aboard a slave ship, with its violent, oceanic imagery like 'bucking on swells' and 'slamming into anvils of water', was thoughtfully interpreted as invoking the brutal history of slavery, suggesting that Cora's body becomes a vessel for the ancestral memory of suffering. This was a feature of the passage which a number of candidates overlooked. Confident candidates discussed the contrast between the cramped, stifling attic and the white, sunlit room, recognising a symbolic shift which offers a brief sense of renewal or rebirth. While the emerging bond between Cora and Ethel was recognised, particularly through the image of Ethel reading the Bible and Cora dreaming of motherly affection, the Biblical allusions to Noah's Ark and the forty years in the wilderness were less frequently explored. Some noted the irony that Cora receives this maternal affection from a woman who has previously resented Cora's presence in the house but is here able to indulge her role as a white saviour. However, in this moment of crisis, the kiss on Cora's 'forehead, motherly' is a genuine moment of tenderness. A number of candidates alluded to the risks taken by Martin and Ethel with their care of Cora, and the role of Fiona was sometimes discussed by those with a confident grasp of the whole novel.

Section B: Unseen

Question 5

Prose

Almost all responses to this passage recognised the writer's presentation of the stranger as a mysterious and enigmatic figure, whose treasures carry both emotional and historical resonance. Many cited the adverb 'bitterly' to reflect the stranger's antipathy toward museums, interpreting this as a critique of society's indifference to local or indigenous histories. Most candidates found the stranger a mysterious figure, who is generous with his treasures but reticent about them, saying 'Maybe some day, Ma'am, I can tell you'. Some candidates suggested that this suggests that the pots are ill-gotten gains, but most noted his appreciation, his knowledge and his reference to getting them out of the ground 'whole like that', suggesting that he is unwilling to reveal his archaeological site. Perceptive answers explored the use of similes, such as the comparison to 'robins' eggs', as well as the stranger's distinctive voice, noting the personal pronoun 'our' and the almost rhythmic phrasing of 'pretty playthings', which captures his gentle, reflective tone. Quite a large number of candidates strongly sympathised with his valuing of indigenous artefacts which 'Museums ... do not care about'. In this light, they commented on his generosity, preferring to give the pots and turquoises to people who genuinely delight in them, rather than sell them. It was noted that not only is he generous towards the children, he also addresses them with respect, giving them clear information, another quality to which candidates responded favourably. Several candidates commented on the irony of this meeting of two cultures, the stranger demonstrating his cultural values along with his artefacts, which have nothing to do with museums or money, while the professor's wife is reluctant to receive the items as gifts because of their worldly value. Some candidates were alert to the written style of the passage, particularly that most of it consists of dialogue with little narrative interruption, leaving the reader to make judgements from characters' phrasing and tone of voice. One variation from this is the penultimate paragraph, where the Professor focuses on the stranger's hands, almost as if they are artefacts themselves. It was noted that the diction is consistently admiring, with words and phrases like 'muscular', 'strong', 'flexible, beautifully shaped'. By implication, this lexis contributes to the characterisation of the stranger and also indicates the Professor's admiration of him. Only a few candidates referred to the abrupt ending of the passage, which may be interpreted almost as if the stranger had vanished into thin air, again foregrounding his enigmatic nature.

Question 6

Poetry

The poem was a popular choice for candidates. Most noted the central concern of the poem and were able to comment on the importance of history and ancestry on identity. Equally, candidates frequently discussed the use of nature and natural imagery within the poem. Developed responses recognised how the poet's use of language, structure, and poetic techniques elevates the ancestors to a mythic status, portraying them as guardians of tradition and enduring sources of inspiration. The personification of forces such as the 'whirlwind' and death as entities trying to 'overcome' or 'conquer' was accurately interpreted as highlighting the ancestors' spiritual strength and permanence. Phrases like 'They came from the womb of the universe' and 'the deep eye of the universe is in our chest' were analysed as placing the ancestors within a cosmic framework, portraying them as fundamental to existence rather than merely historical figures. There was thoughtful discussion of the respect shown to the ancestors by the speaker of the poem, but also of the vivid way that the ancestors seem to live on and enjoy the celebration of them by the current generation. Candidates selected language details successfully to support these points. There was much interesting discussion of the use of 'we' and 'they' and what these pronouns show about community and the relationship between the past and the present. Most essays commented on the effects of the anaphora of 'They' in ll.14 – 18, to suggest the permanence of the ancestors' presence. Many candidates effectively explored the subtle presentation of death and the juxtaposition of the 'tall boulder' with its 'humble shadow'. Candidates were also able to comment purposefully on the single stanza form, suggesting the unity that the ancestors promote and the shape of the 'ancient stone'. Examiners saw some thoughtful responses to the poem's structure and tone, noting the shift from quiet reverence to joyous celebration, while details such as the capitalisation of 'Forefathers' and 'Ancestors' were noted, which endows these terms particular significance. It was interesting to see that this poem encouraged candidates at each level to make some commentary on poetic methods and language. There were comparatively few answers which merely summarised the poem.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/23
Prose and Unseen

Key messages

- Responses which rely on narrative summary are not successful.
- Successful responses focus on the writing of the texts and how the writer presents the meaning and content to the reader.
- Successful responses to (a) questions use analysis of specific references and quotations to support their points.
- Successful responses to (b) passage-based questions focus securely on detailed analysis of the writing of the selected extract.
- In **Section B: Unseen**, successful responses engage closely with the text type's literary features, discussing how they communicate the meaning and contribute to the reader's or audience's understanding of the passage or poem.

General comments

The Underground Railroad proved to be an enormously popular text to which candidates responded with enthusiasm and interest. That novel, alongside the Cambridge anthology *Stories of Ourselves, Volume 1*, dominated the prose answers in **Section A**. While candidates answering on Whitehead's novel often showed their grasp of the whole text by making thoughtful connections across it, which helped place the passage in context, there was often less confidence with a full knowledge of the stories chosen from the anthology. Conversely, some candidates responded to the (b) passage-based questions by discussing the story generally, without the question's required close commentary on the selected passage. Successful answers will always focus on the writing of the text, considering ways in which the writers present their characters or concerns, and this is particularly important for the passage questions. These demand very close commentary on the extract from the text provided on the question paper, which means a good grounding in prose narrative technique is needed.

Candidates need a wide prior experience of the key features of poetry, prose and drama texts from different historical periods to prepare for the **Section B: Unseen** section of the paper. The drama unseen options were popular, though many of the answers would have been improved with a greater awareness of dramatic conventions. Candidates should consider the role of speeches, character interactions, exits, entrances and stage directions and their theatrical realisation, as they do for the drama section of Paper 1 Drama and Poetry.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Prose

Question 1

KIRAN DESAI: *The Inheritance of Loss*

(a) There were few responses to this question, but candidates who tackled it showed some understanding of Desai's use of humour, blended with more challenging and disturbing aspects. Some essays asserted that elements of the novel are funny without clarifying how Desai achieves the humour. Biju's phone call to his father from America was frequently cited, while some made reference to Sai and Gyan's adolescent courtship or the characterisation of Lola and Noni. The tragic in the novel was seen to encompass the Judge's treatment of Nimi, the Ghorka riots and Biju's difficulties in America. Some thoughtful responses articulated ideas about the novel's

portrayal of the tragedies of colonialism and its aftermath, while the most successful explored the ambiguity of Desai's narrative style, noting that the comedy usually has a poignant edge. The phone call, while funny, reveals how much the cook and Biju miss each other and highlights the fact that Biju has to deceive his father about his life in America. Lola and Noni are satirically presented, and part of the amusement comes an observation of their superior detachment from the lives of the people around them, accentuated when they are visited by the rebels. The humour of Gyan and Sai's courtship dissolves into bitter recrimination. Although relationships are fractured and political unrest is rife, some candidates pointed out that Desai ends the novel with the joyous reunion of Biju and the cook while the 'five peaks of Kanchenjunga turned golden', concluding the novel with an image of optimism.

(b) Very few candidates commented on the narrative structure of this extract, although it clearly demonstrates Desai's technique of breaking up the text into discrete sections. A number of candidates also provided a more general passage analysis rather than tailoring the analysis towards the specific question of Sai's first experiences. This was frequently apparent when essays ignored the final section of the passage, favouring discussion of the judge and the cook, despite its usefulness in depicting Sai's isolation and apprehension. More focused responses engaged with the presentation of Sai's observations of the bad-tempered judge and his annoyance at the disruption of routine, whether that involved forgotten soup or the burden of having to arrange a suitable education for his granddaughter. Details of the dilapidation of Cho Oyu and the 'terrible, terrible' treatment of the cook were noted, though Desai's imagery of shadow puppets was given less attention. Many candidates could have made much more of the portrayal of the frightened girl whose toes go silently through the rotted tablecloth under which she lies, listening to the *jhora*'s pure voice and 'the hollow-knuckled knocking of the bamboo.' Few candidates explored the tone of the extract and its portrayal of the uneasiness of Sai's first introduction to life in Cho Oyu.

Question 2

Stories of Ourselves, Volume 2

(a) There were very few responses to the question on the portrayal of mothers in the stories. Among the answers, candidates referred to such stories as *The Yellow Wallpaper*, *My Greatest Ambition*, *Of White Hairs and Cricket*, *The Son's Veto* and *To Da-duh, in Memoriam*. Discussion of this latter story and *Of White Hairs and Cricket* often included grandmothers, which was legitimate. However, many of the essays described the mothers, what they did and said, rather than focusing on the writers' presentation of mothers, which limited their achievement. There was often a stronger sense of presentation in the answers which focused on *The Yellow Wallpaper*, considering the increasingly broken phrases of the narrative; answers on *The Son's Veto*, which demonstrated considerable sympathy for Sophy and the ways she is treated by her son; and answers on *To Da-duh, in Memoriam*, which showed appreciation of the contrast and tussle between Da-duh and the narrator.

(b) This was a very popular question and most candidates demonstrated knowledge of the wider story, appreciating the context of Ravi's hiding place and his shift from triumph to despair, though relatively few really focused on the injunction to 'Comment closely' on Desai's writing. There was considerable sympathy for Ravi, though this sometimes led to general discussion of his character and his relationships with his siblings, rather than applying focus to the presentation of him leaving his hiding place. Stronger, more directed responses noted the shift from 'smiling' at the beginning to 'flooded with tears and misery' in I.26. These answers noted that the third person narrative reflects Ravi's point of view, which is very apparent in the sequence of questions in II.13 – 15 and his reminders of how to win the game in the following paragraph. Effective and detailed answers noted how closely Desai links Ravi's success in the game with his anguish – his triumphant 'Den! Den! Den!' is juxtaposed with the words 'rage', 'pity', 'disgrace' and 'misery', just as 'I won, I won, I won' is accompanied by 'bawled' and 'big tears'. A few perceptive candidates were alert to ways in which Desai structures the sentences and paragraphs so effectively, for example, in the contrasting long sentences and fragments at the beginning of the second paragraph which demonstrate time passing, and the rapid shifting through time in the penultimate paragraph to show how much has happened since Ravi concealed himself in the shed. A number of candidates too commented on the symbolism of the story, highlighted in this passage where Ravi emerges not to triumph, but a sense of his own insignificance and even mortality in the way 'he had disappeared from their minds. Clean.'

Question 3

EVELYN WAUGH: *A Handful of Dust*

- (a) Too few responses to make a general comment appropriate.
- (b) Too few responses to make a general comment appropriate.

Question 4

COLSON WHITEHEAD: *The Underground Railroad*

- (a) The question of Whitehead's presentation of relationships between women in the novel prompted some thoughtful responses. In particular, the familial relationships between Cora, her mother Mabel and grandmother Ajarry were examined. Although little interaction is presented in the novel between these women, candidates recognised that Whitehead suggests that they are nevertheless influential on one another. There was discussion of the link that connects Cora to Africa and ways in which Whitehead presents inter-generational trauma. The relationship between Cora and Mabel was particularly productive for candidates who took the opportunity to discuss the structure of the novel, with Cora's anger at Mabel's abandonment of her, her mother's escape driving her own as well as Ridgeway's pursuit, before Mabel's narrative is finally revealed at the end. Among other relationships, essays discussed the supportive actions of the women in the Hob, all in some way rejected, but caring tenderly for Cora after her beating by Terrance Randall. This sense of sisterhood was also seen in Cora's relationship with Lovey; her childlike innocence and respect for Cora were seen as significant, while her recapture and death haunt Cora. Other relationships also drew candidates' attention, with Miss Lucy and Ethel often discussed, as well as Cora's much more supportive relationship with Sybil in Indiana.
- (b) Candidates responded well to this passage, with the most successful responses appreciating Whitehead's ambiguous presentation of Mingo, and how the women's perspectives shape the reader's perception. Some confident responses noted the structure of the passage, giving the reader first a view of Mingo and how he is perceived on Valentine Farm, before focusing on the contrasting views of Sybil and Cora. There was some sound discussion of Mingo's 'red checkered suit', bold clothing which establishes his presence and suggests his status, while the reference to 'his allies' indicates the factions and underlying tension in the community on the farm. There was some acknowledgement of how the 'political arguments' later end in violence, but a number of candidates discussed the political language of Mingo's position on the 'severe reduction in those they sheltered'. Some candidates connected this language and the threats of 'it always ended with violence' with today's political language about migrants. There were some well-argued discussions about the contrast between Sybil's and Cora's views. Candidates were alert to Sybil's view of Mingo's 'greasy personality and constant jockeying', which suggests his manipulative manner and his political ambitions. In particular, thoughtful responses compared her view of Mingo's getting 'lucky with regards to his master' with reference to the 'prodigious feat' of buying his family out of slavery, with Cora's refusal 'to join her friend in her derision.' They saw that Cora does not share this view and many speculated that this was because she felt her own mother had abandoned her, while Mingo had saved all his family. However, many essays noted the comparison with Blake at the end of the passage, which suggests Mingo's malign impact.

Section B: Unseen

Question 5 - Poetry

While the poem was by far the more popular of the two unseen options, many candidates struggled with it, demonstrating partial understanding. Some seemed to have been attracted by the regular conventional form of four-line stanzas and rhyme, but then found the meaning challenging. A number of essays noted the form but were unable to develop convincing ideas about how the poet makes use of it. Only a few were able to relate changes in the speaker's thoughts to the progression of the stanzas, with the pairs of stanzas developing firstly the speaker's situation and then secondly their thoughts on time. These responses noted that the 'Oh, list!' at the beginning of stanza 5 marks a clear shift, a realisation which challenges the mood of the opening, before leading to the reflective rhetorical questions of the final stanza. Perceptive and observant answers noted that these groupings within the stanzas are also indicated by the sentences, with the final lines of stanzas 2, 4, 6 ending the sentences. These essays demonstrated the importance of really close reading, including following the sentences and grammar of poetry. Thoughtful responses kept the specific

question in mind and noted the soft language of comfort and relaxation prompted by the natural world in the first two stanzas, with 'sheltered', 'clear', 'smiles', 'glistening', 'sunshine', 'rustling' and 'softly whispering', often commenting on the effects of assonance and sibilance. They then discussed how the speaker responds to that relaxation, drinking 'in the sound', by reflecting on time in similar ways. The past is seen as 'one mild, beaming, autumn day', while the future is seen optimistically as 'basking in the summer's sun'. The volta in stanza 5 with the two exclamations 'Oh, list!' and 'But look!' overturn the speaker's mood and the reader's understanding of the first stanzas. With the references to 'clear blue sky' and 'sunshine fair', perceptive candidates noted that summer had been suggested, but stanza 5 reveals that it is in fact winter, with 'snow', 'frost' and 'winter's sun'. While a number of responses ignored the final stanza, more successful essays recognised the sudden change of mood and the speaker's introspection. The optimistic mood of the future is dissipated, and the final question recognises the challenges and uncertainties of the present, using the natural world as its metaphor.

Question 6 - Drama

Most candidates who offered responses to the drama passage made sensible comments about the relationship between More and Rich. There were interesting comments on the power dynamic between the two men, with most candidates recognising that More is in a superior position to Rich as a wealthier and wiser man able to gift silver cups and offer advice. They often recognised that he was trying to show Rich how to be an honest man by pursuing an honest profession. Thoughtful candidates picked up details of More's speeches which indicate his own position of power and influence, as he is accustomed to the type of bribes which are offered to those 'in office', while he also perhaps hankers for 'a quiet life.' His comment that office 'was inflicted' on him drew some perceptive analysis of his language, offering reasons for his attempts to dissuade Rich from official positions. Some candidates also noted the careful phrasing of his speeches and that his addressing of Rich by his first name shows both his position and his care. Candidates suggested different interpretations of Rich himself. Some saw him as unprincipled, as he is happy to accept the silver sup and sell it, and perhaps jealous of More's wealth as he wishes to own 'a gown like' his, accentuated by the stage direction '*Sudden ferocity*'. Others showed sympathy for Rich as a young ambitious man. Some felt that he is patronised by More, and many seemed to share his dismissive view of teaching as a career with only 'candidates', 'friends' and 'God' to acknowledge success. Some candidates suggested there is irony in the names, as he desires to be 'rich', expressing this to the man who has 'more'.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/31
Shakespeare and Drama

Key messages

- Candidates should provide context which is relevant to the question. Background information about the playwright is unlikely to add depth to a response unless it is integrated into the overall argument.
- Candidates need to have a firm grasp of the genre of the texts on this paper; their responses should explicitly refer to the texts as plays which were designed to be performed and seen on stage, rather than to be read in a classroom.

General comments

In general, candidates know their texts and demonstrate an engagement with issues and dramatic techniques. The best answers offer real insight into the texts, often showing both a breadth of knowledge and an ability to construct an argument. Less successful responses sometimes over-emphasise context or fail to stay relevant to the question throughout. In both **(a)** and **(b)** questions there is the expectation that arguments will be founded on clear and explicit reference to particular moments in the play under consideration. Candidates should be reminded that length in an answer is not a substitute for concise argument. The higher levels of marking criteria ask for evidence of an ability to select material that is continually relevant. An answer does not have to be comprehensive. We see some very good long answers, but these are rare; most long answers would have been better if they had been much shorter and more focused.

As always, there was a preference for **(b)**-type questions. In these questions, it is expected that the extract will be the prime focus of the answer and that candidates will make frequent and detailed reference to what they have in front of them. Candidates must refer to other moments in the play but there must also be a balance of part to whole. It follows, too, that responses should deal very clearly with the playwright's language and staging choices, showing awareness of the dramatic 'arc' of the extract presented. In some answers, it is not clear that the candidate knows who is on stage apart from the people who actually speak. Candidates need to consider why someone is speaking and who they are trying to influence, persuade or impress. There needs to be awareness and comment on how this particular moment may (or may not) be central to the action or to the play's themes. The best candidates are aware that an audience is seeing the action in real time (there is no opportunity to return to an earlier page, as in poetry or fiction reading). A firm understanding of genre is central to a good answer.

Including the opinions of others continues to puzzle some candidates. At the lower levels, it is barely demonstrated, whilst in the mid-levels, candidates may mention a few remarks by a critic, without really demonstrating how they have helped formulate a candidate's own response. There is, of course, the possibility on this paper that a candidate will talk about a particular production in order to focus a response, and this can prove illuminating. Other candidates plainly assume that the video they have watched is an accurate reflection of the text they have been asked to study. This was particularly noticeable in responses on *The Taming of the Shrew* where a viewing of the film seems to have taken over from close engagement with the text for some candidates. A critic's view – whether formally academic or the interpretation of the text by a director – is only useful if it furthers the candidate's own insights and arguments. Candidates should be wary of a 'feminist' or 'Marxist' reading, unless they are willing to quote a source, because this often simply means that they want to argue that women are badly treated in a text, or that the play could be seen as exploring the economic forces that shape characters' behaviour.

We see a number of responses that discuss punctuation. A word of caution: with a play, punctuation has to be treated in a specific way. Candidates need to note where the playwright suggests pauses (for example) that have to be realised through the acting and shown to have a dramatic effect. The same applies to stage

directions which point to how something is said – the audience has to *feel* that something is said ‘sadly’ and explain why this is important. The script is not available to the audience during a live performance.

Please remind candidates that it is really important to label their answers accurately. Remind candidates too that if their writing is difficult for an examiner to read, the examiner may not understand them. Candidates should also be reminded that, although it is commendable to start by planning, the plan should be brief. Time spent in detailed planning is time not spent on answering the question. There are moments in some essays where quotations are too long. Particularly with a passage-based question, it is perfectly legitimate simply to write the first and last words or refer to the lines being referenced. There were occasional scripts where a candidate only responded to one question which was unfortunate.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Shakespeare

Question 1

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*

(a) Most candidates who attempted this question were able to isolate the relationship between the eponymous hero and Ophelia from the rest of the play successfully and comment on how it changes and evolves as the plot progresses. Weaker answers tended to revert to the modern, popular cliché that we are looking at a ‘toxic’ relationship. Many stronger responses took the oft-stated view that we can have Hamlet’s story without Ophelia but not the other way round. An approach of considering a few key scenes in which liaison between the two played a part gave candidates an ample framework on which to examine the relationship and indeed to go in other valid directions such as Hamlet’s misogyny generally, or the effect that his relationship with his mother Gertrude has on his dealing with women. In all but the very best responses, particular textual reference seemed rather limited. There was often useful discussion of different sorts of madness in the play, with Hamlet’s feigned ‘antic’ disposition often seen as the cause of Ophelia’s psychological disintegration into real madness. There was often contextual discussion of how their relationship was doomed from the start as Ophelia was not of the right birth to become wife to a member of the royal family. The best answers were able to talk about the pressures on the relationship from without, with Claudius, Gertrude and Polonius all trying to use Ophelia for their own ends.

(b) Answers in the lower reaches of the mark scheme thought that the question was simply asking them about Claudius’s character in the play. Better responses were able to use the passage to see how Claudius manipulates. Oddly, few drew attention to the fact that this is a very public scene – there are councillors present who never speak – and it is therefore clear that Claudius is addressing a mixed audience and is maintaining a public persona of apparent good kingship with the self-sacrificing royal ‘we’. The best answers noted the flaws in what he says, such as his turning aside too quickly from grief with the word ‘yet’ in line 10 and then the dismissive ‘So much for him.’ in line 28. Points were also made about how he only begins to talk to Hamlet after seventy lines, thus betraying the sincerity of what he says in line 71. Very few candidates pointed out that Hamlet’s remark punctures the grandiosity of mien and vocabulary that has gone before. On the other hand, others argued that Claudius should be praised for putting country before personal matters. A few candidates noted that Shakespeare presents Claudius as a rather competent king in public, capable of big decisions in his country’s best interest, unlike Hamlet who, had he succeeded to the throne, would have been much less decisive. Many candidates wrote extensively about other scenes in the play, failing to keep the extract provided as the central focus of the answer.

Question 2

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *The Taming of the Shrew*

(a) This question was often seized upon by candidates eagerly, offering as it did a natural comparative structure to base one's answer upon. In doing so, they demonstrated detailed textual knowledge and understanding most of the time. Indeed, it was rare to encounter any significant misunderstandings. At times, many candidates fell into the trap of treating the two suitors as polar opposites: the idealistic romantic hero/lover versus the avaricious and opportunistic cynic. Where candidates took this approach early in their essay, it often limited their response and prevented them from writing about nuances in the individual characters, similarities between them or the ways in which the suitors are ultimately revealed to contradict these simplistic and one-dimensional identities. For example, it was not uncommon to read that Petruchio felt nothing for Kate, and this tended to lead to candidates ignoring the final wedding celebration scene and the admiration he expresses for her therein. Only a few candidates made the point that Kate and Petruchio know each other well by the end of the play and have the basis for a feisty relationship, whereas Lucentio and Bianca are still tied to the conventions of idealised romantic love, a much less reliable foundation for the future.

(b) All responses commented on Baptista's demand, many then elaborating on what it revealed about arranged marriages and the objectification of women during Shakespeare's time, sometimes with reference to Christian views of submissive women which therefore see Katherina as a 'fiend of hell' who should pay 'penance' for her strong will. Better responses explored the arguable victimisation of Katherina by the men in this extract as well as the evidence of her father's favouritism toward Bianca, and the best responses explored Bianca's willing conformity to male expeditions and how far Lucentio's praise of her was contrasted to Hortensio and Gremio's harsh dismissal of Katherina, thus highlighting the expectations about the subjugation of women throughout. Better responses were also able to look beyond this passage to explore how far Katherina or Bianca conform to and challenge the audience's first impressions of them later in the play. A small number of responses simply wrote general essays about Katherina and Bianca, largely ignoring the passage printed. A number of candidates had plainly watched *Ten Things I Hate About You* and were responding more to the film than to the play as written.

Section B: Drama

Question 3

LYNN NOTTAGE: *Sweat*

(a) Candidates who attempted this question were usually able to link the question of celebration closely to the bar as a setting and to choose occasions when the characters gather to mark birthdays or a promotion. Equally, they realised that, ironically, these occasions often turn sour and expose the vulnerability and insecurity of blue-collar workers in the face of deindustrialisation and the perceived effects of NAFTA. A number of responses focused entirely on the contrasting birthday parties in the play, particularly Tracey's in Act One, Scene 2, and Jessie's in Act One, Scene 6, using them as the means to explore the deterioration in the three women's friendship, and considering how they prepared the audience for the final confrontation in Stan's bar in Act Two, Scene 6. The best responses saw that the bar is a microcosm for the worsening situation at Olstead's and the Rust Belt generally, exploring how the cracks in Tracey, Jessie and Cynthia's relationship exemplify social and ethnic divisions encouraged by economic crises. The best responses also noted the constant presence of Oscar, coming increasingly into the foreground, until he becomes the catalyst for the fight in Act Two, Scene 6, exploring how his role and his treatment exemplified people's need for a scapegoat.

(b) Nearly all candidates were able to 'track' the extract adequately and compare and contrast the reactions that Evan elicited from the two parolees, Jason and Chris. Some of the weaker responses showed some confusion, missing the ways in which Nottage was contrasting Jason and Chris and thinking that Evan was talking to both of them at the same time. Stronger candidates considered the theatrical device of having both the released young offenders on stage at the same time, positioned either side of Evan, but not being interviewed by him together. This enabled a far deeper and more perceptive response in which the best treated the extract as one dramatic entity rather than two shorter vignettes. To expand upon this further, successful candidates considered anger in the rest of the play and especially the scene when the boys attack Oscar and inadvertently

injure Stan, and the very final scene in the play where they (and the whole Olstead 'family') are left to stew in their 'fractured togetherness'. The best candidates, of course, recognised that the anger comes from feelings of helplessness in the face of monolithic capitalism.

Question 4

EUGENE O'NEILL: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

(a) Candidates warmed quickly to this question, there being much material relevant to tension between the generations in a wide range of scenes. If they went a little awry, it tended to be by writing about the parents, then the brothers (or vice versa) and not really exploring the tension *between* those two pairs; or they focused too much on tension *within* generations: marital turmoil or fraternal strife. However, the majority were able to proceed by discussing similarities between parents and children, for example addiction, denial and obsession with the past. Candidates then continued to show how these traits were as much the cause of conflict for the Tyrone family as the basis for their rare moments of affection or harmony. Some candidates went back a generation to suggest that Mary and Tyrone were victims of their own upbringing, a useful area of discussion.

(b) Most responses moved in quickly on the opening aggressive salvo from Tyrone and on the father and son's opposing tastes in literature as a means of characterising their different world views. The passage provided concrete examples throughout of instances where even relatively weak candidates could latch on and produce firm linguistic or structural analysis. Many candidates also explored the stage directions, seeing them as highly indicative of the fluctuations in the relationship, particularly towards the end, where the two conspire to change tone and attitude as Mary 'comes in from the back parlour'. The tendency of both characters towards blame avoidance (and therefore guilt avoidance) both here and elsewhere were often clearly explored. The weakest answers either gave an account of the scene or wrote in very general terms about the relationship between Jamie and Tyrone.

Question 5

WOLE SOYINKA: *Kongi's Harvest*

(a) A number of responses drew powerful comparisons between the plant, hemlock, and the body politic, correlating the widespread, poisonous plant and the havoc it can do to the soil with the devastation of Kong's rule by the end of the play. Most responses showed understanding of the nature of the relationships (Danlola/Superintendent) and the significance of the closure of the iron bars descending at the end. The obscenities of the 'national anthem' were much enjoyed by those who understood what was going on. Many responses commented on the feelings of impending doom and despair ('disaster/is the only certainty we know') as 'the drums are newly shaped'. Although this was not a passage-based question, a number of candidates drew comparisons between the lyricism of this section (despite its gloomy nature) and the hard-nosed language of realpolitik used elsewhere.

(b) The majority of responses tended to consider the Aweri and then the Organising Secretary sequentially, or they took strictly linear approaches. The issue with either of these techniques is that they produce answers which treat the extract at face-value and miss out on some of the nuances. Prime among these omissions was a failure to realise the satire and humour generated by the situational irony of two parties of hypocrites and opportunists accusing each other of being cynical, two-faced pragmatists, while denying their own culpability for those offences. The best responses understood that often Soyinka's work is sardonically humorous and that the humour is used to underscore the gravity of political tragedy, rather than provide comic relief from it.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/32
Shakespeare and Drama

Key messages

- Candidates should provide context which is relevant to the question. Background information about the playwright is unlikely to add depth to a response unless it is integrated into the overall argument.
- Candidates need to have a firm grasp of the genre of the texts on this paper; their responses should explicitly refer to the texts as plays which were designed to be performed and seen on stage, rather than to be read in a classroom.

General comments

In general, candidates know their texts and demonstrate an engagement with issues and dramatic techniques. The best answers offer real insight into the texts, often showing both a breadth of knowledge and an ability to construct an argument. Less successful responses sometimes over-emphasise context or fail to stay relevant to the question throughout. In both **(a)** and **(b)** questions there is the expectation that arguments will be founded on clear and explicit reference to particular moments in the play under consideration. Candidates should be reminded that length in an answer is not a substitute for concise argument. The higher levels of marking criteria ask for evidence of an ability to select material that is continually relevant. An answer does not have to be comprehensive. We see some very good long answers, but these are rare; most long answers would have been better if they had been much shorter and more focused.

As always, there was a preference for **(b)**-type questions. In these questions, it is expected that the extract will be the prime focus of the answer and that candidates will make frequent and detailed reference to what they have in front of them. Candidates must refer to other moments in the play but there must also be a balance of part to whole. It follows, too, that responses should deal very clearly with the playwright's language and staging choices, showing awareness of the dramatic 'arc' of the extract presented. In some answers, it is not clear that the candidate knows who is on stage apart from the people who actually speak. Candidates need to consider why someone is speaking and who they are trying to influence, persuade or impress. There needs to be awareness and comment on how this particular moment may (or may not) be central to the action or to the play's themes. The best candidates are aware that an audience is seeing the action in real time (there is no opportunity to return to an earlier page, as in poetry or fiction reading). A firm understanding of genre is central to a good answer.

Including the opinions of others continues to puzzle some candidates. At the lower levels, it is barely demonstrated, whilst in the mid-levels, candidates may mention a few remarks by a critic, without really demonstrating how they have helped formulate a candidate's own response. There is, of course, the possibility on this paper that a candidate will talk about a particular production in order to focus a response, and this can prove illuminating. Other candidates plainly assume that the video they have watched is an accurate reflection of the text they have been asked to study. This was particularly noticeable in responses on *The Taming of the Shrew* where a viewing of the film seems to have taken over from close engagement with the text for some candidates. A critic's view – whether formally academic or the interpretation of the text by a director – is only useful if it furthers the candidate's own insights and arguments. Candidates should be wary of a 'feminist' or 'Marxist' reading, unless they are willing to quote a source, because this often simply means that they want to argue that women are badly treated in a text, or that the play could be seen as exploring the economic forces that shape characters' behaviour.

We see a number of responses that discuss punctuation. A word of caution: with a play, punctuation has to be treated in a specific way. Candidates need to note where the playwright suggests pauses (for example) that have to be realised through the acting and shown to have a dramatic effect. The same applies to stage

directions which point to how something is said – the audience has to *feel* that something is said ‘sadly’ and explain why this is important. The script is not available to the audience during a live performance.

Please remind candidates that it is really important to label their answers accurately. Remind candidates too that if their writing is difficult for an examiner to read, the examiner may not understand them. Candidates should also be reminded that, although it is commendable to start by planning, the plan should be brief. Time spent in detailed planning is time not spent on answering the question. There are moments in some essays where quotations are too long. Particularly with a passage-based question, it is perfectly legitimate simply to write the first and last words or refer to the lines being referenced. There were occasional scripts where a candidate only responded to one question which was unfortunate.

Comments on specific questions

Section A: Shakespeare

Question 1

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*

(a) A number of candidates struggled with this question. The question prompted them to discuss the most fundamental relationships in the play: Hamlet as prince and son; Gertrude as queen but also as a mother who has offended her son through her public (and possibly private) role; Claudius’s conflicted self as both king and murderer. Better candidates, of course, understood this immediately, and were able to reflect various aspects of the issue, with many talking about Claudius’ strained attempts at a public façade. Others, of course, focused on how an audience has a privileged insight into Hamlet’s private turmoil through his soliloquies. A number of very good responses made much of the way in which Hamlet’s indecision in his private life impacts upon his inability to function as either prince or revenger.

(b) If one error sometimes undermined otherwise serviceable answers to this question, it was a failure to correctly identify and discuss the extract’s timing and place in the sequence of the narrative. Many candidates believed that the ghost is instantly recognised here and therefore known to be perceived as that of Hamlet’s father. As well as somewhat neutralising the last few lines of the extract, this also diluted the analysis of the different guard’s responses to the spectre (especially Horatio’s rationalist questioning). There was often useful discussion about how a contemporary audience, whether Catholic or Protestant in their sympathies, might respond to this moment. Many candidates noted that Horatio’s approach to the ghost varies so much from that of his less educated colleagues; and, indeed, why it was thought appropriate to inform Hamlet of the visitation first, rather than the king. Many of the strongest answers made much of the atmosphere of doubt and suspicion that starts in the first scene and pervades the whole play.

Question 2

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *The Taming of the Shrew*

(a) This question inspired much discussion about marriage and the role of women in Elizabethan society. Some candidates found it hard to focus their insights on particular moments in the play. The best dealt with the commodification of marriage by Katherina’s father and Petruchio’s determination to tame her. More nuanced answers argued that the marriage between Bianca and Lucentio, conventionally conceived in terms of the plot and the language used by the lovers, is much less likely to succeed than that of Petruchio and Katherina. Petruchio and Katherina know each other and have tested their feelings, whereas the Bianca and Lucentio have stereotyped views of what they are letting themselves in for. Many of the best candidates noted this but went on to suggest (probably rightly) that neither marriage overcomes the issue of it being conceived in male terms, with the play as a whole demonstrating quite a strong streak of misogyny.

(b) Strong responses treated the extract as a dramatic turning point in the ‘taming’ of Katherina, commenting on the ways in which her spirit is ‘broken’ by the end of it to the point where she veers from beating Grumio to addressing Petruchio as ‘sir’ and pleading with him ‘I pray you, let it stand.’ They went on to compare her as she was in earlier scenes with her speeches and behaviour in the final scene. While some made a powerful case for the play offering an unequivocal portrayal of an outspoken woman being forced to conform to her society’s patriarchal standards, others explored

the extract as an example of an elaborate game being played by Katherina to ensure her ultimate dominance or as one played with Petruchio's connivance. Most took a grim view, however, and several likened Petruchio and Grumio's behaviour towards her to gaslighting and torture, pointing out that even the previously hostile Hortensio is moved to pity and to remonstrating with Petruchio ('fie! You are to blame'). Weaker responses often went through the scene or simply gave an account of Katherina's relationship with Petruchio.

Section B: Drama

Question 3

LYNN NOTTAGE: *Sweat*

(a) Most responses were able to link the concept of work to identity and the self-regard of the characters. Moreover, stronger answers forged the link with context, examining how NAFTA impacted on the 'blue collar' population and became blamed for mass immigration and the removal of jobs to foreign territories. Some particularly interesting responses included exploration of how the idea of work represents different generational values in the play, for example security and self-worth for the older characters, opportunity and self-realisation for their children. Work was also explored as being emblematic of how working-class lives become prison-like because it traps individuals into psychologically unrewarding but financially necessary circumstances that thwart human ambition and imagination. The best responses were able to demonstrate through particular reference how all of this becomes visceral in the language and action of the play, where tension between characters is symptomatic of larger dissatisfactions.

(b) Candidates warmed quickly to the rich opportunities that the passage provides for exploring the play's earthy yet theatrical use of language as a means of involving us in the lives of the characters. At the same time, the examples could also be related so readily to the themes of the play, such as thwarted ambition and the post-industrial context of the workaday world eroding youth and optimism for the future. Many answers focused extensively on Jessie's recitation of the cities along the 'hippie trail' and how this became a mantra for her, demonstrating her lost aspirations. The best exponents of this were able to explore how she, as a relatively minor character, is used by Nottage to articulate many of the concerns that crossed barriers of age and ethnicity in the play. Very few responses tussled with the symbolism and connection between meat, hunger, and desire in the passage.

Question 4

EUGENE O'NEILL: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

(a) Successful responses recognised lies and deceit across multiple character relationships in the play. Stronger responses recognised how stagecraft was used to foreground these concerns, for example presence and absence from the stage, their changing reactions to the fog and to Mary, the use of space. There was some very pertinent comment on self-deception, especially in relation to Tyrone. Less successful responses saw the play in simpler terms, without recognising that the characters are constructs, as is the play. A number of candidates wanted to explore the play in relation to O'Neill's own life, an approach that fails to see that the play crystallises experience, rather than re-counting it as dramatized fact.

(b) The passage offered very straightforward access to the overarching themes of the play, with ample opportunities to address context. The best responses explored what is not being said in the extract and treated it as a prime example of how denial and evasion feature so strongly in the behaviour and language of the characters in *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Other responses segued from the extract into an exploration of filial relationships or masculinity in the play in general. The best answers engaged with the significance of the poems quoted by Edmund as well as the dialogue between him and Tyrone, commenting on the echoes of Baudelaire in the Tyrone's speech and the ways in which Dowson's poem similarly echoes their delusions about themselves and their lost potential as well as Jamie's need to romanticise his encounters with prostitutes. Other responses also commented on the love and hostility evident not only between Tyrone and Edmund but also between Edmund and Jamie, exploring the ways in which father and son try to reach out to each other during the passage, even while it highlights the sources of confrontation between them. Almost all the responses commented on the way in which the two men's different choices of reading material reflects on their personalities. Very strong responses sometimes saw the way that

Eugene O'Neill blends Classicism and Modernism in the play itself, so that the words echo the techniques of the play as a whole.

Question 5

WOLE SOYINKA: *Kongi's Harvest*

This text is new this year. There were only a few answers on each question on Paper 32. The responses seen on Paper 31 suggest that many candidates find it interesting and challenging, and that it engages their budding awareness of how political power works. Please refer to the report on Paper 31 for more details.

- (a) Candidates were able to see that the Prologue to the play (symbolically entitled *Hemlock*) sets up the poisonous atmosphere of what is to come, with many of the techniques (commentary in song, for example) already present. There was much comment on how the language is portentous, as though what is to follow has already been decreed by fate. Candidates also noted how Danlola ('This dance is the last') and the Drummer ('the king's umbrella/Gives no more shade') guide the audience's reactions. There was much comment on the ending, with the gradual arrival of the prison bars. The rest of the play was usually explored in the context of Danlola's gloomy 'disaster/is the only certainty we know'.
- (b) Candidates were quick to note that absolute rulers require absolute obedience. As the passage notes, the best thing is 'to hand the Leader what he wants.' Some answers simply went through the scene or narrated the story up to this point in the play. Better answers were able to put the scene in context and recognise the sense of impending doom and loss that suffuses this moment. The final moment, Danlola's 'count me out' was often taken to suggest that there is acceptance that any sort of resistance is now futile.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/33
Shakespeare and Drama

Readers of this report need to remember that the paper is only done by a small number of candidates. It follows, therefore, that answers at all levels and on all questions may not have been seen.

Key messages

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General comments

In general, candidates know their texts and demonstrate an engagement with issues and dramatic techniques. The best answers offer real insight into the texts, often showing both a breadth of knowledge and an ability to construct an argument. Less successful responses sometimes over-emphasise context or fail to stay relevant to the question throughout. In both **(a)** and **(b)** questions there is the expectation that arguments will be founded on clear and explicit reference to particular moments in the play under consideration. Candidates should be reminded that length in an answer is not a substitute for concise argument. The higher levels of marking criteria ask for evidence of an ability to select material that is continually relevant. An answer does not have to be comprehensive. We see some very good long answers, but these are rare; most long answers would have been better if they had been much shorter and more focused.

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Comments on specific questions

Section A: Shakespeare

Question 1

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Hamlet*

(a) On the whole, answers tended to restrict themselves to the most obvious scenes, for example Polonius spying on Hamlet and Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s employment as spies to ascertain the full measure of Hamlet’s madness. But, as the best candidates realised, it is a theme as well as a dramatic device. The atmosphere of the court is one of constant mistrust and mutual suspicion. Moreover, it is not simply a one-way street: Hamlet spies on Claudius at prayer; Hamlet watches Claudius watching the play within a play; Hamlet watches aside when Claudius makes his first big speech. In other words, the rottenness of the state of Denmark is entirely bound up with, and illustrated by, spying and overhearing. Some candidates needed to pay more attention to the precise formulation of the question, noting the step up from ‘presentation’ to ‘dramatic significance’.

(b) In general, responses to this question showed a good understanding of the. Most ventured into the psychoanalytical, with comments about the Oedipus complex. Only the best responses, however, really engaged with the text printed. Those that did noted Hamlet’s dominance of the scene, his anger, his refusal until the end to let his mother speak (signalled by Gertrude’s outburst ‘O Hamlet, speak no more!’ and her final, exasperated ‘No more!’). They were also clear about the strong language, full of vivid images of corruption. Candidates were conscious that Hamlet idolises his father, seen in the comparison between old Hamlet and Claudius when he characterises his father as being like ‘Jove himself’. Many candidates broadened out the discussion to talk about Hamlet’s view of women in general. Only a few commented on the intimacy of the scene, the fact that it takes place in one of the most private places in the palace, Gertrude’s closet.

Question 2

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *The Taming of the Shrew*

(a) There were relatively few answers to this question, despite Petruchio and Kate’s centrality to any response to the play. Those that did attempt it tended to enjoy a good level of success and drew their material from a sensible selection of scenes. A relatively high number of candidates also remembered to examine the relationship with the framing device of the Induction in mind. This opened up vistas for them in which they might explore the play’s meta-theatricality and consider how that might affect audience perception of the play’s central relationship: should we consider Kate and Petruchio’s words and actions as ironic commentary on the patriarchal society in which Shakespeare wrote, for example?

(b) The extract-based question was a popular choice. Candidates found it easy to use it as a springboard to explore language because of the almost coded nature of the negotiation between Baptista and Petruchio, but also it was a handy opportunity to articulate and analyse the patriarchal nature of Elizabethan society on the play. The best responses also saw this as a ripe chance to address the ‘elsewhere in the play’ element of the question, as this is one of a series of scenes that is concerned with the appearance and reality of marriage in Shakespearean times. There were few

responses that took the father/son-in-law transaction at face value and therefore saw Petruchio's words as that of a romantic suitor. In some cases, more could have been done to engage with the drama of the scene presented.

Section B: Drama

Question 3

LYNN NOTTAGE: *Sweat*

(a) Only a small number candidates elected to attempt this question about the past. Those that did observed that the play itself switches often between two separate temporal settings and the actions of Chris and Jason in particular have a direct cause and effect connection to the situation that they find themselves in during the opening and penultimate scenes. Some candidates also explored the effects of deindustrialisation on the futures of the play's main characters. More could perhaps have been done to talk about methods, for example, the fact that the past is constantly evoked by characters as a means of placing their present reality.

(b) As many candidates observed, this extract offers a microcosmic encapsulation of the woes of the blue collar dramatis personae of the play. Weaker answers were able to see the ironic belligerence of Tracey and the greater, cynical realism of Cynthia. Many answers featured close examinations of the idea of the legality of burning your own house down, treating it both as a humorous intervention and a serious, symbolic expression of the speaker's frustrations. The references to NAFTA also invited candidates to explore the specific context in which the play was produced and set in some detail. On the whole, answers were not very explicit about 'dramatic methods'.

Question 4

EUGENE O'NEILL: *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

(a) This question on the presentation of illness brought forth a few interesting responses. To succeed, candidates really had to go beyond physical ailments and consider mental health and addiction. Those who did so were not short of raw materials from the play to work with. Many executed the task well but those who went awry tended to enter into generalised discussion of the causes and effects of every condition mentioned in the play other than tuberculosis. Furthermore, there was something in the nature of the question that prompted candidates to express themselves in a rather colloquial register, often referring to Mary 'using again', for example. Candidates should remember that they are undertaking a formal English Literature examination and their style of expression needs to be sufficiently formal and precise so as to express (often abstract) ideas with clarity and concision, as required in AO4 Communication.

(b) The extract, which featured all three of the male members of the Tyrone family as well as Mary, was often used by candidates to discuss masculinity and patriarchy. As with Question 4(a), there was a danger that such responses would become digressive and too general but by and large candidates tethered their answers closely enough (and often enough) to avoid that possibility. Indeed, most of the answers stuck with a conventional linear approach, consciously 'tracking' the extract and remarking on, sometimes discussing context, language, structure, form and other views when the opportunities to do so arose along the way. A more strategic view of the passage would have been useful in many responses. Many responses widened their perspective to note that the scene is entirely typical of the play as a whole, full of the static relationships and constant reiteration that prevents the family from moving forwards. There was often useful commentary on the stage directions ('her smile vanishes', for example) as a means of showing how the family try to mimic the way that other families behave, only for their pretence to break down within moments. As Tolstoy has it: 'All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.'

Question 5

WOLE SOYINKA: *Kongi's Harvest*

(a) Too few responses to comment.

(b) The responses to this question about the ending of *Kongi's Harvest* showed that candidates had a firm grasp on the play as a whole and of the various ways in which Kongi's acolytes and opponents

take common cause in fleeing after the fiasco with the ceremonial yam. There was some useful comment on the future prospects for the unnamed kingdom, made dramatically real by the final stage direction about the music coming to a halt as the iron grating descends and hits the ground with a final, doom-laden clang. Some candidates discussed the fact that the scene comes from a section called 'Hangover', which commented on the regrets for what has gone before.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/41
Pre- and Post-1900 Poetry and Prose

Key messages

- The quality of planning and structuring responses is key to achieving relevant and effective arguments and, hence, outcomes.
- AO5 is a core element of the mark scheme and must be addressed specifically and with relevance to the question and arguments presented.
- Use of supporting detail demonstrates not only the depth and extent of knowledge and understanding, but also the ability to select points to respond to a particular question.

General comments

There were overwhelmingly positive reports from Examiners on candidates' engagement, interest and determination in responding to the literature on this paper. It is clear that personal exploration and focused discussion has ignited their enthusiasm for the texts across all levels of ability. A combination of original and insightful personal response and critically detached analysis was a feature of the best answers. The majority of answers seen were to **(b)** questions where focus on the printed extract and awareness of its wider context were essential to achievement against the assessment objectives. These extract style questions require candidates not only to closely address the detail of the given material, but also to consider the significance of the passage or poem to the wider text. The texts for the **(b)** questions have been particularly chosen to entice candidates to demonstrate their skills and it is important to focus on the specifics of form, structure and language. In both **(a)** and **(b)** responses, successful candidates showed evidence somewhere in their essay of close reading and some detailed analysis of the writer's use of effects, particularly language choices.

Examiners reported seeing a number of answers that focused a great deal on the writer's punctuation choices. This is not helpful in isolation. Punctuation should be considered a functional tool used rather than a writer's choice as an effect. For example, one candidate wrote of Glück's *Presque Isle*, 'moreover she uses a hyphen to create a pause for the reader'. On the same poem, a more successful candidate wrote, 'Glück's use of caesura in 'That small boy – he would be twenty now' conveys a sense of the passage of time and memory in the poem'.

Examiners see a range of planning approaches during marking, and many answers where no planning is evident. While plans are not marked as part of the assessment process, it is clear they have an impact on outcomes. The best plans are tailored by candidates to address the argument they want to develop and the progression of this argument in the light of the question focus. These planning approaches include useful prompts for the candidate to use during their writing of the essay and are essentially working documents for the construction of an essay. This series, some candidates wrote plans that were too long. In one example, a really good candidate made a long plan for the whole answer in note-form but did not have time to complete the actual essay. Examiners also reported seeing scripts where the second essay was cut short or only just started. More astute candidates wrote strategic introductions which included a considered response to the question giving some sense of a possible argument or context and some indication of relevant methods. Moreover, AO4 Communication is affected by the structure of a candidate's answer. An example of this is seen in repetition of ideas which Examiners often see in the work of candidates in the Level 2 and Level 3 mark ranges. Repetition of a point is very different from the development of a point and candidates should be aware of this in their preparation and planning for the exam. Furthermore, there is a tendency for some candidates to write commentaries on texts, usually seen in **(b)** questions. Commentary does not enable candidates to demonstrate their understanding and ability to analyse and engage with text. Thoughtful and helpful planning of answers tends to support a critical, rather than a descriptive, approach.

Assessment Objective 5 requires candidates to consider and evaluate other views and opinions of a text. As the assessment objectives are equally weighted, this objective cannot simply be ignored. Examiners report seeing some excellent practice in the use of critical opinions from named critics or other sources and various literary approaches, such as Marxist and Feminist interpretations. Moreover, successful answers refer to AO5 aspects throughout their answers, carefully linking points to the question and their own personal views. However, a significant number of candidates are not including AO5 at all or are adding on unspecific remarks in the introduction or conclusion, for example 'some critics argue that Donne's exploration of human suffering is not evident in all his poems.' Candidates should be reminded that they can use broader critical approaches to address AO5, including use of modal auxiliary verbs to convey the idea of a range of possible views but this should add to the candidate's argument rather than appear as an addendum. Successful candidates often challenged or supported their critical references with specific textual detail. Reference to a film production or review can also work effectively and some candidates use the author's own words taken from introductions and interviews to explore and evaluate interpretations. Overall, use of personal response and evaluation of other opinions should be integrated into discussion. Some candidates had more quotations from critics than they did from the actual texts. Critical views that offered some insight into aspects of concerns or methods were more useful in generating or supporting discussion than those that were just generally appreciative.

Knowledge and understanding of text are crucial in underpinning responses in this component. It is helpful when candidates use quotation to support their views, but specific reference to details or episodes is also valid. Where responses lack supporting detail, the ability to analyse, engage personally or evaluate interpretations is also compromised. Examiners saw some very impressive preparation from many candidates with aptly chosen quotations used to support a point and then analysed to show what was significant or effective about the choice of language or effect. Quotations are most effectively used when integrated into the candidate's argument and some evidence of sound approaches was seen in Level 4 answers. Some candidates used over-long quotations followed by explanations that were simply paraphrasing the quotation. This was largely seen on (b) questions, but a few examples were seen on (a) questions with variable relevance. Supporting detail also includes aspects of context. Some candidates struggled to relate details of context to their arguments and a few included inaccuracies such as Jane Austen as a Victorian and Walt Whitman being influenced by President Roosevelt (who came to power in 1901, 9 years after Whitman died). When using support, it is important to ensure that details are accurate and relevant to the question and argument being put forward.

Rubric errors are still in evidence, although fewer were reported than last series. Please remember that candidates MUST answer on one prose text and one poetry text. One of the texts must be from **Section A** and the other from **Section B**.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

JANE AUSTEN: *Pride and Prejudice*

(a) *Pride and Prejudice* proved to be a very popular text, and this question attracted a good number of responses, however the (b) question attracted many more answers. Stronger responses demonstrated a clear understanding of Mr Bingley's role in the novel, offering specific details about his character, his contribution to the plot and his relationships with others. These responses often recognised Bingley as a foil to Darcy, highlighting his sociable nature, friendliness, and openness in contrast to Darcy's reserve and pride. More successful candidates also considered how Bingley's social position and wealth positioned him as 'new money' and noted his willingness to marry for love rather than status. They supported their ideas with quotations and referred to the author's use of literary devices and narrative techniques. The best candidates incorporated critical opinions effectively, offering a broader and more convincing view of Bingley's role within the text. Weaker responses tended to be overly descriptive, offering basic character summaries that lacked depth and failed to engage with Bingley's role in the narrative. These candidates often struggled to provide textual evidence and did not fully explore Bingley's relationships, or the literary techniques used to present him. Many responses showed limited awareness of the distinction between character and characterisation, and few made effective use of context. Some candidates misinterpreted details or confused Bingley with other characters such as Darcy, which undermined their analysis.

Less successful essays often took a reader-response approach that focused more on personal feelings towards Bingley rather than analysing how the author presents him. These responses lacked structure and insight into literary methods. Some candidates appeared to see Bingley as less interesting or harder to write about compared to other characters, which led to superficial treatments of his role. The least successful responses focused mainly on Bingley's personality as though he were a real person, with minimal use of quotations.

(b) This was a very popular question. Responses varied widely in quality, though most addressed the central themes of pride and prejudice. Stronger candidates demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the developing relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy. They recognised the shift in their dynamic, particularly Darcy's attempt to be more agreeable and Elizabeth's subtle changes in attitude. Many noted the humour and irony in their exchange, particularly Elizabeth's comments on Mr Collins and her sharp observations on marriage.

Weaker responses, in contrast, often focused too generally on themes or became sidetracked by contextual discussions that were disconnected from the extract. These essays often lacked textual support and struggled to identify the characters correctly or interpret their conversation. Some confused Charlotte with Jane or failed to grasp the significance of Charlotte's role in the scene. Several less successful answers lacked balance and dwelt excessively on general ideas about marriage in the novel.

Mid-level responses (L3) generally summarised the extract and commented on themes such as social class and wealth. Some made connections to other parts of the novel, albeit in a limited way. Level 4 responses began to engage with Austen's literary methods, commenting on tone, irony, and narrative perspective. There were occasional mentions of free indirect discourse, though often these were undeveloped or lacked supporting evidence.

More confident answers (L4/L5) showed deeper insight into Austen's methods. Candidates highlighted shifting points of view—moving between Darcy, Elizabeth, and Charlotte—and appreciated Charlotte's perceptive nature. They recognised the symbolic meaning in physical actions like Darcy moving his chair closer and Elizabeth blushing. These details were interpreted as signs of Darcy's growing affection and Elizabeth's complex reactions. Some perceptive responses also identified how Austen uses everyday dialogue effectively.

The strongest candidates offered close textual analysis and thoughtful interpretations, connecting this passage meaningfully to the wider novel. They explored how the scene foreshadows Darcy's proposal and the broader evolution of his and Elizabeth's perspectives. These responses also considered how Austen uses this conversation to critique societal expectations, especially those surrounding marriage, and explored how Elizabeth and Charlotte each seek autonomy within their constrained roles.

A good number of answers showed growing awareness of context, character development, and authorial technique. There was also improved recognition of the limitations imposed on women in Regency England. One candidate suggested the era was 'all fluff and feathers'. The best candidates framed contextual insights through the novel itself rather than relying on historical generalisations. Overall, the best responses demonstrated both critical insight and an ability to use the extract to illuminate broader themes and character arcs within the wider novel.

Question 2

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*

(a) This was a fairly popular question which attracted a range of responses. Weaker candidates often took a literal approach, linking the quotation only to Januarie's physical blindness and offering generalised comments on the plot. These answers typically lacked close reference to the text and offered limited analysis of Chaucer's language or technique.

Stronger responses interpreted Januarie's blindness as a metaphor for his self-delusion and societal ignorance, noting its connection to his lustful motivations and desire for control over May, whom he likens to 'warm wax.' These candidates explored the symbolic implications of blindness in relation to May's deceit and Damyan's betrayal, often connecting this to broader commentary on love, power, and marriage. They also considered how the fabliau style undercuts courtly love

conventions, with May and Damyan's relationship shifting quickly from romantic convention to crude betrayal.

Several successful essays examined the role of Pluto and Proserpina and their divine interference in the garden scene, using this to highlight Chaucer's irony and narrative complexity. There was evidence of strong contextual awareness, especially regarding the Merchant's personal bitterness and how this influences the tale's anti-feminist tone.

The best answers quoted effectively, analysed Chaucer's language closely, and commented on irony and satire. They acknowledged different interpretations—between Chaucer's audience and a modern one—and identified various kinds of love presented in the poem: lust, manipulation, and disillusionment. Weaker responses, by contrast, lacked depth, misunderstood aspects of the text, and showed difficulty engaging with Chaucer's language.

(b) This question was not as popular as the **(a)** option but attracted several answers. Most candidates engaged well with the themes and symbolism in the garden scene. Stronger responses interpreted the 'gardyn, walled al with stoon' as a metaphor for control and chastity, reflecting Januarie's possessive intentions and alluding to both the 'Romance of the Rose' and the fabliau tradition. These answers discussed the irony in Chaucer's use of Courtly Love tropes, such as May granting Damyan 'her verry grace,' only to subvert them through bathos and physical comedy.

More perceptive essays explored Januarie's self-indulgence and blindness, linking the garden to Eden, fertility gods like Priapus, and mythological references to Pluto and Proserpina. There was insightful analysis of language and structure, such as contrasts between religious and sensual diction, enjambment, caesura and alliteration, and how these techniques enhance the ironic tone and sense of deception.

Weaker responses often focused only on the first part of the passage or summarised the affair between May and Damyan without connecting it to the wider poem. These answers lacked textual analysis and broader contextual awareness.

The best essays displayed a balanced approach, integrating close reading of the extract with discussion of wider themes like power, gender roles and Chaucer's satire. They recognised the ambiguity in the portrayal of all three characters, often engaging with feminist readings and the Merchant's cynical commentary. Candidates also noted the contrast between idealised language ('gentil,' 'honest') and the duplicitous actions described, highlighting Chaucer's complex use of irony.

Question 3

JOHN DONNE: Selected Poems

(a) This question attracted very few answers. Most responses reflected moderate achievement, showing straightforward understanding of Donne's handling of suffering but often lacking depth. Some listed poems without analysis. More successful candidates chose well-paired poems—such as contrasting sexual frustration in *The Flea* with loss and spiritual suffering in *A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day* or a *Holy Sonnet*—tracking Donne's development of ideas using conceits and direct address. A few high-level responses explored suffering from sin as a path to salvation, or as a necessary part of redemption. They also considered innate suffering and its acceptance. Some very good analysis of effects was evident in these answers.

(b) This was the more popular of the Donne questions, with most candidates showing a solid grasp of the poem's themes and language. Many responses included strong contextual references, particularly to Anne More, and recognised Donne's characteristic elevation of his love through royal and solar imagery. Most candidates understood the core argument about love surviving beyond death and the complexities around separation in stanza two.

Stronger responses analysed poetic devices effectively, noting the anaphora, lexical choices like 'sweet salt tears,' and the impact of the extra metrical foot in the final lines of each stanza. These candidates made insightful comparisons to other Donne poems such as *The Sun Rising*, *The Good Morrow* and *The Flea*, using shared types of imagery and tone to deepen their interpretation. Their responses demonstrated a confident understanding of Donne's conceits and metaphysical style.

Mid-level answers tended to paraphrase, offering a running commentary with some appreciation of effect. Weaker candidates often struggled with meaning and relied heavily on technical observations, for example counting rhyme or syllables, without exploring the significance of this. A few clearly misunderstood the structure of the poem.

Overall, the best answers balanced detailed textual analysis with wider knowledge of Donne's themes, successfully linking love, time, and death across his work.

Question 4

GEORGE ELIOT: *Middlemarch*

(a) Although relatively few candidates attempted this question, there were several answers on Dorothea. Stronger candidates demonstrated a thoughtful understanding of Dorothea as an empowered character, addressing the quotation through her relationships, particularly with Celia, and evaluating how she overcame challenges. They analysed her role in the novel with reference to how others viewed her and the ways she grew throughout the text, though direct quotations were limited and occasionally of partial relevance.

Weaker responses tended to focus on superficial character summaries or plot-driven accounts, failing to respond directly to the quotation or to support claims with relevant textual evidence. Some overemphasised historical context and critics at the expense of argument and analysis.

Competent answers portrayed Dorothea as kind, self-sacrificing and principled, resisting materialism and societal pressures to follow her values and beliefs. However, many responses remained generalised and lacked detailed reference to the whole novel. Only a few acknowledged differing interpretations or critical perspectives.

(b) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

Question 5

THOMAS HARDY: *Far from the Madding Crowd*

(a) There were a few answers to this question. Most candidates engaged with relevant arguments about the character of Gabriel Oak, though weaker responses offered only brief descriptions and failed to connect his role to the quotation. These less successful answers lacked meaningful textual references or analysis and often summarised events without deeper insight.

Stronger responses explored how Gabriel's steady character influenced key events in the novel. They evaluated how he remained static in some ways, yet vital to the narrative through his dependability, hard work and emotional resilience. These candidates compared Oak with Boldwood and Troy, highlighting his virtues and his eventual rise in status.

More perceptive answers examined Gabriel's significance in scenes such as the fire, saving the sheep from clover and protecting the ricks, linking these to his enduring influence on Bathsheba. Some also considered gender roles and social context, particularly regarding changing views on farming and masculinity. However, few responses explored the full scope of his development across the text.

(b) Very few candidates attempted this question, though those who did often recognised Troy's villainy and financial motives for marrying Bathsheba. Boldwood's obsessive behaviour was generally acknowledged, with some noting the valentine card as the source, though many missed how his impulsive violence foreshadowed later events. Feminist interpretations were rare, despite opportunities to explore the men's control over Bathsheba and her implied loss of autonomy in marrying Troy.

Stronger candidates provided in-depth analysis of character tension in the extract and linked it effectively to the broader novel. They tracked shifts in conflict and its emotional impact on characters while also engaging with reader response and thematic concerns such as misogyny, obsession and objectification. Some successfully challenged critical perspectives using close textual evidence.

Weaker responses tended to summarise events, focusing only on the extract without recognising its wider narrative implications. These candidates lacked focus on conflict, narrative methods or language. Technique was often overlooked, and analysis was limited to plot description. A few less articulate answers were hindered by awkward phrasing and lack of structure.

Question 6

WALT WHITMAN: Selected Poems from *Leaves of Grass*

(a) Few candidates attempted this question, and most chose *A Noiseless Patient Spider* as one of their three poems. Stronger candidates engaged with three poems and offered thoughtful analysis of Whitman's depiction of inner conflict, referring to poetic devices and linking themes across poems. Successful responses discussed poems like *O Me! O Life!*, *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life* and *How Solemn as One by One* exploring Whitman's struggles with self-worth, identity and connection.

Weaker candidates often failed to analyse more than one poem, offering literal and, at times, repetitive interpretations with limited understanding of poetic technique. Many showed little awareness of the question's phrasing or the broader concept of inner conflict. Some essays were hindered by a superficial reading of Whitman's style and over-generalised statements about his themes.

The best answers recognised Whitman's inner turmoil as existential and poetic, while weaker responses lacked range, analysis and focus on the 'ways' in which conflict was presented.

(b) This was a very popular question with a wide range of responses. Weaker candidates tended to feature-spot and provided superficial line-by-line commentary without deeper analysis. Many failed to explore the poem's historical inspiration with few recognising its roots in a slave auction. Stronger candidates engaged with poetic features and their implications, confidently analysing Whitman's language, structure and themes. They discussed the democratic tone, Whitman's celebration of physical and mental beauty and his admiration of individuality.

Candidates often linked this poem to *I Hear America Singing* noting shared themes of respect for personal labour and Whitman's use of free verse. Effective analysis focused on repetition, anaphora, sensory imagery and potent phrases such as 'immeasurable meaning of his black eyes'. Some noted Whitman's transcendentalist values and speculated on the poet's sexuality, referencing *In Paths Untrodden*.

Stronger responses also explored how the man could symbolise America or represent the poet himself. They showed contextual awareness, considering transcendentalism, race, gender and class, while discussing how Whitman's celebration of humanity challenged contemporary norms. Critical views were used to support interpretations, and literary techniques were analysed in detail.

Less successful essays often lacked structure and relied on insubstantial assertion. Many failed to reference other poems or offer wider contextual insight. Candidates at Level 3 typically paraphrased the poem or overly focused on admiration of the man without interpretation.

What limited some higher-level success was a lack of fluency in articulating complex ideas. Stronger responses combined critical insight, contextual understanding and close analysis of literary methods to explore Whitman's concerns and effects.

Section B

Question 7

LOUISE GLÜCK: Selected Poems from *The Wild Iris*

(a) Few candidates selected this question, but those who did often produced either very strong or very weak responses. Stronger candidates offered thoughtful interpretations of Glück's exploration of faith, portraying a complex and often conflicted relationship with a distant or critical Creator figure. They analysed poems, often from the *Matins* and *Vespers* sequences, highlighting Glück's desire for certainty and reassurance, alongside frustration, resentment and doubt. These responses included specific quotations and closely examined tone, language and poetic voice.

Weaker responses struggled to identify suitable poems or focused too heavily on Glück's biography at the expense of textual analysis. Some discussed only one or two poems, offering vague or superficial commentary, often overlooking use of poetic techniques. While the poems invite personal response, weaker essays leaned too far into life context and failed to engage with how Glück conveys religious struggle through form and language.

The best answers showed nuanced understanding of ambiguity, emotional depth and Glück's poetic voice in her meditations on faith.

(b) This question was extremely popular and generally well-answered, producing a range of responses. Stronger candidates showed clear understanding of the poem and engaged closely with Glück's use of poetic methods. These responses remained focused on the text rather than Glück's life, offering critical appreciation of imagery, symbolism and structure. Strong personal responses emerged, particularly around themes of time and mortality. Candidates explored disjointed rhythms, caesura and the progression from general imagery to intimate moments such as the apricots and the small boy, noting their symbolic richness. Strong answers connected this to Glück's broader themes, like the fragility of life and the search for meaning.

Moderately successful responses (L3/L4) often summarised the poem or treated it like an unseen. While some commented on symbolism, such as flaking paint, flower imagery or the colour white, analysis was often limited or undeveloped. These answers made some thematic links to other poems, often referencing floral symbolism or ideas of transience, though sometimes without textual precision.

Weaker responses (L2/L3) struggled to interpret the poem, offering speculative or biographical readings without close textual engagement. Many responses focused on a vague idea of a special memory and lacked understanding of the final stanza. Some candidates misidentified characters or offered basic paraphrasing with little focus on poetic technique. There was limited reference to other poems in the collection, with many stating that the poem 'felt different' from others without expanding further on this.

Across all levels, the more successful essays were those that identified and unpacked key imagery, such as sea, mountains and apricots, and explored the poem's emotional depth. They reflected on Glück's portrayal of time as fleeting and memory as fragmented, comparing these ideas meaningfully with other poems from the collection. The best responses also demonstrated evolved and specific AO5 awareness through discussion of ambiguity and differing interpretations.

Question 8

JAMES JOYCE: *Dubliners*

(a) There were few answers to this question, although *Dubliners* is a popular text. Most candidates responded well, particularly those with strong knowledge of Joyce's characters and their emotional dynamics. Effective essays explored unrequited love, epiphanies and emotional isolation seen in Gabriel, the *Araby* narrator and Duffy in *A Painful Case*. Some examined women's roles, such as Gretta's guilt, Eveline's fear and Polly's relationship with Mr Doran. Stronger responses integrated the theme of paralysis into close analysis, while weaker ones lacked detailed knowledge, especially of *The Dead*. The best answers offered perceptive distinctions between public and private relationships and examined the contrast between appearances and emotional reality.

(b) This question was very popular. Results varied widely with candidates either scoring highly or struggling significantly. Stronger responses showed a clear understanding of the extract's place in *Eveline*, recognising it as a powerful representation of the theme of paralysis. These candidates dealt with the stream of consciousness technique and the presentation of Eveline's conflicting emotions. Joyce's use of symbolic details featured, such as the 'yellowing photograph' and the dusty, oppressive domestic setting. Some connected Eveline's stagnation with broader themes in *Dubliners*, exploring the roles of women, post-colonial tensions, and institutional decay.

While many engaged well with the text, few achieved the depth of analysis required for the very highest marks, demonstrating a need for stronger contextual and intertextual preparation.

Less successful candidates often summarised the extract without analysing its function or linking it meaningfully to other stories. Some made unspecific references to context or discussed Dublin life without textual support. Many neglected the wider text entirely or mentioned the titles of other stories without drawing clear connections.

Moderately successful responses often identified themes such as violence, the influence of Catholicism and gender inequality, with some linking Eveline's life to characters like Maria in *Clay* or victims of abuse in *Counterparts*. A few perceptive candidates commented on how Eveline herself seemed to be 'gathering dust', reflecting her entrapment and emotional inertia.

The weakest responses tended to be brief or lacked structure, with little attention to effects or wider significance. These answers often struggled to interpret Joyce's subtleties and did not consider other stories.

Question 9

TONI MORRISON: *Beloved*

(a) This popular question on Denver produced a wide range of responses. Weaker candidates often summarised her role in the plot, focusing on her isolation, relationship with Beloved and how she eventually turns to the community. These responses tended to lack textual support and rarely explored Denver's symbolic or thematic significance. Some were repetitive, with little analysis or textual evidence.

Stronger responses analysed Denver as a symbol of healing and community, noting her critical role in helping Sethe reconnect with society. Most explored her growth from dependence to agency, particularly in her decision to leave the house and seek help. Her unique position, shielded from slavery but impacted by its legacy, was effectively discussed in some essays, as was her function in maintaining the supernatural atmosphere and ambiguity surrounding Beloved.

Some strong responses also discussed Denver's birth story, her role in the narrative and her evolving relationships with Sethe, Paul D and Beloved. Denver was seen by some as a bridge between the past and a hopeful future, embodying inherited trauma yet representing the possibility of moving beyond it.

Moderately successful responses identified her key qualities but often fell into narrative commentary. The best responses showed a nuanced understanding of Denver's significance as both a character and a symbol of healing and generational transition.

(b) This was a popular question, though responses varied in quality. Weaker candidates often paraphrased the passage or focused only on its second half, overlooking the significance of the opening paragraphs and failing to analyse literary methods. Stronger responses, however, engaged with the richness of the imagery, particularly the symbolic contrast between natural imagery such as the blossoms and the ragged figure of Paul D.

Successful candidates explored the tobacco tin metaphor, its recurring role throughout the novel and Paul D's struggle with memory and trauma. They also discussed Morrison's use of sentence structure to convey exhaustion and disorientation, noting Paul D's lack of direction through phrases such as 'no idea what to do'. The symbolism of the North as 'free' and 'magical' was a focus for many.

Some stronger essays made thoughtful links to the Cherokee, their oppression and their compassion toward the escaped slaves. A few perceptively explored how names and identity were central to the passage. The best essays included close reading of vivid phrases such as 'spring sauntered north but he had to run like hell', highlighting the novel's deeper themes of survival, memory and belonging.

Question 10

GABRIEL OKARA: Selected Poems from *Collected Poems*

(a) There were too few responses to this question to be able to make a general comment on performance.

(b) There were several responses to this poem, and these ranged widely in quality. Weaker answers tended to paraphrase the wintry setting line-by-line, missing its symbolic significance. They focused on physical hardship, overlooking the deeper themes of exile, spiritual emptiness, and patient anticipation. Many failed to identify the poem's setting, with some inaccurate assertion about links to Nigeria. They also struggled to link it to other poems or interpret its religious and political undertones.

Stronger candidates connected the harsh winter imagery with Gabriel Okara's personal experience of exile, interpreting the landscape as a metaphor for displacement and colonial oppression. They used a post-colonial lens to see the poem as a hopeful testimony to future independence, drawing on symbolism such as the 'deprived squirrels' and religious allusions to the Second Coming. Some successfully explored implied critiques of passivity and silence.

Moderately successful responses showed awareness of poetic methods and context, though links to the wider text were inconsistent. Few referenced other poems meaningfully.

Question 11

JEAN RHYNS: *Wide Sargasso Sea*

(a) This was a popular question on a popular text. Stronger responses demonstrated a solid understanding of the relationship dynamics in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, particularly through race, class and gender lenses. Better answers also explored how societal divisions and environmental contrasts, such as the conflict between Coulibri's lush landscape and England's climate, contributed to the breakdown between Antoinette and her husband. Many recognised Antoinette as a vulnerable, victimised figure in both childhood and marriage.

Effective essays critiqued the marriage, with some portraying Rochester as a chauvinistic coloniser and others presenting him as a product of primogeniture and class pressures. Candidates discussed narrative perspective, noting Antoinette's limited voice and Rochester's namelessness, with thoughtful links to *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys's wider concerns. Structural features like foreshadowing and parallelism were explored, and many employed feminist, psychoanalytical, or post-colonial frameworks effectively.

Weaker responses often summarised the plot or focused on character in isolation. These lacked specific textual evidence and failed to respond directly to the question. Understanding of Antoinette's symbolic and thematic role was generally limited in less effective essays.

Success in this question depended on detailed textual knowledge, sustained argument and the ability to analyse power dynamics and structural methods.

(b) This question was very popular and generally well answered, with stronger responses demonstrating clear understanding of the extract's narrative placement and its significance in portraying the reality of lifelong discrimination against Antoinette. Strong candidates analysed narrative techniques and built focused arguments around the emotional and social context of the scene, especially following the fire at Coulibri and Antoinette's rejection by Tia. Many explored the symbolic importance of her protest 'But I am here,' identifying themes of isolation and racism.

Some Level 3 responses showed partial understanding, highlighting Antoinette's troubled relationship with her mother, the foreshadowing of her mental decline, and the labelling of her as a 'crazy girl.' These essays tended to lack depth and failed to link the extract meaningfully to the broader novel. More developed answers contextualised the death of Pierre, Antoinette's identity struggles as a Creole and the emotional trauma caused by both familial and social rejection. Weaker responses summarised events or offered limited insight into the extract's thematic and narrative weight.

A few candidates effectively commented on how the language of the children's taunts, the imagery of cracking fingers and the phrase, 'cling to life', conveyed fear and emotional tension. Rhys's use of foreshadowing was identified in references to madness and accusations against Annette. Several stronger responses also integrated historical context, discussing Creole identity post-abolition, Christophine's contrasting support and the absence of maternal care.

The best answers combined contextual knowledge, detailed language analysis and thoughtful interpretation of Antoinette's psychological development and social alienation.

Question 12

NATALIA TRETHEWEY: Native Guard

(a) This question attracted a few answers. Some responses lacked depth, listing poems and summarising their content without analysing how Trethewey presents the lasting impact of the past. Weaker candidates described poems superficially, while stronger responses explored themes of historical erasure, grief and identity. Trethewey's relationship with her mother and her Southern heritage were common approaches, with fewer exploring the legacy of slavery or the erasure of Black soldiers' sacrifices.

Better responses focused on Trethewey's use of photographs, memory and historical references, showing an appreciation for her poetic language and form. Some linked her work to Southern Gothic themes or intertextual references, including Eliot's *Prufrock* and Heaney's *North*. There was thoughtful analysis of how Trethewey seeks to reconcile the past and present and how photography is used to critique the limited framing of white-centric historical narratives.

(b) This popular question elicited a wide range of responses. Weaker candidates tended to provide literal readings, focusing on surface elements such as the speaker's desire to be 'blond' or summarising the gift of a wig and doll. These responses often lacked connection to wider themes or other poems. Weaker answers also showed limited knowledge of the wider collection or spent excessive time on biographical detail or miscegenation laws without linking these to poetic techniques.

Stronger responses engaged meaningfully with themes of identity, race and the complications of mixed heritage. They drew on biographical context, noting Trethewey's childhood experiences and societal pressures around race and beauty standards. Successful candidates referenced other poems like *My Mother Dreams Another Country*, *Pastoral* and *Southern Gothic*, exploring how Trethewey presents identity, memory and cultural erasure. They analysed key phrases such as 'primer for a Mississippi childhood' and the biblical allusion to Joseph, teasing out layered meanings including innocence, alienation, and historical weight.

Some perceptive essays discussed how the child's excitement to 'prance' as a blonde contrasted with her parents' bewilderment, linking to deeper questions of racial performance, acceptance and longing. Others commented on the halo imagery and significance of the birth year, 1966, with insightful parallels drawn between Trethewey's personal history and broader social narratives.

Moderately successful answers often recognised key ideas but failed to analyse poetic methods or connect effectively to the wider text. There was limited appreciation of irony or metaphor, and few answers moved beyond describing the poem's narrative.

The best responses were those that moved fluidly between the given poem and Trethewey's wider collection, used context and close reading to enrich analysis and explored the tension between personal and cultural identity. Some of the best responses even linked the theme of erasure to recurring motifs like the missing tombstone and racialised visual imagery.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/42
Pre- and Post-1900 Poetry and Prose

Key messages

- The quality of planning and structuring responses is key to achieving relevant and effective arguments and, hence, outcomes.
- AO5 is a core element of the mark scheme and must be addressed specifically and with relevance to the question and arguments presented.
- Use of supporting detail demonstrates not only the depth and extent of knowledge and understanding, but also the ability to select points to respond to a particular question.

General comments

There were overwhelmingly positive reports from Examiners on candidates' engagement, interest and determination in responding to the literature on this paper. It is clear that personal exploration and focused discussion has ignited their enthusiasm for the texts across all levels of ability. A combination of original and insightful personal response and critically detached analysis was a feature of the best answers. The majority of answers seen were to **(b)** questions where focus on the printed extract and awareness of its wider context were essential to achievement against the assessment objectives. These extract style questions require candidates not only to closely address the detail of the given material, but also to consider the significance of the passage or poem to the wider text. The texts for the **(b)** questions have been particularly chosen to entice candidates to demonstrate their skills and it is important to focus on the specifics of form, structure and language. In both **(a)** and **(b)** responses, successful candidates showed evidence somewhere in their essay of close reading and some detailed analysis of the writer's use of effects, particularly language choices.

Examiners reported seeing a number of answers that focused a great deal on the writer's punctuation choices. This is not helpful in isolation. Punctuation should be considered a functional tool used rather than a writer's choice as an effect. For example, one candidate wrote of Glück's *Presque Isle*, 'moreover she uses a hyphen to create a pause for the reader'. On the same poem, a more successful candidate wrote, 'Glück's use of caesura in 'That small boy – he would be twenty now' conveys a sense of the passage of time and memory in the poem'.

Examiners see a range of planning approaches during marking, and many answers where no planning is evident. While plans are not marked as part of the assessment process, it is clear they have an impact on outcomes. The best plans are tailored by candidates to address the argument they want to develop and the progression of this argument in the light of the question focus. These planning approaches include useful prompts for the candidate to use during their writing of the essay and are essentially working documents for the construction of an essay. This series, some candidates wrote plans that were too long. In one example, a really good candidate made a long plan for the whole answer in note-form but did not have time to complete the actual essay. Examiners also reported seeing scripts where the second essay was cut short or only just started. More astute candidates wrote strategic introductions which included a considered response to the question giving some sense of a possible argument or context and some indication of relevant methods. Moreover, AO4 Communication is affected by the structure of a candidate's answer. An example of this is seen in repetition of ideas which Examiners often see in the work of candidates in the Level 2 and Level 3 mark ranges. Repetition of a point is very different from the development of a point and candidates should be aware of this in their preparation and planning for the exam. Furthermore, there is a tendency for some candidates to write commentaries on texts, usually seen in **(b)** questions. Commentary does not enable candidates to demonstrate their understanding and ability to analyse and engage with text. Thoughtful and helpful planning of answers tends to support a critical, rather than a descriptive, approach.

Assessment Objective 5 requires candidates to consider and evaluate other views and opinions of a text. As the assessment objectives are equally weighted, this objective cannot simply be ignored. Examiners report seeing some excellent practice in the use of critical opinions from named critics or other sources and various literary approaches, such as Marxist and Feminist interpretations. Moreover, successful answers refer to AO5 aspects throughout their answers, carefully linking points to the question and their own personal views. However, a significant number of candidates are not including AO5 at all or are adding on unspecific remarks in the introduction or conclusion, for example 'some critics argue that Donne's exploration of human suffering is not evident in all his poems.' Candidates should be reminded that they can use broader critical approaches to address AO5, including use of modal auxiliary verbs to convey the idea of a range of possible views but this should add to the candidate's argument rather than appear as an addendum. Successful candidates often challenged or supported their critical references with specific textual detail. Reference to a film production or review can also work effectively and some candidates use the author's own words taken from introductions and interviews to explore and evaluate interpretations. Overall, use of personal response and evaluation of other opinions should be integrated into discussion. Some candidates had more quotations from critics than they did from the actual texts. Critical views that offered some insight into aspects of concerns or methods were more useful in generating or supporting discussion than those that were just generally appreciative.

Knowledge and understanding of text are crucial in underpinning responses in this component. It is helpful when candidates use quotation to support their views, but specific reference to details or episodes is also valid. Where responses lack supporting detail, the ability to analyse, engage personally or evaluate interpretations is also compromised. Examiners saw some very impressive preparation from many candidates with aptly chosen quotations used to support a point and then analysed to show what was significant or effective about the choice of language or effect. Quotations are most effectively used when integrated into the candidate's argument and some evidence of sound approaches was seen in Level 4 answers. Some candidates used over-long quotations followed by explanations that were simply paraphrasing the quotation. This was largely seen on (b) questions, but a few examples were seen on (a) questions with variable relevance. Supporting detail also includes aspects of context. Some candidates struggled to relate details of context to their arguments and a few included inaccuracies such as Jane Austen as a Victorian and Walt Whitman being influenced by President Roosevelt (who came to power in 1901, 9 years after Whitman died). When using support, it is important to ensure that details are accurate and relevant to the question and argument being put forward.

Rubric errors are still in evidence, although fewer were reported than last series. Please remember that candidates MUST answer on one prose text and one poetry text. One of the texts must be from **Section A** and the other from **Section B**.

Comments on specific questions

Section A

Question 1

JANE AUSTEN: *Pride and Prejudice*

(a) There were many responses to this question but a good number focused more on marriage than love, often missing opportunities to refine their material to address the question more directly. Weaker answers tended to summarise the main romantic pairings of Darcy and Elizabeth and Jane and Bingley without close textual reference. Some relied heavily on generalisations or aspects of historical context. Some candidates lacked clarity about time periods and offered overly broad discussions on women's roles and class.

Stronger responses took a broader view, incorporating relationships like Mr and Mrs Bennet and the love between Jane and Elizabeth as sisters. They explored attitudes to love through comparisons, for example, highlighting Charlotte Lucas's pragmatism, Lydia's immaturity and the emotional growth required for Darcy and Elizabeth to acknowledge their feelings for one another. Some candidates made useful contextual links to the Regency marriage market and social mobility.

Moderately successful responses identified various attitudes to romantic love and attempted critical evaluation but many lacked the depth and cohesion needed for higher marks. The best essays structured responses around contrasting pairings and examined love through themes of respect,

compatibility and personal growth, though more focused use of textual evidence was needed for top-level work.

(b) This was a very popular question that produced a range of responses. Weaker candidates often focused more on Lydia and Wickham's future relationship instead of analysing the extract itself. While some understanding of Wickham's character was evident, close textual reference was limited. Many responses noted his contradictory behaviour, saying one thing but doing another, as a sign of his unreliability, and some contextualised this with reference to social etiquette and expectations of decorum.

More confident responses explored Wickham's manipulative nature and Elizabeth's susceptibility to it. Candidates noted Wickham's civil and persuasive tone and contrasted it with Austen's underlying irony and Elizabeth's reactive dialogue. While many mentioned language and methods, fewer explored the nuances of tone. Some effective readings highlighted how Elizabeth's comments reflect an emerging curiosity about Darcy, even as she continues to judge him harshly.

Higher-level responses included perceptive analysis of irony, satire, and narrative techniques. They analysed Wickham's calculated revelations and his willingness to speak freely once assured that Darcy is unpopular. These candidates noted how Wickham's charm masks his duplicity, setting the stage for later revelations about his behaviour with Georgiana and Lydia. Some also addressed the broader thematic concerns such as Elizabeth's prejudice and Darcy's perceived pride as central to this scene.

Successful candidates made strong connections to the wider text, recognising Wickham as a plot device and thematic counterpoint to Darcy. A few even contrasted Wickham's polite surface with Lydia's exuberant impropriety, noting Austen's critique of rigid decorum as much as wild impulsiveness.

Overall, stronger essays balanced close textual analysis with contextual understanding and interpretation of character dynamics. Weaker responses relied on summary or strayed from the extract's specific focus.

Question 2

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*

(a) This question attracted several responses, but few excellent responses were seen due to difficulties dealing with the complexity of Chaucer's language and style. Weaker responses offered a basic overview of friendship in the poem, often lacking detail, textual support or reference to literary techniques. Stronger responses explored different types of friendship, including Januarie's relationships with Justinus, Placebo, and Damyan. These candidates used specific textual examples and engaged with the language and techniques characteristic of Chaucer's writing. A few insightful answers recognised the irony and betrayal within these relationships and connected them effectively to the poem's wider themes and context.

(b) There were few answers to this question, and most responses were at Level 2 or 3, showing limited understanding of the text and its context. Some simplistic comments included misunderstanding Chaucer's use of language and themes. However, a handful of candidates recognised the irony in Januarie's desire for a malleable young wife, comparing his intentions with May's subversive use of wax to create a key for Damyan.

Stronger responses analysed poetic methods and Chaucer's layered irony exploring Chaucer's presentation of 'fresshe' May, corrupted by deceit, and Januarie's biblical language being undermined by the Merchant's cynicism. A few explored narrative techniques, including the Merchant's address to the audience and references to Ovid.

There were some effective discussions of rhyme and the symbolic garden imagery. Candidates often linked the passage to wider themes of misogyny, patriarchy and Chaucer's critique of courtly and transactional love, with occasional reference to established critical perspectives.

Question 3

JOHN DONNE: Selected Poems

(a) Few answers were seen to this question. Candidates who answered often chose well-known poems like *The Good Morrow*, *The Sun Rising*, *The Flea* and *To His Mistress Going to Bed*. Stronger candidates demonstrated a sophisticated grasp of Donne's elevation of everyday experiences through metaphysical conceits. They supported arguments with quotations and analysed tone, language and ideas effectively. Weaker responses relied on summaries or descriptive approaches. A few strong responses integrated three poems with confidence and insight, though some chose too narrow a focus.

(b) This was a popular question. Stronger candidates made thoughtful links to Donne's wider poetry and discussed contextual aspects such as his conversion and the evolving religious landscape of the 17th century. The poem's opening violence was well analysed, with close attention to harsh consonants, disrupted syntax and its physical, almost eroticised language. Some noted Donne's adoption of a feminised voice, being 'betrothed' to the enemy and begging God for a violent reclamation. The paradoxes in the final couplet, freedom through imprisonment and chastity through ravishment, were frequently explored. Many explored the sensuous tension between spiritual surrender and physical imagery.

Candidates often appreciated the poem's intensity, noting the sound effects, alliteration, and metaphysical conceits such as the 'usurped town'. One perceptive response made a link to Sonnet 9's challenge to God, and some confident answers explored how 'batter' set the emotional tone and theme. Biographical speculation occasionally weakened arguments, with some over-emphasis on Donne's sins or rhyme patterns.

Very good responses explored the paradoxes and drew out the innuendo in verbs like 'rise', 'stand', and 'bend'. Some also considered Donne's spiritual journey across the Holy Sonnets. There were strong comparisons made with poems like *To His Coy Mistress*, linking erotic and devotional language. Critical perspectives were occasionally referenced to sharpen interpretations.

However, one weakness observed was the limited comparison with Donne's other devotional works, which held back some otherwise effective responses. Most essays gave a strong reading of the set poem but did not extend this insight across the wider collection.

Question 4

GEORGE ELIOT: *Middlemarch*

(a) There were insufficient answers to this question to make meaningful comment on performance.

(b) There were insufficient answers to this question to make meaningful comment on performance.

Question 5

THOMAS HARDY: *Far from the Madding Crowd*

(a) There were insufficient answers to this question to make meaningful comment on performance.

(b) There were insufficient answers to this question to make meaningful comment on performance.

Question 6

WALT WHITMAN: Selected Poems from *Leaves of Grass*

(a) A few responses were seen to this question. Poems such as *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life*, *Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd*, and *In Paths Untrodden* were referenced, often highlighting Whitman's transcendentalist belief in nature's guidance. One candidate linked the spider in *A Noiseless Patient Spider* to connection and change, then digressed into the Civil War using *The Wound-Dresser* and *O Captain! My Captain!* Some drifted from the focus of the question. Others tried to discuss change through death but most lacked relevant supporting material.

(b) This question was popular and produced a wide range of responses. Stronger candidates demonstrated detailed engagement with the poem, analysing Whitman's portrayal of human life, despondency, and the search for meaning. They showed understanding of the poem's structure,

including the significance of the final two-line ‘Answer’ and identified how it provides resolution and reassurance. These candidates referenced other poems such as *As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life* and *Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand*, drawing connections between Whitman’s identity as an individual and his collective vision of humanity. There was also effective analysis of poetic devices including repetition, anaphora, alliteration and internal rhyme, with some essays exploring the musicality of the free verse form.

Some effective responses incorporated critical perspectives, citing Emerson’s transcendentalist ideas of the ‘Oversoul,’ while others referred to existentialism or linked Whitman’s themes to post-Civil War America and critiques of urbanisation and capitalism. The interplay between spiritual doubt and artistic faith was also explored, with several essays discussing how Whitman views art as a form of salvation or collective unity. Contextual references to the Civil War, Lincoln’s death and Whitman’s wider philosophical outlook were also well integrated.

Weaker candidates struggled to interpret the poem beyond its opening lines, often repeating ideas or resorting to general statements about Whitman’s style. Many failed to recognise the relevance of the final lines or analyse poetic techniques in detail. References to other poems were superficial, often limited to brief mentions of repetition or free verse without deeper analysis. Context was rarely applied effectively.

Moderately successful responses highlighted Whitman’s creation of tension between faith and doubt, identifying his humility as part of the crowd and his critique of societal values. They analysed how the capitalised ‘M’ and ‘L’ reflect individual and collective experiences, as well as the existential questions implied by the structure of the first stanza. Some explored how the speaker’s voice shifts, interpreting the final lines as the voice of God, the soul or a metaphor for creative expression.

Section B

Question 7

LOUISE GLÜCK: Selected Poems from *The Wild Iris*

- (a) There were insufficient answers to this question to make meaningful comment on performance.
- (b) There were several answers to this question. In many essays candidates tended to struggle with the complexity of the poem’s topic. There were some comments on the link between Glück’s religious beliefs and her discussion of the divine in other poems.

Weaker responses relied on summary and basic line-by-line paraphrase, lacking deeper engagement with the complexity of images. Stronger responses provided confident detail on the questioning and testing of faith. Some took a linear approach, yet avoided narrative summary, picking out salient ideas and analysing how these were presented. Others started with the poet’s concerns and ranged across the poem for evidence to support. References to the wider collection were brief. Context of religion was covered with reference to Glück’s own beliefs.

Some essays appeared to be done as unseen responses, but most were able to select evidence relating to Glück’s dissatisfaction with the God/Creator figure. Others offered personal reflections instead – asserting that God is always there and will surely send help. More successful essays explored the accusatory tone, use of direct address and how free verse and midline caesuras contributed to it. Few referred to other poems portraying the Creator’s impatience and hostility. Discussion of natural imagery sometimes led to brief mentions of *The Wild Iris*.

Less successful responses showed little knowledge or understanding of the poem beyond stating that it’s about the narrator’s relationship with God. Some asserted that the poem was compromised by ‘scattered sentences’. Several responses identified poetic techniques without understanding the poem’s meaning. The final lines of the poem were frequently overlooked and there was some overreliance on biographical interpretations which diluted textual analysis.

Several moderately successful responses made good links with other poems using similar imagery. One excellent response insightfully argued that Glück humanises God by attributing vulnerability, perhaps to soothe her existential crises.

Question 8

JAMES JOYCE: *Dubliners*

(a) There were a few answers to this question. Some discussions focused on Joyce's desire to 'hold up a nice polished looking-glass to life' and his portrayal of spiritual and emotional paralysis in Dublin. Stories discussed included *The Sisters*, *The Dead*, *Counterparts*, *Clay*, *Eveline*, and *Araby*. While many addressed key contextual factors such as Catholicism, colonisation, poverty and gender roles, specific analysis of effects was often limited or lacking in support. Stronger answers focused on the question, integrating critical perspectives and contextual insight effectively.

(b) This question was more popular than the (a) option on this text. Most candidates offered useful discussion of *The Dead*, with some focused consideration of the relationship between Gabriel and Gretta as a one-sided and disconnected marriage, tainted by years of stagnation. Candidates discussed how Joyce uses their relationship to highlight the paralysis of Dublin society and critique Irish culture on being unable to implement change for the better. The T S Eliot quotation 'Joyce describes the paralysis of a city through the stagnancy of its characters and their inability to bring about meaningful change' was very popular.

While most essays were able to explore the way Joyce creates Gabriel's heightened emotional state, very few seemed able to refer to his relationship with his wife elsewhere. There were some good examples of close reading with better responses picking up on the juxtaposition of the dull, rather menacing external environment and Gabriel's inner romantic view of himself, his memories and fantasies. One candidate commented on the way Gabriel's passionate expectations were dissipated by Gretta's story of Michael Furey and appreciated the foreshadowing irony of the 'Moments of their secret life together burst like stars on his memory.' Most commented on the contradiction of his certainty that daily life had 'not quenched all their souls' tender fire' with the desire to make Gretta 'forget the years of their dull existence together'.

Some of the best responses demonstrated detailed discussion of literary techniques such as setting, use of time, symbolic objects and verb choices. Some also included reference to the voiceless Gretta and began to discuss the significance of her not being given her own voice, Joyce nevertheless expressing her feelings through his language such as her looking out of the window.

Question 9

TONI MORRISON: *Beloved*

(a) This question was popular with many good answers seen. Some offered engaging discussion around the idea of 'rememory' and storytelling as a way of binding the black community together and of coming to terms with trauma and the past. Weaker answers seemed to struggle with the idea of storytelling and wrote more general essays on the text. Better answers recognised storytelling's role in healing and community formation, evaluating differing perspectives and showcasing deep knowledge of the text.

It was clear that many candidates could select evidence from across the novel. They discussed the non-linear structure, giving voices to the unheard, the context of African tradition of story-telling and different perspectives including Paul D, Sethe, Denver and Beloved as a 'catalyst that demands stories should be told'. Most candidates were clear on the significance of storytelling and showed awareness of Morrison's determination to subvert conventional slave narratives that focus on the institution of slavery, rather than its effects on people. Candidates also noted that stories like Denver's recreation of Sethe's telling of her birth reflect oral tradition and connect people, helping them face trauma. They analysed how storytelling locks Sethe in the past, using recurring motifs from her time at Sweet Home like her milk and the 'tree' scar. One candidate explored Beloved's fragmented 'rememory' of the Middle Passage and how she ends 'disremembered and unaccounted for,' reinforcing the idea that trauma can resist articulation.

There was a challenge in distinguishing between Morrison's storytelling and her emphasis on storytelling within the novel. Weaker candidates misunderstood the prompt, summarising the plot instead.

(b) This question proved quite popular and there was a range of useful discussion around the presentation of trauma in the extract and how it affects the relationship between Paul D and Sethe.

Some effective links to the wider novel were evident in terms of the anatomical terms used in the extract and their equivalent in the wider novel, e.g. Sethe's 'exhausted breasts' and the nephews stealing her milk, Sethe's 'ugly' feet and Amy Denver rubbing her feet when she was in labour with Denver, linking to the mark that slavery and trauma leaves on characters and the difficulties of escaping the past.

This passage was recognised as a calm ending to the novel where various strands come together, particularly in Paul D's and Sethe's memories. Paul's gentle care for Sethe brings out all the things she can tell him because he understands and allows her to cry. Paul D reflects that only Sethe could have left him his manhood and assures her of her self-worth. There is some optimism about acknowledging the past but looking forward to the future. There was some close analysis focused on how they each help each other to reclaim their identity with some developing references to the wider text in terms of Paul D's and Sethe's experiences.

The best essays focused in detail on the way the passage leads up to the final affirmation that is given to Sethe that she herself is her 'best thing'. They examined how Morrison presents Sethe's fear of disintegration through a stream of consciousness and a reference back to when she had first arrived and was washed by Baby Suggs. They enjoyed picking out and explaining the significance of the various motifs – counting the feet, the exhausted breasts, and her grief over her abandonment by Beloved. They examined the euphemistic language used to describe the 'neck jewelry' and saw how reframing the experience allowed Paul D to see that they could have a future together.

Many moderately successful responses focused on motherhood and events mirrored in this extract. Some candidates pointed out that this is a turning point in the novel since this is when Sethe begins to talk and therefore address the past. Almost all candidates responding to this passage found authorial techniques upon which they could comment and aspects of the passage that they could relate to other relevant incidents and themes of the novel. Personal response to the context and the theme of slavery was particularly strong and was often well supported by wider reference.

Question 10

GABRIEL OKARA: Selected Poems from *Collected Poems*

(a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

(b) This question produced responses across a wide range of ability. Stronger candidates demonstrated clear engagement with the poem's exploration of childhood innocence versus adult disillusionment, interpreting the boy's dream as a symbol of an idealised world or a longing for pre-colonial purity. They linked these themes effectively to Okara's recurring concerns with the effects of colonialism. Some offered thoughtful analysis of poetic methods, such as the poem's structured form (not free verse), softer, dreamlike imagery and its more ambiguous tone. The repetition of 'soft clouds' and 'glittering' were commonly discussed, with contrasting interpretations, either as symbols of hopeful innocence or of desperate naivety. The cyclical structure and use of 'I dare not open my eyes' was often read as an evasion of harsh reality. A few linked the sun and moon imagery to contrasting socio-historical realities and post-colonial hopes. Some also noted the use of African storytelling techniques in the language. Weaker answers often struggled with figurative language and produced largely descriptive or repetitive responses. Some focused too narrowly on ideas of war, lacking textual evidence or failing to link broader themes to specific lines. There was limited reference to other poems in Okara's collection and very little engagement with critical views. The third stanza posed a particular challenge, with only a few commenting on the opposition of 'delineating' and 'harmonious blending'. Nevertheless, most were able to engage with some symbolic aspects of the poem, especially the closing image of the child clinging to the dream-world.

Question 11

JEAN RHYS: *Wide Sargasso Sea*

(a) Candidates tended to find this question more challenging than the passage-based task. The abstract nature of 'rumour and gossip' proved difficult to anchor, leading many to offer narrative or unfocused responses. Some resorted to discussing the extract instead. However, stronger candidates demonstrated excellent knowledge of *Wide Sargasso Sea* and selected relevant quotations to support their arguments. They effectively explored how rumour drives the novel's plot.

and highlighted the impact on Antoinette and her husband's relationship. One candidate noted that the novel opens with 'they say', immediately establishing gossip as a central narrative force. Top-level responses examined how rumours shape Rochester's perceptions, blocking authentic communication between the couple, and linked this to Antoinette's crisis of identity. Several candidates understood Rhys's use of fragmented, gossip-saturated narration as reflective of the novel's thematic instability. Some responses explored the gossip about Annette and its influence on her isolation or discussed Rochester's reaction to Daniel Cosway's letter. A few recognised Rhys's broader project of challenging Brontë's depiction of the 'madwoman in the attic' through an unreliable, multi-voiced narrative. One very effective response interpreted readers themselves as the first 'gossipmongers,' attempting to piece together a fragmented truth from conflicting perspectives. This interpretation recognised Rhys's intent to immerse the reader in ambiguity, reinforcing the theme of narrative unreliability. There was a suggestion that the question could have been better directed through a specific reference to Daniel Cosway or Annette's early experiences. This was a question that revealed strong understanding in some but challenged many.

(b) Responses to this very popular question varied widely. Weaker candidates recognised the conflict between Christophine and Rochester but often relied on surface-level identification of literary devices. In contrast, stronger candidates offered insightful interpretations of this pivotal moment, analysing how the confrontation shapes Antoinette's tragic trajectory and Rochester's decline. Many candidates responded enthusiastically to Christophine's assertiveness and independence, with some providing detailed close analysis of her idiomatic speech and how it unsettles Rochester. Several thoughtful responses explored Rochester's insecurity, linking his reactions to anxieties about masculinity, financial dependence, and colonial power. Some argued that Christophine represents a reversal of colonial roles, her strength and clarity making Rochester feel victimised and exposed, which heightens his narrative bias and self-pity. This extract was used effectively to support post-colonial and feminist readings, with many identifying how patriarchal and colonial systems allow Rochester to control Antoinette's fate, despite Christophine's resistance. Stronger answers tracked Rochester's emotional response to Christophine's suggestion that Antoinette should remarry. They also analysed how Daniel Cosway's earlier letter resurfaces in his mind, contributing to his mental unravelling. Candidates showed how Christophine's defiance is ultimately rendered powerless in a system where the law and social norms favour men and colonisers. Some argued that Rochester's narration reveals his deteriorating mental state and inability to process being challenged.

More assured responses linked Christophine's depiction here to her role throughout the novel and reflected on Rochester's limited, unreliable narration. Candidates compared this passage to others, often discussing narrative methods, and drew effective connections to themes of colonialism, patriarchy and silenced female voices. Some offered compelling post-colonial readings, referencing critics such as Bhabha (*Of Mimicry and Man*) and Gilbert and Gubar (*The Madwoman in the Attic*), and noting the symbolic power dynamics. One insightful candidate interpreted Antoinette as a marionette and highlighted the parallel between her and Rochester, both trapped by systems beyond their control. This nuanced interpretation reflected a sophisticated understanding of Rhys's broader commentary on colonisation, control and identity.

Question 12

NATASHA TRETHEWEY: Native Guard

(a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

(b) Few candidates answered this question and most responses lacked focus on form or language. There was little mention of the sonnet structure or the poem's place within the crown of sonnets. Some essays lacked organisation, with repetitive ideas and critical quotations overshadowing analysis. However, stronger candidates demonstrated a clear understanding of Trethewey's thematic concerns and engaged effectively with context and critical viewpoints. One insightful response explored the speaker's verbosity and introspection, though wider textual connections were scant. One perceptive observation noted the poem's circularity, reinforcing the closing assertion of 'Truth be told'.

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 9695/43
Pre- and Post-1900 Poetry and Prose

Key messages

- The quality of planning and structuring responses is key to achieving relevant and effective arguments and, hence, outcomes.
- AO5 is a core element of the mark scheme and must be addressed specifically and with relevance to the question and arguments presented.
- Use of supporting detail demonstrates not only the depth and extent of knowledge and understanding, but also the ability to select points to respond to a particular question.

General comments

Please note that in this June series, this component is sat by a relatively small number of candidates so not all texts and questions are seen.

I am once again pleased to convey the overwhelmingly positive reports from Examiners on candidates' engagement, interest and determination in responding to the literature on this paper. It is clear that personal exploration and focused discussion has ignited their enthusiasm for the texts across all levels of ability. A combination of original and insightful personal response and critically detached analysis was a feature of the best answers. The majority of answers seen were to **(b)** questions where focus on the printed extract and awareness of its wider context were essential to achievement against the assessment objectives. These extract style questions require candidates not only to closely address the detail of the given material, but also to consider the significance of the passage or poem to the wider text. The texts for the **(b)** questions have been particularly chosen to entice candidates to demonstrate their skills and it is important to focus on the specifics of form, structure and language. In both **(a)** and **(b)** responses, successful candidates showed evidence somewhere in their essay of close reading and some detailed analysis of the writer's use of effects, particularly language choices.

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Section A

Question 1

JANE AUSTEN: *Pride and Prejudice*

(a) Responses to this question were few and tended to be at the lower end of the mark scheme. Most candidates focused on class issues, for example, 'Social gatherings were seen as opportunities' and 'Each gathering was a turning point in the plot' with some assertion and variable use of textual support and reference. Discussion of social gatherings was very much focused on their role in driving the plot forward and in Austen's world building. There was some useful discussion of the importance of social gatherings in the Regency period as a tool for social cohesion in better responses where judicious use of critical opinions was also seen. Weaker answers tended to offer narrative summary with the Bennets described incorrectly as lower class.

(b) Several answers were seen to this question. There was some useful discussion of Elizabeth's apparent subversion of societal values in wishing to marry for love, including Austen's own support of this and her critique of the Regency marriage market. Critical views were well used by better candidates and these stronger answers tended to balance the passage with awareness of the wider text and insightful awareness of the implications of the passage to the wider plot and

Austen's thematic concerns. Less successful answers tended to describe or comment on the extract with little reference to use of form, structure or language.

Question 2

GEOFFREY CHAUCER: *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*

(a) This question attracted a few answers. There was some clear, supported discussion of the presentation of marriage as negative. More able candidates discussed the differences in social class and age between Januarie and May as the reason for their disconnect. There was some interesting discussion of the possible readers' responses to May and her actions, with links made to contextual features in the best answers. Reference to critics was effective in the best answers including Tolliver's view that 'January is a product of male fantasy,' linking to wider discussion of gender roles and expectations.

(b) Often well answered, this was a relatively popular question. Candidates frequently saw Januarie's speech as reflecting social expectations of women and of wives in particular. The comparison between a wife and a 'true servant' puts them on the same level just like 'londes, rents, pasture or commune, or moebles'. Much of this was identified as ironic in view of May's later betrayal, foreshadowed in 'Ful lightly master been a cakewalk'. Some made relevant arguments concerning the reinforcement of religion in the role of the wife to look after her husband in sickness and in health. Some answers dealt with the rhetorical questions at the beginning of the extract and how these reflect the unconsidered optimism of Januarie in embarking on matrimony along with his dismissive attitude towards Theofrastus. Largely insightful and well organised, responses tended to show considered understanding of Chaucer's concerns and effects.

Question 3

JOHN DONNE: Selected Poems

(a) Very few answers were seen to this question and these tended to be weak. Responses often focused on how Donne is wracked with regret about his lack of faith when young, considering the lustful temptations he fell into. Most responses lacked specific detail and struggled to convey points using a critical style. Poems used included *The Flea* with one candidate commenting of Donne, 'He uses fleas to illustrate the temptations he was going through.' There was some assertion in relation to *A Valediction: forbidding Mourning* in terms of how it shows Donne's religious regrets, with little reference to text.

(b) This question attracted very few responses, and these tended to be weak. There was some blunt handling of the poem and its ideas with one response arguing in basic terms about Donne 'moving from writing about love in a physical way to writing about love in a soulful way.' Most answers relied considerably on description and paraphrase with brief mention of the compass image as wider text. There were very few wider references or use of context.

Question 4

GEORGE ELIOT: *Middlemarch*

(a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

(b) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

Question 5

THOMAS HARDY: *Far from the Madding Crowd*

(a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

(b) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

Question 6

WALT WHITMAN: Selected Poems from *Leaves of Grass*

(a) This question attracted several answers, and most were strong or moderately strong. Candidates selected appropriate poems they considered were true to life, including *O Me! O Life!, I Hear America Singing*, *A Noiseless Patient Spider*, *Beat! Beat! Drums!* and *How Solemn as One by One*. They wrote of Whitman's concern that people should understand the gravity of the Civil War, the need for connection with others and man's struggle with the concept of mortality. Some quoted Rossetti '—There is a strong tone of paradox in Whitman's writing' supported by analysis of *O Me! O Life!* where Whitman's message is that despite moments of despair life can get better. Weaker responses demonstrated fundamental misunderstanding of *O Captain! My Captain!* with some candidates asserting that it was about the loss of a love affair.

(b) This was a very popular question and a range of answers was seen. Many candidates discussed the metaphorical representation of the 'ocean' in this poem and linked this to the lack of peace and tranquillity due to the Civil War. Many links were made to Whitman's own experiences in the war. Useful links were made to other poems including *The Wound-Dresser*. Many answers referred to the transcendentalist views apparent in the poem. The best answers discussed Whitman's concerns with the natural world and the importance of the individual including how love does not stop at death. They also quoted Rossetti – 'Whitman is both a realist and an optimist in extreme measure.' Some considered ideas about the forbidden nature of homosexuality which may be separating two potential lovers but 'cannot carry us diverse for ever'. They saw the ocean as representing society and also as a symbol of chaos and the importance of the individual. This was successfully linked by some candidates to *O Me! O Life!*

Section B

Question 7

LOUISE GLÜCK: Selected Poems from *The Wild Iris*

(a) There were very few answers to this question. Most answers were quite narrative and did not take the poetic choices into account, using a more descriptive approach. Some poems discussed were *Snowdrops*, *The Wild Iris* and *Lullaby*. Despair was considered in its broadest sense and there was some reliance on grief as a link to despair.

(b) There were very few answers to this question on the poem, *Lullaby*. Some answers simply tracked the poem, relying on commentaries and narration. Better answers attempted to deal with Glück's language, for example commenting on the fricative alliteration of 'Fireflies...flickering here and there' with one making an insightful personal argument about the 'delicate touch of Glück's verse' and its 'resonance with human emotion'.

Question 8

JAMES JOYCE: *Dubliners*

(a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

(b) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

Question 9

TONI MORRISON: *Beloved*

(a) There were several answers to this question, most of which were moderately effective. One answer argued that Morrison uses Sethe and Paul D to contrast the experience of males and females and the effects of feminism, racism and desire with partial security. Another commented that their relationship seems like a failing marriage when Beloved disrupts their life. Both characters were identified by candidates as sharing horrible back-stories and witnessing terrible events. They considered coping methods such as Sethe ignoring her own health and needs to care for her children while Paul D resorts to the tobacco tin to avoid his feelings. Some candidates recognised that the two find reconciliation in the end by attempting to look forward to tomorrow.

(b) This response attracted several answers. Some thoughtful responses were seen with focused exploration of the text and its wider significance. The character of Denver was treated very much in

terms of a survivor of collective trauma and representative of the next generation of freed slaves. Discussion included the importance of community in overcoming collective trauma such as slavery. Some useful links were made to the context of slavery and its historical and social aftermath. Links to critical views included Gina Wisker's idea of 'race memory.' The role of women was also discussed as taking on the emotional burden of slavery for the men in their lives who had been emasculated and oppressed.

Question 10

GABRIEL OKARA: Selected Poems from *Collected Poems*

- (a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.
- (b) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.

Question 11

JEAN RHYS: *Wide Sargasso Sea*

- (a) This was a very popular question. Candidates took a range of different approaches. Several aspects of cruelty were discussed, focusing on such concepts as the husband's cruelty to Antoinette and its consequences, the cruelty of British Imperialism, and the cruelty of the treatment of the mentally ill, focusing on Annette. The effects of British imperialism on Jamaica were often discussed, with stronger candidates often discussing a post-colonialist view of the topic. One confident response explored the sources of cruelty, particularly in the husband, viewing it as rooted in his need to control as he struggles with a strange environment, a strong woman in the shape of Christophe and the fact that all his money comes from Antoinette. The candidate argued that he responds with an approach that reflects toxic masculinity. Some candidates considered Antoinette's cultural isolation, being neither white nor an ex-slave and how she later punishes Rochester's cruelty with fire. Some gave examples of cruelty using a narrative summary approach.
- (b) This question was very popular along with the (a) option. The passage was seen by most candidates as a stream-of-consciousness narration. The 'life and death kiss' symbolises the life Antoinette could not have by marrying Rochester. One mentioned Rochester's claim in *Jane Eyre* that he had been 'cheated into espousing her'. The passage and the whole novel were described as 'filling in the gaps of Jane Eyre's narrative'. One candidate effectively commented on the use of past and future linked together 'It reminded me of something I must do' and 'Rhys grants Bertha female autonomy beyond the male gaze.' Strong responses were very much focused on links with *Jane Eyre* and it is clearly a great advantage for candidates to have sound knowledge of this novel. All candidates commented on the presentation of Antoinette as a mixed heritage individual and her struggles with identity and fitting in to either the black or white community. Mental health was also discussed, with links made between Antoinette and her mother Annette, as well as some insightful discussion of Antoinette's' eventual transformation into 'Bertha' in *Jane Eyre* and how this is facilitated by the husband.

Question 12

NATASHA TRETHEWEY: *Native Guard*

- (a) There were insufficient responses to this question to effectively comment on performance.
- (b) There were very few answers to this question. Most offered basic discussion of *Elegy for the Native Guards* with some weaker answers treating the poem effectively as an unseen text. There was general awareness of context in some answers, but others were fragmented with no overarching argument and lack of wider reference or interpretations. Attempted contextual reference included 'The long complex sentences reflect the many and complicated roots of civil war history.' Most candidates understood that the poem was about the untold, unhonoured history of the black Native Guards' contribution.