

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LITERATURE

H472

For first teaching in 2015

H472/02 Summer 2018 series

Version 1

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates. The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report. A full copy of the question paper can be downloaded from OCR.

Paper H472/02 series overview

H472/02, Comparative and contextual study, is one of the two examined components for the English Literature A Level. This component requires candidates to study at least two texts from their chosen topic in depth, and also to develop a broader knowledge of the topic through wider reading from primary and secondary sources. Candidates are asked to write a critical appreciation of an unseen prose passage, relating their discussion to their reading in the topic; they also write an essay comparing two set texts from the topic in the light of a statement given in the question.

Almost all candidates were well prepared for the component. Those who did well were able to offer a wealth of knowledge and insight, and many seemed to relish the opportunity to demonstrate their expertise in the topic area. The three popular topics on the paper were American Literature 1880-1940, The Gothic and Dystopia. There were far fewer takers for Women in Literature or The Immigrant Experience, and consequently this report will have less to say about these topics (indeed, some questions on these topics received hardly any responses).

Those who did well in the critical appreciation prioritised analysis of the unseen passage and were prepared to respond freshly on the day to the challenge of an unfamiliar piece of writing, using their wider knowledge of the topic with a light touch to illuminate their reading. They were often particularly good at judging the tone of the extract. One examiner noted that 'the better unseen analysis essays were those that focused on the passage as a text in its own right, rather than just listing ways it was similar to other texts they had read'. Those who did less well prioritised contextual discussion, which led to two kinds of answers that received lower marks. The first of these was an answer which used brief references to details from the passage to trigger much longer discussion of prepared material, often of set texts, which would have been more helpfully deployed in the comparative essay. The second was an answer where the candidate misread the passage in an attempt to fit it too closely to an expected model; this was especially apparent in answers to Q5, which will be discussed below. Less successful answers were sometimes error-prone, for example in referencing 'Ann Radcliffe's *Wuthering Heights*' or 'the novel *A Night in the Catacombs*', suggesting that they were depending on imperfectly memorised information rather than genuine wider reading.

Those who did well in the comparative essay crafted a well-structured argument, making effective use of references to primary texts, different interpretations and wider contextual information in support of it. They also showed a consistent interest in literary matters, avoiding prolonged detours into social history or contemporary affairs (Donald Trump appeared in a surprising number of answers, usually representing a distraction from English Literature). Some outstanding answers used their chosen texts so that each enabled a deeper understanding of the other, often selecting telling quotations to support discussion. Those who did less well were once again inclined to force the question to fit their material, rather than selecting material suitable to the question. Some candidates seemed to have predetermined a preferred area for discussion, and were prepared to wrench the argument to fit. For example, an answer to Q4b, concerning shock in the Gothic, offered this transition: 'Secondly, Gothic writing has the power to shock in the presentation of women'. Clearly, the presentation of women could be a profitable area for discussion here, but the argument needed to be thoughtfully shaped to the question rather than diverging to give a response about women. Many answers did not justify their length: it was not uncommon for candidates to write a very serviceable essay but then to feel they had to continue writing, making their response unnecessarily long by discussing additional irrelevant material or by repeating themselves which didn't add anything to their performance.

There were a surprising number of rubric infringements this session. The most common was where candidates opened the paper and automatically started work on Q1 without checking whether this was the correct passage for their topic (the topic is stated on the paper above the passage). In a number of cases, the American passage was treated as Gothic or Dystopian, and the comparative essay was

subsequently chosen from the topic studied. When a rubric infringement of this nature occurs, the examiner can only award the mark given for the higher of the two responses for the whole paper. Centres are strongly advised to ensure that candidates have seen and if possible practised answering from a complete paper, so that they are used to leafing through to find their chosen topic. A very small number of candidates did not fulfil the requirement to write on two prescribed texts, instead substituting texts of their own choice.

Option – American Literature 1880-1940

Question 1

- 1 Write a critical appreciation of this passage, relating your discussion to your reading of American Literature 1880–1940. [30]

Generally, candidates were quite happy with this extract's cosmopolitan locale and its concern with immigration, though many felt the passage was somehow about industrialisation, and others that the treatment of immigrants betrayed the legacy of the Civil War. Candidates often misread March's attitude to his wife; many candidates misquoted the passage, changing 'a hereditary Sabbatarianism kept his wife at home' to the inaccurate version 'he kept his wife at home', thereby generating a view of March as a misogynist which is not supported by the passage. Similarly, some selective quoting often led to the sense that March entertains xenophobic feelings towards the Italian immigrants, whereas the text states that he 'likes' them and finds 'nothing menacing for the future' in them. The passages on squalor and untidiness were more comfortably handled, with considerable interest in linguistic effects. A discriminator in this question was how much candidates made of the boy's intrusion (and philosophy) in the final section of the extract. Many missed him out altogether. At very least he offers a comment on the sufferings of the poor; some answers went further, seeing him as shifting the tone of the extract from realism to surrealism, or even romance: on one script he was a 'hyperbolic metaphor' speaking 'poetic words'. Some thought the extract representative of the 'naturalist' movement, drawing interesting comparisons with Dreiser and Sinclair. Some thought March's name symbolic, of spring-like new beginnings, the march of progress, or even the brisk military way in which he surveys New York.

Question 2(a)

Either

- 2 (a) F Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby*

'American literature often depicts tension between social classes.'

By comparing *The Great Gatsby* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

Most were comfortable discussing class issues, even though the American territory was unfamiliar to many. Wharton's *Old New York* was a frequent stop, candidates at all levels comfortable with its rather distant historical setting, and the snobberies of the 'gilded (sometimes misspelt 'gilded') age'. Fitzgerald's bootlegger's paradise and its ethic of conspicuous consumption was roundly criticised, and candidates were very well informed about radical politics and the pride of the poor whites in *The Grapes of Wrath* - with many offering a side-light on impoverished farmers in California from their study of *Of Mice and Men*. Willa Cather's *My Antonia* introduced a strong note of immigrant experience and Anglo-Saxon snobbery. Richard Wright's *Native Son* also figured strongly on this question, candidates deliberately allowing race issues and class issues on the poor South Side of Chicago to grind together, usually with controlled and impressive effect. This was on the whole a very well answered question, although one examiner found that 'a few answers did try to refocus the question to make it about gender, which made me wonder why they didn't do Q2c'.

Question 2(b)

Or

(b) John Steinbeck: *The Grapes of Wrath*

'American literature often seeks to change the world for the better.'

By comparing *The Grapes of Wrath* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

This was a less popular question, but it produced some lavish accounts of politics in action in *The Grapes of Wrath*, FDR's 'New Deal' and the demythologised Christianity of Casy, the preacher. *The Great Gatsby*, often paired with it, was fruitfully seen as a story about a man who tried to change the world and failed. Once again the responses brought out the compatibility between these two novels, rather than their differences. Other novels were sometimes introduced as taking up a cause, and *Native Son* answered particularly well in this respect; some candidates also chose to write on *Sister Carrie* or *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which was successfully discussed in several contexts this session. Answers to this question were often more inclined to demonstrate the interaction of text and context to encouraging effect.

Question 2(c)

Or

(c) 'Female characters are often depicted on the sidelines in American literature.'

By comparing at least two texts prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you have found this to be the case.

In your answer **you must include** discussion of either *The Great Gatsby* and/or *The Grapes of Wrath*.

[30]

Most candidates wrote about the strong but relatively unthinking women of *The Grapes of Wrath*, contrasting them favourably with the spoilt playthings of *The Great Gatsby*. Some thoughtful answers on *Gatsby* argued that, while in some ways Daisy can be seen to occupy the centre of the novel, her function is to represent someone else's dream, and as such she is arguably objectified and, indeed, sidelined. The question generated some strong arguments, the word 'sidelines' proving a very useful prompt. *The Age of Innocence* fared less well on this question than on the question about social class. Many candidates tried hard to exonerate May and even saw Newland as in some ways the villain of the book, although one candidate suggested that May does indeed inhabit the sidelines, but does so from choice, and arranges everything to suit herself from that vantage point. The larger-than-life figure of Antonia from Willa Cather's novel was helpful to candidates who wished to challenge the question's statement; there was also some interesting work on *The Sound and the Fury*, where one candidate pointed out that 'Caddy never adopts the voice of the narrative for herself [...] As a result, the reader is forced to observe her from a virtual 'sideline' as her voice merely lingers on in the memories of her siblings.'

Option – The Gothic

Question 3

- 3 Write a critical appreciation of this passage, relating your discussion to your reading of the Gothic. [30]

Many candidates were aware of Le Fanu's novel, its apparently lesbian content, and its status as a precursor of *Dracula*. They wrote with some fluency about the collection of Gothic tropes in the extract, with better answers concentrating on the means by which suspense is evoked and sustained. The 'black cat' was frequently compared with the witch's familiar of folklore and better answers responded to the detail of the locked room at the passage's climax. The events of the passage are clear and quite simply presented, and some candidates fell into a fairly straightforward description, supported occasionally by an assertion that the passage displays Gothic qualities. Better answers made artful use of literary contextual support in a number of ways, for example by using of Ann Radcliffe's distinction between Gothic 'terror' (for heightened states of apprehension akin to Burke's notion of the sublime) and 'horror' (for crushing displays of violence). More successful responses kept the distinction clear and used it rigorously; others merely name-checked the terms. Burke's *Philosophic Enquiry* provided philosophic underpinning on many scripts, and on the whole was well-used. Some short texts had clearly been properly assimilated and provided excellent context, especially Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-paper' and Polidori's 'The Vampyre'. Knowledge of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was sound and widespread. As always with this topic, many candidates are inclined to derive serious messages from the texts, often about gender politics; only the best responses focus on the Gothic as a genre which often privileges entertainment.

Question 4(a)

Either

- 4 (a) Bram Stoker: *Dracula*

'Gothic writing is characterised by a fascination with death.'

Consider how far you agree with this statement by comparing *Dracula* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic.

[30]

The question on death in Gothic was the least popular of the comparative questions for this topic, and was answered less confidently than many others on the paper, almost certainly because candidates preferred to offer prepared material, which did not fit, rather than to approach the importance of the theme freshly. Many spoke of the 'liminal' space between life and death, but very few argued about ways in which Gothic is bound up with the fear and fascination with death, the possibility of immortality, even the limited immortality of the vampire. Instead much of the writing on this topic concerned primarily other themes than death, such as the role of women, homosexual practices or science. It was surprising to read answers based on *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* which overlooked *Dracula*'s status as 'undead', or the Creature's creation from parts of dead bodies.

Question 4(b)

Or

(b) Angela Carter: *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories**

'Gothic writing must always have the power to shock.'

By comparing *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories** with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

Many more candidates chose to write on 'the power to shock', often focusing much of their attention on the treatment of female characters and the portrayal of sexual experiences. Not all the issues brought up here were particularly shocking, and many were plainly academic, such as the view that Victorian texts under-represented women. There was generally sound material on Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, usually with a fair sense of second-wave feminism and what it stood for, and also with appropriate insights into the literary fairy-tales and folk-stories on which Carter based her text. Of the authors of second-wave feminism, Germaine Greer was named most frequently, followed by Simone De Beauvoir and Kate Millett. Thoughtful responses often considered the significance of the context in which the texts were originally received, one arguing that 'Stoker's audiences may be shocked by the nonchalance with which more modern audiences react to such depictions of the supernatural, however one must recognise that the threats embodied by the vampire are no longer representative of today's anxieties and fears.'

Question 4(c)

Or

(c) 'A common character in Gothic writing is the isolated figure or outsider.'

Compare ways in which such figures are presented in at least two texts prescribed for this topic.

In your answer **you must include** discussion of either *Dracula* and/or *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories**.

[30]

Dracula's status as an outside threat to Empire ('reverse colonisation') was frequently referred to, suggesting that, as an outsider, *Dracula* represents a threat to the complacent – or fearful – civilisation of the West. These answers often saw *Dracula* as symbolic of a remote medieval aristocracy. Less successful answers once again were inclined to state that certain characters (usually female) can obviously be seen as 'isolated figures' or 'outsiders', often without constructing an argument which supported the assertion, and instead off-loading prepared material about the characters. As suggested above, the best responses are those which privilege literary matters, and some excellent answers showed how the novel's uncertain means of presentation, in letters and journals, tends to marginalise everyone, and make nearly every character vulnerable. The Creature from *Frankenstein* was a useful contributor to many essays, and there was excellent use here and elsewhere of Cormac McCarthy's *Outer Dark*, a text which seemed to help candidates to focus on the Gothic imagination.

Option – Dystopia

Question 5

- 5 Write a critical appreciation of this passage, relating your discussion to your reading of dystopian literature. [30]

Many candidates seemed to experience difficulties in understanding the surface meaning of the Stephen King extract from *The Long Walk*, partly because of the set-piece metaphor of 'Crowd' at the beginning, which some read distractingly as the embodiment of a Stalinist. The colourful individuals who can no longer be identified are not dead, as many candidates assumed, but subsumed into the corporate entity of 'Crowd'. As one candidate put it, 'This metaphor illustrates the death of the town's prior feel and personality, and also underlines the oddness and cruelty of what happened there.' Many compared King's rather hedonistic setting with the iron regime of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, often drawing parallels between Crowd and Big Brother, when the more useful connection (which many did bring out) is with the Two Minutes Hate. In many cases whole paragraphs were devoted to Orwell, drawing attention away from the content and rhythm of the King passage. Some candidates for this topic were clearly real enthusiasts, and these perhaps fared better, many referencing *The Hunger Games* trilogy as an interesting comparator, where a competitive game becomes a brutal and violent spectacle; one excellent answer suggested that King is dealing with the 'gameification' of life and death. As with other extracts, there was a real reward for candidates who read attentively to the end; these made much of Garraty and his mixed emotions and the death of the 'mercifully blasted' Milligan, which was oddly overlooked in many responses.

Question 6(a)

Either

- 6 (a) George Orwell: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

'Dystopian writing is usually deeply pessimistic.'

By comparing *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

Candidates who picked this question sometimes wrote about women's issues rather than focusing on dystopia itself. Where *The Handmaid's Tale* is concerned this made sense, but with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* it sometimes skewed answers. Some, for instance, felt Winston was a misogynist, others a potential rapist. Following this line and ignoring other aspects of Orwell's pessimistic vision was potentially damaging. Better answers tended to concentrate on the nature and effect of the totalitarian state, ground shared by both novels. Most candidates referenced Atwood's appendix, with its brilliant pastiche of the campus novel, showing their awareness of the instability of the story Offred tells, and the significant postmodernity of its ending. Candidates generally acknowledged the importance of endings to the topic of pessimism, and wrote well about the presence or absence of hope in a range of texts. *The Road*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *The Time Machine* proved to be increasingly popular texts this session, here and in other answers.

Question 6(b)

Or

- (b) Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale*

'Dystopian writing often features the misuse of power.'

By comparing *The Handmaid's Tale* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

Most candidates wrote on the two core texts in response to this question, and found an abundance of examples of the misuse of power, exemplifying Atwood's use of flashbacks to show how Offred has been stripped of autonomy and independence, and focusing on the use of torture in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to stamp out every trace of independent thought. Candidates were well supplied with quotations from primary and secondary material to map out the territory of their answers. Once again, there was a tendency in less successful responses to abandon literature in favour of historical context, and too much detail was sometimes offered on the cruelties of the Stalinist regime. Discussion of contemporary politics, while not wholly irrelevant, was also sometimes pursued at too great a length. *Fahrenheit 451* often provided an effective variation on the 'misuse of power' in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; there was also some use of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, usually to throw into relief the presentation of the state's apparatus in the two core texts.

Question 6(c)

Or

- (c) 'The imagined settings of dystopian novels reflect the social and historical contexts in which they were written.'

By comparing at least two texts prescribed for this topic, explore how far you agree with this view.

In your answer **you must include** discussion of either *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and/or *The Handmaid's Tale*.

[30]

This question, despite the careful wording ('the **imagined settings of dystopian novels** reflect the social and historical contexts in which they were written'), tended to draw even the better candidates away from their texts and into political history. In less successful answers, there was often insufficient attention to 'imagined settings', and candidates also often missed the opportunity to discuss whether the novels genuinely reflected topical issues from the time of publication or might be felt to have a universal message, or to originate in fantasy rather than contemporary events. The possible sources of *The Handmaid's Tale* ranged very widely: there were references to regimes in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Reagan's USA, Afghanistan, Romania and even Ireland. For Orwell, the contexts were generally restricted to Nazism and Stalinism. As with other questions from this topic area, there were many answers which considered a wide range of texts, sometimes climbing to seven or eight rather than the minimum requirement of two. Whilst this does not represent an infringement of the rubric, it is more difficult for candidates dealing with such a wide range of material to offer 'consistently detailed comparative analysis of the relationships between texts' (AO4); candidates are generally better advised to write about two central texts and treat others more briefly for contextual support.

Option – Women in Literature

Question 7

- 7 Write a critical appreciation of this passage, relating your discussion to your reading concerning Women in Literature. [30]

The quality and delicacy of Chopin's writing brought out the best in many candidates. Some offered a rather reductive view of the dialogue between Edna and Mr Pontellier, but many suggested that the couple had been over this ground before, that it often ended in an armed truce, and that Edna's real life was now associated with her dreams and designs in the atelier. Mr Pontellier's feeling that his wife might be 'growing a little unbalanced mentally' was picked up by many candidates, who often cited Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wall-paper' as a parallel case. Some interesting answers focused on the 'fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world', with a feeling that this sentence might offer a shrewd insight into the experiences of women and offer a point of contact with many other texts in the topic. A number were intrigued by Edna's fascination with her mixed race model, seeing this as foreshadowing the Lawrentian currents and symbolism at the end of the passage. Better candidates explored the gradient of feeling in Edna as the passage develops; the less successful responses were trapped in the unsatisfactory marital conversation at the start, and didn't reach the symbolism of the close of the passage.

Question 8(a)

Either

- 8 (a) Jane Austen: *Sense and Sensibility*

'Female characters in literature often dominate in home and family life.'

By comparing *Sense and Sensibility* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you have found this to be the case.

[30]

Examiners reported seeing little or nothing in response to this question on the dominance of women in home and family life, although there was plenty of work on *Sense and Sensibility* in response to the other essay questions. It may be the case that candidates are expecting to write about ways in which women suffer or are mistreated; there were certainly plenty of takers for Q8c about women as victims. The topic as a whole is not one of the more popular choices, which seems surprising when candidates responding on other topics often seem to manipulate the questions to enable discussion of the presentation of women.

Question 8(b)

Or

(b) Virginia Woolf: *Mrs Dalloway*

'Capturing the woman's viewpoint often means telling the story in a completely new way.'

By comparing *Mrs Dalloway* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

This question was not as popular as Q8c, but most candidates who took it on had plenty to say about literary form and how to use it to embody autobiographical features or to write a *bildungsroman*. Discussions of the workings of free indirect speech in *Mrs Dalloway* were sometimes sophisticated and thoughtful, and there was some excellent commentary on the narrative voice in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit* and on Jane as narrative filter in *Jane Eyre*. Examiners were impressed by the attention to literary matters in these answers.

Question 8(c)

Or

(c) 'Female characters in literature are often depicted as victims.'

By comparing at least two texts prescribed for this topic, explore how far you agree with this claim.

In your answer **you must include** discussion of either *Sense and Sensibility* and/or *Mrs Dalloway*.

[30]

There was good, strongly prepared work on *Mrs Dalloway* and *Sense and Sensibility* in response to this question, the latter novel working particularly well, as it features a wide range of strong women and partial or potential victims. Although there were some answers which found women to suffer unrelieved victimhood, many were prepared to offer a more balanced view and explored the novel as a vivid contemporary portrait of a woman's world. Discussion of *Mrs Dalloway* was pleasantly nuanced, with the privileged West End world at the zenith of Empire offering limited but real opportunities for female suffering. Many candidates wrote well on *The Bell Jar*, which functioned very effectively as a comparator in the question. There was some thoughtful and imaginative writing, including from a candidate who suggested that both Austen and Woolf 'show women to be victimised by the repression of their emotions; however, in Austen that is more in a narrative sense, while in Woolf's work it is more of a psychological silencing'.

Option – The Immigrant Experience

Question 9

- 9 Write a critical appreciation of this passage, relating your discussion to your reading concerning the Immigrant Experience. [30]

There was relatively little work on this topic, with *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* overwhelmingly the most popular text, often with Andrea Levy in support but with references somewhere to all of the prescribed texts. Candidates usually wrote quite well on the passage, almost always giving detailed attention to effects of language in the description of New York Harbour. Answers variously picked up on the 'hard brittle coat of snow', usually found to give the sense of a harsh and unwelcoming reception, and the noise, soot and fog, again found to be intimidating to new arrivals. Most featured the towering skyscrapers and commented on the narrator's response, feeling 'small, frightened, cowed'. Some answers were locked in to a reading where all immigrants are people of colour, and suggested that the idea that 'it hurt our eyes to look upon so much whiteness' was to do with skin colour rather than the sun on the snow. More successful answers focused effectively on the change of style and tone as the passage moves into the variety of feelings experienced by the children as they see their father; one answer pointed out perceptively that the passage shows how immigration can introduce tensions within and between generations of a family. A significant minority of answers did not reach the end of the passage, which inevitably limited performance on this question.

Question 10(a)

Either

- 10 (a) Henry Roth: *Call it Sleep*

'In the literature of immigration, younger immigrants accept change more readily than older ones.'

By comparing *Call it Sleep* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

Not enough centres opted for this text option for meaningful comments on performance to be made.

Question 10(b)

Or

- (b) Mohsin Hamid: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

'In the literature of immigration, heroism is hard to find.'

By comparing *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* with at least one other text prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

[30]

Not enough centres opted for this text option for meaningful comments on performance to be made.

Question 10(c)

Or

- (c) 'Immigrants in literature often feel compelled to rediscover their roots.'

By comparing at least two texts prescribed for this topic, discuss how far you agree with this view.

In your answer **you must include** discussion of either *Call it Sleep* and/or *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*.

[30]

There was so little work in response to questions 10a and 10b that it is not possible to report on performance. Q10c was, therefore, a relatively popular question, and worked very well, often because the subject of rediscovering one's roots is so complex, courteously expressed and covertly threatening in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. *The Secret River* lent itself well to this discussion, providing a range of views from its characters, and there was also some thoughtful and sensitive work on *The Namesake*. As happened last year, few candidates had read *Call it Sleep*, but those who had were well placed to respond imaginatively to the question of roots, which are a controlling feature for David's troubled parents.

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