

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)

H474

For first teaching in 2015

H474/03 Summer 2018 series

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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 H474/03 series overview

The H474/03 component, *Reading as a writer, writing as a reader* is a paper which invites candidates to apply their understanding of narrative construction to a set text as well as to their own writing. Candidates have the opportunity to demonstrate the breadth of their developing skills base across the English Language and Literature assessment objectives AO1, AO2, AO3 and AO5.

Successful work in this component is characterised by an understanding of how story can be manipulated and the impact this manipulation has on the writing and its effects.

In Section A, higher ability candidates demonstrated a convincing sense of narrative construction and a sharp focus on the aspect of narrative highlighted within the question (AO1). The impact of writers' choices and the significance that these have within the whole text were thoroughly explored with candidates offering a strong understanding of how these choices conveyed meaning (AO2). Candidates also contextualised the significance of specific choices within the framework of the novel as a whole (AO3) but may have also offered consideration of relevant aspects of genre and social and/or historical context where this illuminated the impact of the narrative construction.

In Section B, higher ability candidates made interesting decisions about the storyline prompts offered to construct writing that was controlled, well-crafted and, above all, engaging (AO5). They went beyond simplistic re-telling or re-ordering of the storyline prompts and made decisions about aspects of narrative including perspective, structure, style and patterning, as well as chronology, that re-presented the narrative in an original way and demonstrate awareness of the impact of the writing (AO2).

Section A overview

Overall, this section was much more successfully tackled this year with a large number of candidates demonstrating a strong sense of the narrative focus of the paper and what this implies about the approach to textual analysis. Both question options were equally popular and offered candidates a wide range of material for discussion. Examiners saw all texts represented apart from *The God of Small Things*. *The Great Gatsby* is by far the most popular option for study but *Atonement*, *Jane Eyre* and *Things Fall Apart* are all frequently offered.

Successful candidates understood that they were being asked to reflect on a particular aspect of the narrative construction of their set text and to explore the significance of this aspect of narrative in relation to the novel as a whole. Strong responses, therefore, considered how either moments of crisis or minor characters contributed to the overall shape, plotting and thematic concerns of the text. These responses selected appropriate examples and successfully explored the significance of these examples in the novel as a whole.

Candidates performing less well in Section A were frequently held back in their achievement by one of the following issues:

- *Insufficient focus on the actual aspect of narrative foregrounded in the question.*
These responses tended to offer rehearsed material about the narrative construction of the set text without mediating their knowledge through the focus of the question. Candidates often fronted these essays with generic introductions and wrote at length about aspects of narrative that were not relevant to the question such as narrative perspective or setting. Attempts to frame this lack of focus with introductory statements were sometimes offered but claims, for example, that the moments of crisis in a text were presented 'through setting' before a detailed discussion of the setting of the novel - as opposed to moments of crisis - did not meet the requirements of the question. Centres are strongly encouraged to advise candidates against preparing generic material: candidates must tailor their knowledge to the question set.
- *Over-reliance on identification of linguistic and stylistic features at the expense of the exploration of narrative construction.*
Many candidates have developed a habit of labelling word classes and linguistic devices, irrespective of whether such labelling contributes to the analysis of narrative. Knowing what word class each element within a quotation belongs to is a certain kind of knowledge but such labelling can tend to obscure the clarity of analysis. In Paper 3, the main ways that candidates can gain credit for AO1 is to demonstrate their understanding of the 'concepts and methods' of narrative construction using what terminology is appropriate in the framework of narrative construction. A discussion, therefore, which considers the significance of the train crash in *The Namesake* to the construction of Gogol's identity or that understands the roles that George and Myrtle play as foils to the protagonists in *The Great Gatsby* is a discussion which will gain credit for AO1 because it is analysing the narrative construction of the text using terminology appropriate to an analysis of that construction. It is useful to remember that the mark scheme takes an integrated approach to AO1 and AO2 - elements of narrative construction are not interesting in and of themselves (AO1) until their contribution to the wider narrative is explored (AO2).

Question 1

Either

- 1 How does the writer of your text use moments of crisis?

You should range across the text to explore how moments of crisis are used, the function they play in the novel as a whole, and the broader generic context.

[32]

Successful candidates selected judiciously from their text to identify significant individual moments of crisis which generated interesting revelations about plot or character or which created or enhanced progression within the text. These moments were variously either personal crises or were, more usually, significant plot events creating revelation, turning points or dilemma.

Some candidates had not read the question sufficiently carefully and talked in general terms about 'crisis' in relation to their text. It was hard to credit these responses for AO1 given that they did not focus on the concept of moments of crisis and how narrative is constructed around such moments to generate meaning.

Less successful candidates used this question to offer what sometimes appeared to be pre-prepared generic analyses of particular moments from the set text without having regard to whether this was a 'moment of crisis' - Gatsby's party was often used for this purpose. Similarly, some candidates selected what could genuinely be viewed as a significant moment of crisis but didn't successfully explain that significance. As mentioned in the introduction to this report, this paper foregrounds consideration of construction and that may well be at 'macro' rather than 'micro' level. Those candidates that focused on word and sentence level identification to the exclusion of the narrative framing rarely looked at the broader significance of what was happening in these moments to the novel as a whole, which is what this particular question was inviting them to do.

Candidates are encouraged not to 'fix' a reading of particular episodes in their novels in advance of the examination. Many candidates were restricted by having points they wanted to make about particular moments without these bearing on the question in hand. Candidates often struggled to say anything about the construction of *The Great Gatsby*, for example, without commenting on Nick's reliability as a narrator yet this was rarely helpful to a discussion of moments of crisis. Candidates do well when they are prepared sufficiently to be able to explore their text afresh and when they apply their knowledge to respond to the specific task set.

Jane Eyre

Many candidates appropriately connected moments of crisis in *Jane Eyre* with the bildungsroman genre as these moments often signal something of the challenges and development that the character faces through her journey. Rich material was found in the Red Room, where many candidates explored the roots of Jane's passion and the influence this moment has on her throughout her life. They were able to comment on the significance of the gothic framing to the novel as a whole and on what this moment contributes to Jane's characterisation. The fires were fruitful sources of material and where candidates connected these across the broader novel, they were able to comment more fully on the significance of these events to the novel as a whole and how Brontë uses such destructive crises to signal the emotion which underpins Jane's characterisation. Similarly, the proposals from Rochester and St John and the moment at the altar where Jane discovers the truth about Bertha were all seen usefully as significant moments in Jane's maturation and in her developing sense of self, as well as in her relationships with others.

The Great Gatsby

Many candidates chose to link earlier moments of apparent insignificance with the crises they appear to have foreshadowed. Myrtle's death was frequently discussed as the most significant moment of crisis but was often linked to earlier moments in the text where the crisis of carelessness in society was foreshadowed - through the crash involving Owl Eyes or through Jordan's dismissive attitude to her responsibilities behind the wheel, for example. The hideous meeting at the Plaza was often signalled as a significant crisis point for Gatsby as he has to hear that Daisy loves him 'too', heralding the beginning of his end and many commented on the anti-climax of Gatsby's death in comparison to the other, more histrionic, moments of crisis elsewhere in the text.

Things Fall Apart

Candidates were often able to trace the significance of moments of crisis in the novel as they revealed the crisis in Okonkwo's changing status in society, both as an individual, but also in relation to the changing status of Igbo culture in the face of colonisation. Okonkwo's killing of Ikemefuna and its exposure of Okonkwo's desperation to demonstrate masculinity was most frequently cited. Okonkwo's banishment and subsequent suicide were also explored in relation to their signposting of his tragic status, and the conversion of his son to Christianity and the crisis this signals both of him as a parent and also of the triumph of colonisation were successfully considered.

Atonement

Many candidates argued that the significance McEwan imparts to Part 1 heightens the significance of the crisis points in this section to the wider novel as a whole. Many were also able to explore the complex significance of such moments as they are given prominence by Briony's narration. Briony's usurpation in her play by Lola, the letter Robbie mistakenly sends to Cecilia and the moment in the library were considered usefully by some candidates. Many explored the significance of the fountain scene as a crisis in Briony's awareness as well as what it symbolises about the fragile nature of Cecilia and Robbie's relationship. Many struggled to view Part 2 as anything other than 'war as crisis', but some identified the moment of the leg as being significant.

The Namesake

The train crash was most frequently cited as a moment of crisis in Ashoke's life as it plays a significant role in setting him on the path to a life in America. Gogol faces many moments of crisis in his relationship with his identity and so the conversation with the headteacher about his name and his various relationships with women are presented in terms of what they signify about his shifting comfort with either America or Pakistan and their respective cultures. The crisis in his relationship with Moushumi was also fruitfully explored.

Question 2

Or

2 How does the writer of your text use minor characters?

You should range across the text to explore how minor characters are used, the role they play in the novel as a whole, and the broader generic context.

[32]

This question option was equally popular and, at times, generated perceptive discussion of the significance of particular characters to the concerns of the set text as a whole. Strong responses considered a range of characters, going beyond mere surface level to offer analysis exploring at greater depth the strands of impact and ripples of effect that minor characters have. Less successful candidates sometimes offered essays which became list-like in their structure without developing fully the arguments for each character identified. Some candidates did not make good choices in their selection of characters for discussion. The examiners were not convinced that successful arguments could be found that either Nick or Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* are minor characters, for example.

Jane Eyre

A wide range of characters were selected here for discussion in terms of what lessons they variously teach Jane in her journey through life. Helen Burns, Brocklehurst and St John were all seen to have something to offer her in her understanding of Christianity and faith. Similarly, Mrs Fairfax, Bertha and Blanche were seen as being examples of differing kinds of femininity and womanhood.

The Great Gatsby

Jordan Baker was frequently discussed in terms of what she reveals of attitudes of the time period and of the role of women. Myrtle and George and their respective relationships with Tom and Daisy were also fulsomely discussed. The contrast between Myrtle and her upper class counterpart Daisy, Wilson's weakness in contrast to Tom's hulking strength and also Wilson's inability to rise above his surroundings in comparison to Gatsby's efforts were the most frequent elements for discussion here and created lots of opportunity for perceptive debate about the impact of the class divide and the inequalities this generates. Meyer Wolfsheim was also a popular choice although discussions of what his characterisation revealed of anti-semitic sentiment were usually less successful than were considerations of what he contributes in terms of revelations about Gatsby's background and the significance of his criminal connections. Surprisingly few candidates tackled the cast of Gatsby's parties but those who did delve into some of the more unsavoury activities suggested by Jazz Age excess through these very minor individuals often found subtle interpretations that illuminated Fitzgerald's overall project in writing the novel.

Things Fall Apart

Few candidates answering on this text chose to write about minor characters. Those who did focused on Okonkwo's family members, his friends and on the significance of the District Commissioner and his writing.

Atonement

Some excellent writing was seen exploring minor characters in *Atonement*. Lola and Paul Marshall were the most common options for discussion. Some candidates offered very insightful exploration of the unsavoury characterisation of Marshall with close attention paid to the foreshadowing McEwan offers of his rape of Lola. Lola's role in inciting Briony's rage which colours how she later views the events of the day in Part 1 was usefully explored and there were some interesting comments on the use McEwan makes of Emily Tallis and the twins and the significance of absentee parenting to the novel as a whole. Robbie's wartime companions Mace and Nettle were also considered in terms of their representation of the breaking down of social division through the war.

The Namesake

Few candidates answering on this text chose to write about minor characters. Those who did tended to read every character other than Gogol as being a minor character and most frequently focused on Gogol's romantic relationships and on the significance of the headteacher and of Ghosh.

Section B overview

Question 3 invites candidates to exploit their learning about narrative construction by producing a short piece of original writing. Candidates are given the bare outline of a complete story arc and are invited to craft a short section of prose narrative of this particular story arc. In doing so, they should demonstrate their understanding of narrative construction through the interesting choices they make regarding elements such as point of view, style, narrative structure, time and place, patterns and contrasts and characterisation.

Some candidates have fully understood the nature of this task and are prepared to think creatively about the prompts offered to re-imagine a fresh, interesting and creative take on the storyline. Some were able to demonstrate real control and stylistic flair in the limited examination time they had available to them and examiners were sometimes hugely impressed with what candidates were capable of achieving within the demands of an examination.

In order to prepare candidates for this section, it is worth considering what an ideal plan for this question could look like in the examination. Instead of a list of techniques to include, a plan could explore some of the options available to candidates regarding perspective, structure, voice, characterisation, time and place, for example. Taking time in the examination to explore which characters are available to them, how those characters might be exploited, how setting could contribute, which structural choices they can make and which bullet points offer them creative inspiration could contribute significantly to the quality of writing that candidates are able to produce.

One option for preparing for Question 3 that is not acceptable, however, is to pre-prepare and rehearse narrative writing in order to present this as original material in the examination. Whilst this was not widespread this year, there was a significant minority of candidates emerging this series who offered work that did not appear to be original constructions within the examination framework. This is a serious issue because it necessarily limits the achievement that examiners are able to credit.

Question 3

- 3 Choose **one** of the storylines below to develop as the opening of a narrative.

Write your narrative, making your own choices about the story's starting point and linguistic techniques.

You should write approximately 500 words.

You are writing the **opening** to a narrative, and can start at any point, using any one of the bullet points as the beginning of your story. You are not expected to write the full story and you are not required to use all six bullet points.

[18]

Either

Storyline 1

- A brilliant inventor and his son are imprisoned by a jealous king.
- The surrounding country and sea are guarded, so the only way to escape is to fly.
- The inventor creates wings for himself and his son, using feathers and wax.
- The father warns his son not to fly too high as the sun will melt the wax on the wings.
- But the son soars high in the sky and the wax melts from the heat of the sun.
- The son plummets to the sea crying 'father, father!'

Or

Storyline 2

- A teenager, adopted at birth, is curious to find out about his / her birth parents.
- He / she tells the adoptive parents that he / she plans to trace the birth parents.
- The adoptive parents are worried about this decision.
- The teenager receives a file about the adoption, including the address of his / her birth parents.
- The teenager goes to the house where his / her birth parents live.
- The teenager knocks on the door and it is opened by his / her birth mother.

Strong answers to Question 3, by their nature, were always original and convincing. They tended to share some of the following key features:

Exploiting the learning from Section A

Some higher ability candidates were able to manipulate their own creative writing by employing features such as tone and style from their study of the set text in Section A. There is absolutely no requirement that Section A and Section B should be connected in any way, however, where candidates have really started to understand the narrative choices of their set text this can make for supremely sophisticated writing. One higher ability candidate used their understanding of the metafictional nature of *Atonement*, for example, to weave the motif of writing and authorship into their own original narrative. Candidates should be warned, however, that lifting whole phrases from their set text to use in their writing cannot achieve AO5 credit as original work.

Making original choices about point of view

Many higher ability candidates made interesting choices about the point of view through which they told their narrative. Successful writing was seen in both storylines written from the perspective of minor characters or antagonists. It was rewarding, therefore, not always to view Storyline 1 from the first person perspective of father or son or to always see Storyline 2 through the perspective of the adopted child.

Some also successfully moved away from first person narrative to show awareness of third person focalisation, for example.

Selecting judiciously from the storyline prompts

Successful writing rarely attempted to cover all of the storyline arc but instead selected just a small section of the storyline to focus on. These candidates were able to spend less time on plot-telling and focus more on crafting.

Candidates performing less well in Question 3 were often held back in their achievement by one of the following issues:

Not writing a prose narrative

Component 3 is a study of prose narrative. Candidates study elements of prose narrative in their set text and are then invited to demonstrate understanding of narrative construction in their own writing of a section of prose. Some candidates attempted to produce drama scripts which were not appropriate in meeting the assessment criteria of this component.

Using all of the storyline bullet prompts to re-tell the entire storyline arc

If candidates were not selective about the section of the story they chose to re-tell, they essentially just re-presented the original material back to the examiner. Candidates sometimes tried to avoid this by using all the bullet points but re-ordering the telling of them in order demonstrate some understanding of narrative structure. However, these responses still tended to be simple re-tellings, relying on flashback to demonstrate basic manipulation of structure.

Having a pre-prepared list of features to include

Some candidates seemed to be working from a pre-prepared list of features as though they had learned a list of ingredients essential for successful writing. These tended to be features of style and almost always included pathetic fallacy, simile, metaphor and motif. It is usually the case that foregrounding techniques in this way leads to unsophisticated crafting with features being shoe-horned into sentences. Such writing also often relied on cliché and rarely convinced the examiner that appropriate choices were being selected for the particular piece of writing under construction.

Over-reliance on dialogue

Whilst dialogue is one of many valid options available for narrative writing, many less successful candidates relied almost exclusively on dialogue to tell their stories. These responses struggled to achieve reader engagement because they lacked other story-telling features to add colour and style.

Unconvincing plot development

Whilst creativity is encouraged, some candidates' flights of fancy were unsophisticated and unrealistic. Writing must remain cohesive within the framework of genre and storyline. Plot twists involving aliens and creepy haunted houses rarely demonstrate writing above a basic level.

Some candidates offered narratives that bore no connection to the storyline prompts at all. This is a rubric infringement, as the instructions for Question 3 clearly require candidates to use the storyline prompts as the basis for their writing. Where examiners could see no link at all to the bullet points, this work could only achieve a mark in Level 1 for AO5 as very little crafting of the storyline prompts was evident.

Other candidates offered narratives that had a very tenuous link to the storyline prompts but which did not convince the examiner that they were wholly original creations prompted by either of the storylines offered. One candidate, for example, wrote a computer gaming framework in which the storyline prompts were inserted as part of the game play. In this case, the framing narrative appeared rehearsed and downloaded in the examination, merely for the storyline prompt to be inserted as a minor element. Such writing can only achieve a mark in Level 2 as it demonstrates only 'limited' crafting of the prompts offered.

Examiners are entirely realistic about what can be achieved in terms of original, creative writing in timed conditions from unprepared prompts and will credit work accordingly. They cannot, however, credit work for a question which tests the ability to craft narrative where that crafting is just not evident within the examination. Given that the candidates are not offered the storyline prompts in advance, they cannot, therefore, pre-prepare material.

Centres are best advised to prepare candidates for this question by practising working on a wide range of original storyline prompts and offering lots of opportunities for exploring the narrative choices that these can offer. Helpful tasks might include:

- considering each individual element of a storyline arc to explore the narrative opportunities that each bullet point can yield - and then writing up just one bullet point from the storyline arc.
- challenging candidates to prepare the same story from more than one perspective and not always that of the protagonist.
- re-casting first person stories in third person - and vice versa.
- trialling differing settings for the stories.
- writing in a range of genres.

Question 4

- 4 Outline the key narrative and linguistic techniques you have used in your writing for Question 3. You should write approximately 250 words.

[14]

The commentary is the opportunity for candidates to explore and explain their narrative construction in Question 3. It is also where candidates can make explicit how the narrative they have written connects to the bullet point prompts.

Where candidates have made interesting choices and selected carefully from the storyline arc to closely focus their narrative then they will have plenty to say here. Such candidates were readily able to comment on and justify the point of view they chose and how the storyline prompt has been exploited. Such commentaries were thoughtful explorations of crafting decisions. Here, the analysis is akin to that in Question 1, where - again - a writer's choices about narrative construction are considered. Candidates who chose to write their commentary in the third rather than first person often generated a convincing analytical tone but this is not a requisite for success.

Less successful commentaries made claims about the writing that were unconvincing or that couldn't be justified by the evidence in Question 3. Such commentaries tended to rely merely on feature spotting the deliberately inserted techniques, (pathetic fallacy, metaphor, simile or structure commencing *in media res*), and became list-like in nature.

These commentaries also made very generic claims about the effects of techniques. For example, first person narration allows us to 'hear the character's thoughts' or a cliffhanger ending 'leaves the reader wanting more'. Where the AO2 effect cited is generic and not specific to the candidate's writing in Question 3 then it can rarely be credited as competent analysis. Candidates are advised to focus their analysis on elements of construction and effects that are particular and specific to the writing in hand. If their commentary could be applied to any piece of writing then it contributes little to an understanding of the choices made in Question 3.

Candidates are also advised to take note regarding the comments on word class and labelling given earlier in the report for Question 1. Candidates frequently offered very technical analysis in their commentaries: 'I used the past participle polysyllabic dynamic verb 'rummaged' to portray Helen's aggression,' for example. As for Question 1, this labelling is a particular kind of knowledge but adds little to a justification of characterisation. It is wordy and over-complex. In Paper 3, AO1 credit is achieved for strong understanding of narrative craft as opposed to complex technical labels.

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