

A LEVEL

Examiners' report

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (EMC)

H474

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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 3 series overview

The Paper 3 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, strong candidates demonstrate a convincing sense of narrative construction and a sharp focus on the aspect of narrative highlighted within the question (AO1): for this series those questions were the use of time and the use of contrasts. The impact of writers' choices and the significance that these have within the whole text were thoroughly explored with the candidate offering a strong understanding of how these choices conveyed meaning (AO2). Successful candidates were also able to contextualise 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.

The Great Gatsby predominates as the text selection for Section A but centres are also engaging with other texts from the set list. It is interesting to note that the nature of each individual set text invites contrasting approaches to consideration of narrative construction.

In Section B, strong 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 storyline prompts but used these prompts to produce a part of a narrative which hinted at how the whole narrative implied by those prompts could be presented. Successful candidates made interesting, sustainable and mature decisions about aspects of narrative including perspective, structure, style and patterning, as well as chronology, and re-presented part of the narrative arc implied in the storyline prompts in an original way. Above all they demonstrated strong awareness of the impact of the writing on prospective readers (AO2) in order to produce work that was convincing and compelling.

Section A overview

Both questions were equally popular and both generated responses across the full ability spectrum.

This year, *The Great Gatsby* appeared to be an even more dominant text choice for centres. Those engaging with *Things Fall Apart*, *Atonement* and *Jane Eyre* found very rich material for discussion and often these texts prompt lively, engaged and very capable explorations of narrative, appearing to generate slightly fewer formulaic responses than those offered on *The Great Gatsby*. The popularity of Fitzgerald's work as a masterpiece of ground-breaking construction does mean that it is often all too easy to reduce its narrative power to simplistic soundbites. There are still candidates who are incapable of writing anything on the text without reference to Nick's 'homodiegetic, unreliable narration', irrespective of the question being tackled and the discussion in hand. Sadly, a negligible quantity of *The Namesake* responses were seen this year and no responses were offered on *The God of Small Things*.

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 time as narrative construct or contrasts in the construction of their text, contributed to the overall shape, plotting and thematic concerns of the novel studied.

The 2018 report offered detailed guidance to centres on approaches to Section A and centres are strongly encouraged to return to this guidance in their preparation of candidates for future series. Candidates have, by and large, understood that they need to focus their responses on the actual aspect of narrative foregrounded in the question and that over-reliance on labelling of linguistic and stylistic features is unhelpful. The key guidance that the examiners would wish to communicate from the 2019 series is that merely commenting on elements of time or contrast only goes so far as identifying the aspect of narrative within the text. Strong responses demonstrate convincing understanding of the significance of such narrative choices in relation to the text as a whole: in this way, AO1 and AO2 become truly integrated.

Question 1

Section A – Reading as a writer

- 1 In what ways does the writer of your text use time?

You should range across the text to explore how time is manipulated, the role it plays in the novel as a whole, and the broader generic context.

[32]

The mark scheme indicative content has been further developed this series to offer more detail on the range of approaches that candidates might wish to consider in relation to both Question 1 and Question 2. Examiners do not use the indicative content as an exhaustive checklist of what candidates ought or must say but centres will find these suggested approaches useful guidance material.

Candidates selecting Question 1 were offered a wide and rich seam of material to consider in relation to all the set texts. Strong candidates were able to readily engage with the implications of time and its construction in all of the studied novels. Fitzgerald's telescoping of time and his investigation of Gatsby's project to repeat the past were often cited, and the episodic, retrospective and selective nature of the narration was also useful material. In other texts, the significance of time to Jane Eyre's emotional and spiritual progression, the discrete historical sections of *Atonement* and the timeless quality of much of Achebe's novel until colonisation and modernity crash into Igbo culture were all useful approaches.

Weaker candidates tended to consider time as a thematic concept rather than a narrative construct and this was particularly evident for those tackling *Gatsby*, where the clock's fall from the mantelpiece became a talisman of significance far greater than any other aspect of the novel. Centres are strongly advised to make sure candidates can range freely across their texts rather than focus rigidly on a very small number of narrative episodes.

Some successful approaches:

- *The Great Gatsby*

- Contrast between younger Nick and older Nick - the novel as bildungsroman
- Changes in how we view motifs over time – e.g. green light - love for Daisy, American Dream, green money to win golden Daisy, symbol of hope and belief in turning back time, “fresh green breast” of the New World ravaged by settlers.
- Nick's nostalgia for the past, his love for Gatsby, his longing for a golden, glamorous past and the novel as a love letter to a lost hero.
- Lost time - the party with McKee; Gatsby's five years
- Collapsed time - all the parties evoked in lists of guests, food; the earth ‘lurches’
- Nick uses future knowledge of Gatsby in telling chronological story
- Youth versus age - the character of Gatsby springs directly from the desires and youth of James Gatz - almost a caricature of what a young man desires
- The killing of Gatsby as countdown
- Time period of the 1920s supplies essential themes and character elements - the bootlegger, the criminal Wolfsheim, the parties and hedonism, the clash between old and new money, the uber masculine Tom, the Stepford wife Daisy, the new woman Jordan, the impossibility of the American Dream
- Sequencing

- the motif of the valley of ashes is introduced before any of the 1920s glamour such as Gatsby's parties - this is because Fitzgerald was aware that his readership would ignore the inconvenient truths of their careless society
- the timing of the death of Myrtle in the valley of ashes after Tom and Gatsby fight in New York depicts Myrtle as collateral damage of upper-class carelessness.

- Seasonal time: summer and temperatures – rising, sweltering, simmering, broiling - mirrors the passion and conflict between Daisy and Gatsby; autumn as the death of summer and the death of Myrtle and Gatsby.
- Different narrative voices from different time periods

- *Jane Eyre*

- *Bildungsroman* - growing up over time; how Jane changes
- Settings reflect phases of development of understanding

- *Things Fall Apart*

- Foreshadowing Ikemefuna's death with “ill-fated”
- Pre-colonial Nigeria versus colonial Nigeria
- How values change over time - types of masculinity that are valued by the tribe; Okonkwo and his need to appear hypermasculine bring on the tribe's destruction at the hands of the white invaders
- Novel as an exploration of a vanished pre-colonial time
- Novel as a record of precise moment when “before” became “after”; Achebe possibly puts forward the why and how this happened

- *Atonement*

- Slows time in Part One to observe moments of crisis

- *Skips time in Part Two from battlefield to Dunkirk to show the real implications of Bryony's actions*
- *Part three time used to show character development*
- *Writer Bryony versus child Bryony*
- *Bildungsroman - time as growth*

Question 2

2 How does the writer of your text use contrasts?

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

[32]

As for Question 1, there were a broad range of differing approaches to this question. At a simple level straightforward contrasts between settings or characters offered lower-ability candidates ample straightforward material for discussion. There were risks with this approach where the significance of such contrasts was not identified – merely describing the differences in Gatsby and Tom's respective mansions was not sufficient, for example. Successful responses connected these contrasts to the broader thematic patterns within the studied novels and considered how such patterns created a web of meaning that contributed to writers' purposes.

Some successful approaches:

• *The Great Gatsby*

- Setting - the Eggs and New York, the Eggs and the Valley of Ashes, Nick's/Gatsby's/ Tom's houses/ the flat/ the hotel
- Tom and Daisy's house versus the valley of ashes vocabulary of vitality versus vocabulary of death
- Old money and new money; the winners and losers of capitalism
- Nick and Gatsby
- Tom and Wilson
- Daisy's voice versus Myrtle's sensuality - something perfect and out of reach versus achievable, flawed, ugly physical reality
- Contrast of the rich and poor to explore moral decline
- Jordan and Myrtle - independent versus sexualised; compromised for the promise of wealth
- Contrast in dialect and idiolect - to represent the melting pot of America in the 1920s
- Survivors and victims
- The contrasting methods of social climbing employed by Myrtle and Gatsby

• *Jane Eyre*

- The contrasts between wealth and poverty and the relationship between money and agency in *Jane Eyre* and those that have agency and power and those who do not
- *Jane versus Blanche to demonstrate Bronte's criticism of contemporary social hierarchy*
- *Rochester and St John - hot and cold; reflective of Jane's two options: self-willed and passionate or restrained and submissive.*
- *Bertha and Jane*
- *Bertha and Jane and Blanche Ingram - degrees of Christian, savagery, beauty.*

- *Helen and St John - types of Christian - loving, self-sacrificing, forgiving versus unable to love*

- *Things Fall Apart*

- the intersection between gender difference and culture in *Things Fall Apart*
- Achebe presents tragedy through the contrasts between Okonkwo and his father
- how the narrative voice views Unoka and how Okonkwo views his father?
- male dominance, rebellion and radical change.
- Okonkwo and Unoka; Nwoye and Okonkwo; Nwoye and Ikemefuna; Ezinma and Nwoye;
- Mr Brown versus Rev Smith
- Uchendu's peaceful compromise versus Okonkwo's impetuous and unexamined violence;
- the District Commissioner's view and our view of Okonkwo

- *Atonement*

- Briony's contrasting worlds of fictionality and reality – and her desire to live beyond, create and/or manipulate both
- *Briony and Cecilia's relationships with Robbie*
- *Contrast between young Briony and nurse Briony - destructive tempest versus healing figure; honesty and lies.*
- *the different views of the fountain scene*
- *Settings: the idyllic Tallis house, the 1999 hotel; Dunkirk (the leg in the tree); London - the flat and the hospital*
- *Rich and poor - types of power and powerlessness*
- *the 3rd person versus the 1st person sections*
- *the story of atonement versus the act of atonement itself in writing the book*
- *Contrast of genres - country house novel, bildungsroman, social novel, psychological fiction; post-modern; tragedy; romance*

Section B

Question 3

Section B – Writing as a reader

- 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 are writing the **opening** to a narrative, and can use 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.

You should write approximately 500 words.

[18]

Either

Storyline 1

- A young bride woke up one morning.
- Her body ached; her mouth was dry; she struggled to get out of bed.
- When she looked in the mirror, she found she had aged fifty years.
- 'My memories!' she said. 'They've been taken.'
- She began to hunt up and down the land for whoever looked as she had once looked.
- One day, long afterwards, she finally found what she had been searching for.

Or

Storyline 2

- It is early morning and the temperature is just above zero.
- A lorry driver spots a moving shape by the side of the dual carriageway.
- The driver pulls over and sees that the shape is a child about three years old.
- Barefoot, the child is carrying a pair of shoes.
- The lorry driver asks where the child's parents are.
- The child asks the driver for help putting on the shoes.

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.

As for the 2018 series, 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 a given 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.

The most successful creative approach was demonstrated by those candidates who had evidently planned their response, creating a scene and a set of circumstances, before plunging into story. The best crafting was subtle and under-played.

Storyline 1 offered a range of interesting creative approaches with examiners surprised by some very sensitive material on memory loss, aging and dementia-related illness. In one piece, the 'young bride' was revealed to be an elderly woman locked in her memories and unable to recall the details of her life. Another candidate impressed with a view of the bride crafted from the perspective of a jealous rival. Storyline 2 also generated mature responses to adult themes with the child variously imagined as escaping disturbing home life or as a trafficked individual. Issues around immigration and Brexit were interesting context for these stories which were strongest when they remained closest to real-world issues. Candidates sometimes chose to write from the perspective of the child, choosing to create a naïve narratorial voice although this was rarely successful.

There was also a lot of weak writing in response to both storylines and a lot of writing which demonstrated misunderstanding of the task rubric. Examiners struggled to credit work which:

- Diverted from the storyline arc.

While creative and innovative writing is always welcomed, there was a significant number of candidates this year who ignored the over-arching storyline arcs given in the prompts. Many chose one bullet point from one of the storylines but detached those details entirely from the original narrative arc implied in the task given. In 2018, the Examiners' Report made clear that writing *must* respond to the prompts given in order to meet the task rubric: writing does not need to represent the entire storyline arc implied in each prompt, (indeed, it is desirable that it does not), but the examiner must have a clear sense that the original writing is part of a wider storyline arc, recognisable as one of the two prompts given. The rubric of this task is that the story arcs given are the focus of the writing. The 2018 report made clear that writing which diverts significantly from the storyline prompts such that it is impossible to see either of the original narrative arcs will be viewed as rubric infringement.

- Made simplistic use of a narrow range of generic codes and conventions.

Very many candidates wish to write in the horror genre. While the cinematic codes for this genre are clearly very well understood by the candidature, many candidates are losing marks by producing naïve and poorly crafted horror stories that clutch too readily at visual codes that they are unable to convert with control into a piece of original writing. Examiners saw many representations of the child in Storyline 2 as a red-eyed fiend or other-worldly alien, but the subtlety required to generate horror in the written form was usually missing and writing fell back on cliché. The most successful writing for Question 3 was often that which presented real-world narrative in realistic voices – testing ordinary people in unusual circumstances is an excellent strategy for writing.

- Was ungrammatical and lacking in basic accuracy.

While much of the credit for AO1 will be generated by narrative crafting, weak accuracy naturally detracts from the success of the writing and indicates lack of crafting and control. Slips in tense were one of the most common issues observed.

- Lacked interest for the reader.

Examiners are entirely realistic about what it is possible to achieve within the confines of exam conditions, but original writing that is pedestrian, clichéd and predictable is hard to credit as competent work. The most successful responses to Question 3 either surprise the

reader with clever or unforeseen plot diversions or present experiences and attitudes that are recognisable to them in some way.

- Relied on description.

Candidates are reminded that this question tests understanding of narrative construction. While descriptive detail may form a significant role within a wider narrative, merely producing a descriptive piece does not fully meet the spirit of the component to focus on narrative construction.

There is also strong evidence of pre-prepared description. Description may form an important part of the original writing but ought not to dominate to the exclusion of plot and story and ought always to be crafted as original and authentic responses to the tasks given in the exam.

- Was too short.

The nature of narrative crafting dictates that there needs to be some substance to the material. Overly brief responses are self-penalising.

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]

Detailed guidance on Question 4 was offered in the 2018 Examiners' Report and this guidance remains valid and useful to centres to understand how candidates can produce successful commentary writing.

This series, fewer candidates merely listed techniques or offered generic claims about their impact in the writing. Examiners do note, however, that some writing is deliberately and awkwardly shaped in order to include techniques which can then be 'ticked off' in a commentary exercise. Both Question 3 and Question 4 suffer from such an approach which is never successful and always feels contrived.

Candidates do need to allow time for the commentary writing task. Time to re-read and review the writing thoughtfully and critically is time well-spent.

Those candidates who have understood the similarities between Section A and their commentary writing in Question 4, often write lucid commentaries that offer valid analysis of the impact of the original writing. Some candidates employed a third person voice in order to write critically and objectively about their work and this is an entirely valid approach. The most successful commentaries explored meaning creation in the writing – analysis verbs predominate in these commentaries and claims can be justified through the evidence in the writing.

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