

FRENCH LITERATURE

Paper 8670/41

Texts

General Comments

It was a pleasure to see that many candidates had clearly enjoyed reading the texts, and tackled the questions expertly. The overall impression was that the standard was in line with the ones of previous years. However the quality of language was quite poor in many cases, with spelling following phonetics, and verb endings and agreements ignored. The use of *car* instead of *quand*, and the omission of *ne* when writing the phrase *ne...que* can lead to ambiguity of meaning and certainly to lack of clarity. A tendency creeps in to answer in note style, juxtaposing one statement after another irrespective of logic. Some candidates had added comments using arrows, asterisks and numbers that were sometimes difficult to follow. Nevertheless, far more average and below average candidates had followed advice about structuring their answers with paragraphs and conclusions and were able to gain marks accordingly. More able candidates showed some resolution in their conclusions.

There were still some Centres whose candidates all seemed to start with the same information, which tended to be of a very general nature, not specific or even relevant to the question. Although introductory remarks can be valid and useful in setting the scene, too much general comment and pre-learned material is counter-productive. Standard information such as the author's year of birth gains no credit unless the candidate makes a point with it that is relevant to the question, which very rarely happens. In the scripts of some Centres, it seemed as though candidates were keeping to the 'official line' of their Centre rather than displaying originality or independence of thought.

There were more cases than in previous years of a very uneven approach to the three part context **Questions, 1(a), 2(a), 3(a) and 4(a)**. There were a significant number of cases of candidates' providing very short answers to one or two of the sections and long ones for the other section. Most often this led to candidates' writing at great length in the first part of the question and failing to develop the other sections. It appeared that some candidates had failed to read all parts of the question first, going on to produce a lengthy first answer, excessively narrative and indiscriminate, and frequently containing material more appropriate to (ii) and (iii), resulting in much repetition in the remainder of the answer.

Fewer instances of rubric infringements were encountered than in previous years showing that most candidates took care to follow the instructions. Most candidates attempted three texts, but a very small number had only completed two essays (occasionally because they had written so much in their first piece that they did not leave enough time to complete the other essays), or had answered two questions on the same text. Clearly *soit...soit* meaning 'either...or' is not understood by some.

It was pleasing to see that there were far fewer cases of excessively long answers than in the past. Candidates are asked to write 500-600 words per essay, and essays which are too long score a maximum of 17.

Comments on specific questions

Section 1

Question 1

Maupassant: *Boule de Suif et autres contes de la guerre*

- (a) **Question 1** on Maupassant was very popular and generally well answered. The majority of candidates knew the story of the *Deux Amis* and were able to identify the context. Assessments of their actions were sound, however candidates' responses to (iii) were more variable. Some thought that *portrait* merely implied the man's physical appearance. There was generally a superficial comparison of this officer with Prussians portrayed in other stories, even where candidates noticed that the question asked them to consider *soldats* (not just *officiers*). Most thought that his behaviour was *typique*, though a few candidates ignored this part of the question. The main failing was that many candidates did not refer to other *contes*. Not many mentioned the Prussian soldiers in *La Mère Sauvage*, which would have provided good material for comparison.
- (b) This question gave rise to a preponderance of superficial answers as many candidates did not really understand what constituted patriotism. *Boule de Suif* and *Rachel* were identified as patriotic by most candidates. Many candidates said that when *Boule de Suif* gave in to the Prussian officer, it was an act of patriotism, without any further explanation or exemplification of her patriotism. Most of the other examples that could be presented needed some consideration of what patriotism means. Whether 'being motivated by love of one's country', including protecting compatriots or the country's dignity, or 'acting against your country's enemy', even motivated primarily by personal revenge, would need to be defined when considering the characters in the other stories. Not many candidates raised this issue. A small number of candidates additionally mentioned the sociological aspects of patriotism in the stories, particularly that it is concentrated in the lower classes. Very few mentioned that Maupassant the pacifist criticised war itself, not just the Prussian side.

Question 2

Voltaire: *Candide*

- (a) Again, this question gave all candidates an opportunity to score marks if they had read the text. Candidates generally understood the context and were able to provide a reasonable response to the first two parts of the question, although there were some irrelevant digressions into cannibalism, and some did not mention religion. Although some answers depended too heavily on narrative, very few candidates used the evidence of chapter 16 to illustrate the exploitation of the poor indigenous people by the rich foreign religious power. Very few candidates saw the need or were able to provide detail of Voltaire's satire other than in the most general terms. Candidates found it difficult to engage in a sophisticated way with the third part of the question, although good answers noted *Candide's* extreme dependency on *Pangloss* gradually decreasing.
- (b) Option (b) was generally less well answered than (a), as the great majority of candidates did not understand the implications and succumbed to the temptation to write a character study on *Pangloss* supported by narrative and storytelling, or even to claim that his philosophy could be taken seriously. Nevertheless, most were able to point to *Pangloss's* failure to adapt his teaching to observed reality. Better candidates realised that this made him a figure of fun, but very few said that Voltaire intended to satirise Optimism. Some candidates contrasted *Pangloss* with *Martin* the pessimist and some with *Eldorado*, however the more successful answers used *Candide's* own (changing) perceptions of *Pangloss* to expose him.

Question 3

Sartre: *Les Mains sales*

- (a) This question was also popular. Few candidates appreciated the self-interest in Louis' position in that he had ordered the assassination of a figure who was by this time the hero of the party and that, therefore, he had a strong interest in Hugo's story's not being told. This rendered many answers rather superficial. Part (ii) in particular was not well addressed as many limited their response to describing Louis' attitude rather than discussing whether it was justified, and some simply repeated the accusations from the passage without exploring them. Many had a good response for point (iii).
- (b) This was quite well answered, but few discussed the structure of the play and how the events of the past are crucial to the decision about Hugo whose fate is in the balance until the very end. As far as understanding and interpretation of the question was concerned, many candidates appeared not to have understood the meaning of 'suspense' and wrote out the story of the play, or enumerated different moments of the play when the turn of events was not what the reader or spectator had been expecting, without giving consideration to the extent to which the play was successful. There was often little or no reference to the more mechanical moments of tension during the play with cases, revolvers, entries and exits designed to tantalise, and the sub-plot of Jessica and Hoederer.

Question 4

Giono: *Regain*

- (a) As last session, this was not one of the frequently studied texts. Of the candidates who did choose this, most appeared to find **Question (a)** more manageable.
- (b) **Question (b)** was mostly quite well done with good examples from the text.

Section 2

Question 5

Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*

- (a) This was a deceptively easy question that some candidates struggled to make into a convincing response because the answer can be distilled into a couple of notions about Cyrano's inner beauty combined with Christian's appearance. Most found more to say about Cyrano than about Christian, but had little idea of what Cyrano's inner beauty consisted of. The difficulty lay in organising observations on this theme with sufficient and appropriate illustration from the text into a satisfactory essay without resorting to recounting the plot. Nevertheless, it was well suited to conscientious candidates. A common weakness was to dwell on the idea of the internal and external beauties without going further.
- (b) This was a less popular question than (a), possibly because it required more detailed knowledge of the text, but for those with sufficient understanding it tended to produce good answers. It was mostly quite well done with good examples from the text. One or two very praiseworthy efforts were seen, providing precise detail. Some essays were perceptive, and commented on the purpose of the character.

Question 6

Balzac: *Le Curé de Tours*

- (a) As in the previous session, this text had not been widely studied, but those candidates who did answer **Question (a)** found it difficult to link the effect of celibacy on the characters and wrote instead about what the 'unmarried' characters did, with no reference to celibacy.
- (b) There were fewer responses to this question than to (a), but candidates were more successful in tackling it than the alternative, coming up with some good examples of ambition and its effects from the novel.

Question 7

Lainé: *La Dentellière*

- (a) This was a popular question, but one that provided few really good answers as it was answered irrelevantly or consisted primarily of retelling the story in many cases. Average candidates found it very difficult and resorted to writing about mutism or Pomme's servile personality. For most candidates, the problem was that they tended to focus almost exclusively on Pomme's failings whereas the comment in the question focuses on Aimery's inability to appreciate Pomme. Mention of his dreamy self-absorption would also have been relevant to the answer.
- (b) Answers to this question tended to be better than those to (a). It provided an opportunity for all candidates to gain marks with their textual knowledge, however weaker candidates tended to describe the lives of the three main women with no development. The question was frequently misunderstood as candidates answered about the roles that the women played in the novel, rather than the *image du rôle de la femme dans cette société*. There was a tendency to see Marylène (if she was referred to at all) as a wholly positive character because she was less passive than Pomme and Pomme's mother, without taking into account the extent to which she was a dependent figure while also exploiting men. Very few saw merit in Pomme's mother who did her best to survive in adversity and took care of Pomme when she was ill.

Question 8

Camus: *Caligula*

- (a) Answers that avoided commenting on what Caligula did without explicitly referring to Cherea's remark from Act IV scene iv in the question still tended only to give examples of Caligula's brutality and how his behaviour was changing the way of life, rather than developing more thoughtful responses. Some candidates expressed the idea that it was more as a theatrical character than as a threatening person that he forced others to think. Stronger candidates concentrated on what Caligula was trying to do by his actions and how his subjects seemed just to accept everything he did rather than rebel against him, which caused him to push them further.
- (b) Answers to this question were less successful. Stronger candidates preferred Cherea to loyal Helicon, but mentioned the latter's strengths (compassion for Caligula's desperation, revolt against social hypocrisy) as well as weak points (complicity, lack of responsibility). Most seemed able to identify the differences between Cherea and Helicon, the reasons for which Helicon so blindly followed Caligula and how Cherea was not working for his own self-interest but for the good of the others. A few candidates only mentioned one of them, not both.

Question 9

Colette: *Le Blé en herbe*

- (a) This text was very popular and the great majority of candidates opted for this question, which was quite well answered on the whole. It was well suited to conscientious candidates, but again weaker candidates were afforded an opportunity to gain marks with their textual knowledge. Better candidates were able to see beyond the Madame Dalleray affair and to acknowledge that adolescence meant that Phil and Vinca were unsure how to respond to each other before she came along; she was not the sole cause of their suffering. The sufferings of Camille Dalleray were often added, but rarely with real insight into her feelings at the end, whilst Phil's problems were often ignored. Some candidates did not take into account the words *le plus* in the title, often because the essay was one-sided, only considering Vinca's perspective, or that the focus of the suffering was to be *de ses sentiments amoureux*.
- (b) Whilst it was the less commonly chosen question, (b) was very well answered by those candidates who knew the text well. It prompted some good analysis and was clearly a subject that had been well explored by some Centres, although the question was answered irrelevantly in many cases. Better answers brought out the symbolism of the title, the importance of the seasons, and the environment of the sea and coast for the characters, as well as the other more obvious symbols of colour, for example. Occasionally candidates appeared unable to decide whether they were writing about human nature or Nature.

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