

LITERATURE (ENGLISH) LEVEL 1/LEVEL 2

Paper 0476/01
Paper 1: Set Texts

Key messages

The following are necessary for success on this paper:

- detailed knowledge of the whole text, not simply a part of it
- maintaining direct relevance to the question
- focus on writer's language, particularly in answers to passage-based questions
- exploration of the writer's method, not just through language and imagery, but also through structure, theme, and characterisation as appropriate
- well-structured and developed argument
- detailed support by way of well-chosen quotation and reference, or close echoes of the text.

General comments

While some candidates showed detailed knowledge of the texts and addressed the questions set, many wrote very little or simply ignored the questions. There was clearly a need for much more practice in examination technique.

For most candidates, the poetry response tended to be the lowest scoring answer. Though there was not much undue listing of poetic devices, many answers contained random and unfocused comments showing only understanding of surface meaning. Candidates need help to identify what is required in questions which use phrases such as 'strikingly convey', 'dramatically reveal' and 'vividly reveal'. They need to be aware that it is crucial to explore the effect of a writer's choice of words or images, not only in the poetry texts but also in the drama and prose, since passage-based questions also require analysis.

There were a large number of rubric infringements. The most common cases were answering or not answering an essay question, or not answering a passage-based question. Some attempted all three questions on each of their three chosen texts.

In empathic responses there were very few examples of candidates offering the wrong character or of not attempting to create a voice for the character

Section A: Drama

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Much Ado About Nothing*

Question 1

While it was very difficult for candidates to answer successfully without referring to Claudio's outburst immediately preceding this and to the famous 'rotten orange' accusation of Hero, some candidates' answers suffered by spending a long time discussing the general situation and delaying starting on the printed passage. Good answers examined the words in some detail and considered the pace and tone. Some responses were under-focused on 'dramatic'.

Question 2

Most candidates were aware of Beatrice's feisty nature and her wordplay, though they might have made it more relevant to her being, because of this, an 'admirable' heroine. Largely, answers made general remarks

about her character and some compared her favourably with Hero. The best answers saw Beatrice as a sort of feminist icon, admiring her ability to stand up to men in an age when women were dependent on men to arrange their marriages and generally control their lives. They also admired her loyalty to Hero – she is the only one to unhesitatingly support her – and her ability to change her mind, when she realises that she is in love with Benedick. Less successful answers offered a character sketch of Beatrice, highlighting her feistiness and her individuality, but not focusing on why she is admirable.

Question 3

The focus here is on 'admirable' so a strong personal response was looked for supported by close consideration of the ways in which Shakespeare presents Beatrice, not merely a prepared character sketch. Most candidates were aware of Beatrice's feisty nature and her wordplay, though they might have made it more relevant to her being, because of this, an 'admirable' heroine. Usually answers made general remarks about her character and some compared her favourably with Hero.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *Julius Caesar*

Question 4

As in but candidates were too often intent on describing the action of the passage at the expense of exploring how Shakespeare makes it powerfully dramatic. Few so much as remarked that a brutal multiple stabbing was powerful or dramatic. Most commented on the ending of the scene and better answers were able to illustrate the drama of the betrayal as presented. Many were able to discuss Caesar's god-like utterances but only the best of these answers discussed or implied the dramatic irony of the situation.

Question 5

There was some detailed knowledge of the part played in the text particularly by Portia and some good close reference, but sometimes this was let down by the level of emotional response offered. Many candidates wrote of how they pitied Calphurnia's shabby treatment by Caesar in the opening scene where her barrenness is insensitively broadcast to all, but the details of her dream and the desperation she shows to prevent her husband from walking to his death were barely discussed. Often Portia, who was mostly the more pitied, was pitied for her husband not treating her as an equal in the marriage, ignoring the later material, and sometimes missing her tragic end altogether. Indeed, some candidates expressed sympathy for Portia because Brutus's suicide made her a widow. Again, the irony of Portia's desire to be treated as a strong woman but ending up consumed by anxiety and fear was something which a good answer might have looked at in some detail. Sometimes answers, ostensibly about Calphurnia or Portia, got side-tracked and spent most of the time discussing Caesar or Brutus, with self-limiting consequences.

Question 6

The voice of Cassius was sometimes difficult to find for candidates, but overall most answers were successful. Candidates knew well enough Cassius's feelings about Antony, and – indeed – about Brutus's tolerance of his presence at the funeral, let alone his willingness to allow Antony access to the volatile crowd, and so forth. Better answers were able to range over a wealth of relevant textual detail and incorporate it using a little textual echo into the thoughts of the character here.

Section B: Poetry

In the poetry tasks it is expected that there will be a range of ideas and perhaps more individual responses than in the other genres, but the prime consideration in assessment is the quality of response to the poetry as poetry, in other words to the effect of the imagery and the sounds of the words. Knowledge of technical terms may well be useful as a sort of shorthand, but not as mere 'feature-spotting'. The Tennyson selection was less popular than *Songs of Ourselves*, but those candidates who offered it, frequently showed strong engagement with the poems; they had clearly enjoyed them.

ALFRED, LORD TENNYSON: *Poems*

Question 7

The extract from *The Lady of Shallott* was popular and there were some good answers but some were very explanatory and for higher reward they needed to respond in much more detail to the words and the setting that is being established. Key words in the question were 'a striking introduction' and unless these were given proper attention answers could not be very successful.

Question 8

Some responses dwelt at length on biographical details (all knew about Hallam) but most tended to be explanatory rather than to *explore* the ways in which Tennyson vividly conveys his thoughts and feelings through vocabulary and imagery.

Question 9

There were some competent responses, showing detailed understanding of Ulysses' strengths and desires but some candidates found giving their own feelings difficult and though they knew the poem, they did not explore deeper meanings or 'the ways in which Tennyson portrays Ulysses'. Occasionally there were indications of lack of clear understanding of the poem.

Songs of Ourselves

Question 10

The key word in this question was 'memorable' and those answers that recognised this and also focused on the fact that these are opening passages and that it was necessary to comment on the *immediate* impact of the words and images scored reasonably well. Weaker answers tended to merely describe or narrate. The poems had clearly been enjoyed.

Question 11

This was quite a popular question and candidates were able to write about sorrow fairly effectively in relation to the Hardy, but had more difficulty with the Arnold. Most answers looked at Hardy. There always seemed to be a clear understanding of the poem, but rarely a genuine response to what the actual question asked for: how a 'vivid feeling of sorrow' is created by the poet's words. Candidates very often asserted things were 'vivid', e.g. "much" in "much missed", without in any way arguing how and why they were so. Often really striking language was either paraphrased (translated, almost) or merely ignored. This approach was equally apparent in the responses to Arnold, where candidates spent quite a lot of time saying what they thought the poet was 'saying'. Generally *Dover Beach* did not seem to be well understood. There were various theories about it being an anti-war poem, based entirely on the last line, and some speculations about it being about the poet's unhappy marriage. Very few candidates engaged with the 'Sea of Faith was once, too, at the full'. The discussion of the feeling of sorrow was limited usually to 'the eternal note of sadness' and the reference to 'human misery'. It was apparently easier to write about sorrow in *The Voice*, but inevitably there were extraneous references to biographical details rather than focus on the words of the poem.

Question 12

Though candidates showed knowledge and understanding of the poem, those did best who kept sight of the words 'the power of moonlight to penetrate every part of the night world'. The question required exploration of the ways in which the language gives moonlight the fluidity of water. The words 'picks', 'licks' and 'flicks' were worthy of comment. More was required than a general overview of the poem and an explanation of how the healing quality of moonlight. Candidates were keen to explain about the moon making amends for the damage done in various ways during the day but often there was little focus on 'how' the words used 'convey the power of the moonlight to penetrate...' In other words answers tended to be descriptive rather than analytical. However, better answers were able to select some of the language and make an attempt to evaluate how it helps to create an effect.

Section C: Prose

EMILY BRONTË: *Wuthering Heights*

Question 13

Candidates were generally able to enter into the way the writing is full of the most violent images and probe what these images show of Catherine and Heathcliff's emotions.

Question 14

Candidates were asked at least to consider both views of Nelly Dean. Successful answers went beyond a character sketch and kept in mind the parameters of the task. After that the balance of the argument was up to the candidate, although it was expected that most would lean quite reasonably towards the first description. There were many testimonies to Nelly as a loyal, loving (and long-service) servant and the names of those she 'was there for' were often listed, but there was little detail, and less still when candidates tried to discuss Nelly as 'an interfering gossip'. They sometimes found some instances of interfering, but were never at all convincing on 'gossip'.

Question 15

Most candidates got a little way to producing something like an appropriate voice once they got into their memories of how Heathcliff supplanted him in his father's affections. Better answers mentioned Frances, his wife. A few mentioned his feelings for Catherine. The more one was made to feel Hindley's rough and unpleasant tones in the voice, the more successful the answer.

KIRAN DESAI: *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*

Questions 16, 17, 18

There were too few responses to these questions to make general comment appropriate.

The Great Gatsby

Question 19

Successful candidates saw the grotesque nature of the situation and explored thoroughly Fitzgerald's writing to bring out the reactions of the rivals.

Question 20

There were some strong responses to this question, based on a thorough knowledge of the text and the place Fitzgerald assigns to Miss Baker in this pleasure-seeking society.

Question 21

Candidates usually conveyed their understanding of the immediate situation, although Gatsby the dreamer was not particularly evident in many responses, and Gatsby's voice proved surprisingly elusive for some. Candidates sometimes made Gatsby appear more hysterical than is warranted, to judge by his conversation with Nick.

BESSIE HEAD: *When Rain Clouds Gather*

Questions 22, 23, 24

There were too few responses to these questions to make general comment appropriate.

EDITH WHARTON: *Ethan Frome*

Questions 25, 26, 27

There were too few responses to these questions to make general comment appropriate.

Stories of Ourselves

Question 28

The descriptive qualities of the writing were central to a successful answer and candidates did not achieve the higher bands unless they explored the imagery and diction carefully. Some answers showed an ability to comment on how the atmosphere created is sinister, and some commented on how the description is symbolic of the situation that the captive is in. Answers also covered the anonymity of the characters and both the overt and suggested violence. The passage drew out some sensitive responses.

Question 29

This was a significantly less popular task, and answers seemed to find little to say. Very little interesting was found about Victor in *On Her Knees*; the narrator of *The Taste of Watermelon* was interesting because he was a typical teenager, or – sometimes, a little better – because he matured during the story; the narrator of *The Signalman* was interesting but it was never really made clear why. A few answers misidentified the narrators of the stories altogether.

Question 30

There were too few answers to this question to make general comment appropriate.

LITERATURE (ENGLISH) LEVEL 1/LEVEL 2

Paper 0476/02

Paper 2: Unseen Texts

Key Messages

- Candidates might helpfully be guided to write stronger introductions, giving a personal overview of the whole text and addressing the question and bullet points instead of repeating them.
- While comment on language has improved, there is scope for better comment on form and structure. Candidates might begin by addressing genre, and the forms of both poetry and narrative.
- They might address structure by looking at paragraphs or stanza form and evaluating the overall direction of a piece of writing before selecting passages for detailed analysis.
- Sentence structure (syntax) often helps readers to interpret poems; it is better to have a confident understanding of the literal meaning of a text before advancing a more adventurous metaphorical reading.
- Nevertheless, texts aim for a response from the reader which goes beyond the surface meaning, so a good, analytical answer needs to explore what is implied or suggested, and should not simply create a paraphrase of the narrative of the text.
- A good conclusion will make a personal response to both the text and the question, without moralising or generalising.

General Comments

Close reading of unseen literature is a challenging but very rewarding way in which candidates can demonstrate the strength of the reading skills which they have acquired throughout the course, and especially their progress in meeting the more challenging Assessment Objectives. AO2 asks more able candidates *to explore texts beyond their surface meaning*, so the best answers always need to go beyond the surface narrative to look at the implications of a text, not only how it has been written but *why*. AO3 asks for the appreciation of *ways in which writers use language, structure, and form to create and shape meanings and effects*, so good answers need detailed appreciation of the writer's choices not just of individual words but also patterns of expression and decisions over genre and the shape of the writing. AO4 asks for the communication of a *sensitive and informed personal response to literary texts*; a response is sensitive when it is based on verbal detail and informed when it shows a full understanding of the text's meaning based on a sustained engagement with the ways in which that meaning develops in the course of making sense of the extract. While the stem question will always encourage candidates to address AO4, the bullet points can be invaluable in helping candidates to achieve a careful and detailed approach to AOs 2 and 3, helping them to see the way the extract develops and drawing attention to important features of language.

There are some general targets for further improvement in response to Unseen literature which Centres could pass on to candidates in order to help them improve. Some essay plans were rather too elaborate and restricting scope for a good final response, while the question, bullet points and sometimes even the introductory rubric are not best answered by copying them out. Candidates preparing for the examination might practice the art of a good introduction. The best candidates give an overview of the whole text, giving an initial response to its genre, mood and tone. Instead of using the same words as the question, they reflect on those words to begin to make a personal response to the purpose and impact of the whole piece of writing.

A good introduction might then be followed by some appreciation of how the text is organised. Examiners noted that although candidates now have a lot more to say about language, often highlighting individual words or images, they say a lot less about form or structure. Some initial comment on genre or overall style can help to position a critical response, and avoid treating all pieces of writing as 'story' or narrative. Is the text reminiscence, autobiography, elegy, lament, character sketch or encounter (for example)? Attention to the structure and development of a passage can also help to give shape to an answer, especially if there is

clear understanding from the beginning of how texts develop and change. Weaker responses tend to demonstrate less attention to later parts of the poem or prose, and yet this is often what the final and most demanding bullet point asks stronger candidates to concentrate on. In the case of prose passage, structural understanding will require an appreciation of the narrator's point of view and the ways in which readers are encouraged to focus on particular characters and the ways in which they see the narrative. Dialogue needs careful reading in order to understand the dynamics of conversation, with appreciation of changes in tone or dominance. Poetry texts are not just shaped by stanza form or the more obvious poetic conventions. More modern poems, in particular, and all the poems in this session were late twentieth-century texts, demand attention to syntax (or sentence structure) as well as diction (word choice). Sentences often run over line- and stanza-endings. Without this technical understanding, it is easy to make mistakes in the literal appreciation of the poems: the quotations of many candidates suggested they did not fully grasp this requirement.

Quotation technique might also benefit from more attention. Stronger candidates certainly make good use of frequent, brief quotation, but they use quotation to advance and develop arguments of their own. It is only weaker candidates who begin sentences or paragraphs with quotation and then comment on no more than the literal meaning of the language. Large-scale lifting of chunks of text or paraphrase have become rare, but really focused comment on the *effect* of word choice or of patterns of sound and image, rather than just spotting such devices, remains rarer than it should be. It is much more effective to comment on the impact of words and images on the reader's feelings and imagination than to list devices or simply to refer to the existence of a 'semantic field'. Candidates are responding well to sound effects and images in verse, but have less to say about argument, or patterns which allow a reader to respond to a poem's symbolic meaning or deeper reflections, so they tend to write about the immediate drama and action indicated within a poem rather than its underlying meaning.

Comments on Specific Questions

Question 1

Weaker candidates did sometimes struggle with the literal meaning of the Tony Harrison's 'Background Material' (one of a series of elegies for his dead parents), while nevertheless finding plenty in the poem's language and imagery to engage with. Stronger responses were focused, as encouraged by the question and bullet points, on the photographs themselves and what they revealed about the poet's love for his parents and their continuing presence in his lives. The poem yields plenty of very specific and moving description and gains power from its simplicity of description and from its elegiac concentration on what changes and what remains the same. This also explains the title: the poet looks at the background images rather than the faces of his parents, and comes to realise that not only are they his background, but also that he is himself in the back ground of the photographs and that they therefore provide a direct link between his past and his present. They are also a lingering presence on his 'writing desk' and a constant background to all he writes.

While the poet's father and 'his background', the man-made scene of the 'pub' are gone, the rural cottage in the background of the photograph of his mother is still there and so are the 'same greens', pointing out nature's ability to renew itself and bring fresh life, eight years on, when the parents are no more. The best responses realised that this is the crucial difference between the two photographs, and that this perhaps just hints at differences between the two parents or how the poet thinks about them. Careful readers also noticed that the 'blur' and 'shadow' are comments on the quality of the photographs not on the quality of the poet's relationship with his parents, although they might be a comment on his difficulty in accurately capturing images of who they are. The poet makes all clearer in the final two stanzas: what would 'mar each shot' if the photographs had been taken by a professional photographer are what make them for him. Each photograph reveals evidence of the photographer's presence: there is a flash from the flashbulb in the indoor photograph, reflected in the father's glasses which reveal a minute image of the poet himself. Similarly, in the background of the photograph of the mother is a shadow of a man holding a camera to his eyes, which is the poet himself. Both photograph as therefore show the poet's close relationship to his parents and show how he is their background, as well as the fact that they are his background. They are also both pictures of the artist recording an image, however imperfectly, and therefore relate to the poet's task as a writer.

Weaker answers saw little of any of this, and often showed a refusal to take the poem at face value and explore its surface in detail. They searched for deeper meaning not in the implicit emotional depth of the poet's feelings, hinted at not only in the words but in the syntax, especially of the final sentence, but through a narrative of their own invention. These responses were very speculative, seizing on individual words and phrases out of context and attempting to construct a narrative of relationships which was often far from the

poet's original tone and purpose. This might have been avoided had candidates paid more careful attention to the question: the rubric, stem question and each bullet point all make it clear that the poem is about the photographs and not about the parents' relationship with each other. However, weaker answers constructed elaborate theories about the parents, perhaps beginning from the line 'Neither one a couple and both bad', which was misread as referring to the parents, or the poet's feelings about them, rather than to the two photographs. The mistake was to take the line out of context, and to assume that the poem says something quite different from what it appears to say on the surface – after all, the previous line had referred to a celebration of the parents' fortieth wedding anniversary. The reference to 'our favourite pub' was also misread and misunderstood by many candidates, who constructed elaborate narratives of alcoholism and abuse from this suggestion. Similarly 'blur' and 'shadow' were taken as referring to darkness and difficulty in the relationships of parents or of poet to parents, which, while perhaps hinted at, are not the primary focus of this poem.

Stronger answers focused on the poet's use of the continuous present tense to celebrate the continuing presence of his parents, and on the ironic contrast between the imperfect photographs and the careful construction of the poem. To understand the latter, a concentration on form and structure is important. The poem is an extended or imperfect sonnet, full of connections made by rhymes and half-rhymes, and this relates both to the imperfect photographs and to the complex relationships and connections celebrated in the poem. Good answers highlighted particular rhymes, for example 'same' and 'frame' or 'light' and 'write' and considered how they might be linked. This is a much more effective technique than simply listing rhyme schemes. Candidates might also be encouraged to pay much more attention to syntax (sentence construction) when writing about poems. In the first stanza, sentences are very short and give a bald and unelaborated description. Some saw this as expressing choked emotion, or a difficulty in recapturing powerful feelings about the parents, which showed sensitivity of response to detail. Certainly the poet appears to be struggling to make out what the photographs describe, what they mean to him, or what they express about his 'background'. However, the next sentence takes up the whole second and longest stanza and suggests that he quickly makes sense of the 'blur'. Simple, verbless sentences have opened out into a deeper and more detailed appreciation of the 'background'. Here the two photographs are linked, albeit by the word 'but', and contrasted, in order to see what is 'gone for good' against what has 'stayed the same'. The father seems to be a link with a vanished social world, the mother with nature and with the way it surrounds the cottage from which the poet writes now. The focus is on loss, but also on memory and on what continues to be present.

The final sentence is the longest of all. It stretches across three short stanzas, which form the second half of the poem, almost the sestet of the sonnet. As in sonnets, there is a change of subject and tone: at this point the poem becomes less elegiac and more celebratory. This was only realised by the stronger candidates in this paper, although the word 'Though' is a clear indication of a change of mood. Punctuation as well as syntax really help to shape appreciation of meaning: the colon here comes before an explanation, which suggests that what 'for photographers would mar each shot' is here something which links them – a link made by a hyphen at the end of line 14. Here the emphasis is very much on what links the photographs, rather than on their difference. What links them is celebrated by the emphatic italics '*me*', reinforced by the excited, almost breathless syntax of 'in his, if you look close, the gleam, the light'. Only stronger candidates looked closely enough to see the significance of the light here. While a pleasing number understood the literal meaning of the way in which the photographer has accidentally placed himself in the photograph, too few saw the flash as enlightenment and celebration, some feeling the 'minute size' of the image was some comment on how unimportant he had been to his father, or finding something sinister in the contrast between this 'light' and the 'shadow' cast in the final two lines. The latter surely refers more directly to the continuities between the view from the cottage shown in the photograph of the poet's mother and the writing desk in the same cottage from which the poet is now writing, reinforcing his choice of the present tense to bring these images to life for the reader. Careful, attentive and sensitive reading, instead of over-imaginative speculation, brought all these connections out in the best answers, and appreciated the ways in which the poet pays homage to his parents' continuing presence in his elegy.

Question 2

This extract from Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, a text made up of a series of such 'vignettes', concentrates on the act of reading and the lasting impression it leaves, and focuses on two very different styles of writing and their lingering influence. Stronger responses showed how candidates realised that the style of writing in the extract is strongly influenced by what it describes and that the writer is imitating, and eventually merging, these two ways of seeing the world through imaginative or expressive prose. While one piece of writing is highly emotive fantasy, the other is concerned with the minute and sensitive representation of the truth: as the passage is autobiography, this is a strong hint of the writer's future allegiance, so those candidates who merely dismissed the second piece of writing as 'boring' had not understood its true impact.

The question asked about the impression made by the two very different styles of writing, and many candidates were better at analysing the more spectacular excitement of *The Shan Van Vocht* than the quieter virtues of the 'model essay' written by the Schoolboy. Some misjudged the question by becoming confused over who wrote what, although a close look at the bullet points should have helped here and clarified that the novel about the rebellion was the first book the narrator had read and that the essay had been recommended to his class by his English teacher, and made him think again about what good style really is. The third narrative voice is the writer's own, no longer imitating or remembering what he has read but writing down his own memories of childhood, both his day dreams and the more mundane reality. This is especially present, as the very best candidates realised, in the final sentence which combines elements of both styles, but is there throughout the extract, accurately recording the facts about his past and skilfully imitating the language and style of pieces of writing which have made such a deep impression.

Most candidates found the first section of the extract immediately accessible and understood the idea of how the writer 'recaptures the excitement' of the novel through faithful imitation. While almost all noted how faithfully he remembered facts like the number of pages, the colour of the cover and the names of the characters, stronger responses noted that phrases like 'talking in whispers' and 'wild night of winter rain and squall' recreate the breathless excitement which the novel communicated, and show that he still remembers the warmth and savagery of the writing. Adjectives are piled high: there are repeated references to 'danger' and to emotive words such as 'great...wild...exquisite...dark...deep...beautiful.' Descriptions of nature or the environment all seem to invoke the pathetic fallacy, with proleptic storms without and warmth within, graveyards foreshadowing death. A number of good responses realised how funny the boy's relationship with the heroine, Anne, really is: not only is he in love with a fictional character, but he works up his jealousy over having to share her with the hero, Robert. Some astutely pointed out that the young boy does not really understand the novel and its political themes: it is the passion and the physical descriptions of Ann which attract him most, and he grows obsessed with 'her dark hair and her deep golden brown eyes and her olive skin'. The writing is heavily adjectival and piles on drama and excess through polysyndeton and clichéd expression. A word like 'exquisite' shows the boy revelling in the extravagance of language and vivid imagination; his brother's rude interruption is a funny moment as it reveals the truth. He is not really reading but 're-imagining', inventing a story rather than following exactly what is there. This is most obvious in the final sentence of the first paragraph when he imitates the passion and also the macabre Gothic imagery of the original, while urging Ann to turn away from the rebellion and towards him, and 'the endless possibilities in the dark' which suggests that the reality of the plot held less interest for the young boy than his thoughts about its heroine. The writer admits that his approach to reading was highly imaginative, and he imitates an exaggerated and extended form of writing in his choice of words, but also in his syntax through the long sentences of the first section.

By contrast, the language as well as the content of the second section is very different indeed. Good responses noticed that here too the writer is communicating the style as well as the content of what he has read. Sentences are shorter, adjectives are fewer and verbs more precise. The style is almost as plain as the straightforward homely scene described, although it is no without its imaginative flourishes, such as seeing the two china dogs 'looking as ever across at one another'. However, the concentration here is on truth and accuracy, not the wild and windy atmosphere around the historical 'open-hearth' fire. Moreover, as many noted, the talk is much less and is of local news, the return of father and homework or learning, as opposed to love and rebellion. It is a world more real to the Schoolboy, although at first he rejects its plainness. 'Everything was so simple...' was his first reaction, although he also begins to feel embarrassed about his own tendency to reach for the dictionary and describe things he 'had seen only with the Ann of the novel', which were his fantasies, not reality. Stronger candidates looked at the structure of the passage (and the bullet points) and realised that the grown-up writer gives as much space to this essay as the famous novel, showing that he values it just as highly. Again he not only remembers precise details of the contents, which show how much it remained in his memory, but he also imitates its style, with its focus on precise and realistic recapturing of genuine experience. Each piece of crockery is carefully preserved and so is the talk of the boy's mother, with its focus on real emotions and pleasures, rather than those of a wild imagination. Sounds as well as sights are also recalled to suggest that realism can be just as memorable as romanticism. Instead of passion and rebellion, this writing highlights domesticity and family loyalties, grounded in contentment and ritual. The narrator says that he is 'embarrassed', so most candidates felt that he agreed with the teacher that this was good writing, although some felt that the boy still rebelled against such dull and familiar fare.

The last paragraph is the key to answering the final bullet point and therefore to evaluating the direction of the whole text, so once again this was a text which required good understanding of the ending in order to put the rest into context. On the surface, the writer may seem to be dismissive of 'such stuff' and 'ordinary life' without rebellions, love or danger and feel it is not worth writing about. However, not only does he tell us that the memory of the essay remained with him, but he has proved this by the precise way in which, as an adult

writer, he reproduces its details in the paragraph which describes it. Good answers benefited from an awareness of the narrative voice, of who sees the events in the prose passage and how this influences the way he or she tells the story. As is so often the case in retrospective narrative or memoir, the writer is much older and looking back at his childhood and childish emotions. This explains why he brings in humour when describing the young boy's passion for the imaginary heroine and why he contrasts the boy's initial dismissal of the 'model essay' with the way it lingers on in his memory. Answers in the top bands usually saw that the final sentence actually combines elements of both worlds. As the passage is a memoir or autobiography, we must assume that it is influenced by the teacher's recommendation of 'just telling the truth', in other words giving the plain facts without embarrassment. Some noticed that this was even the case in the precise description of the places and colours of *The Shan Van Vocht*, or the accurate description of the scorn of the narrator's brother. Nevertheless, the final sentence of the passage suggests that the novel's romantic style and commitment to rebellion and yearning remains present, even as a ghost. Strong responses noted the poetry of the final phrase, showing that 'behind and above' the realism of the 'Dutch interior' are the sibilant sound effects of the alliterative language and adjectival abundance of the wild nights, the rebels and their passions: 'those wispy, shawly figures from the rebellion, sibilant above the great fire and below the aching, high wind'. They rightly noticed that the high style remains there alongside the realism and that perhaps both are needed to capture what writing means to this writer. Certainly both styles shape his writing here, and a good answer balanced out analysis of both influences and paid due respect to the influences and characteristics of each, appreciating that good analysis of prose should focus as much on style as content.

Comments on Specific Questions

Question 1

Tony Harrison's 'Background Material' is one of a series of elegies for his dead parents. Because this was not made explicit in the rubric, weaker candidates did sometimes struggle with the literal meaning of the poem, while nevertheless finding plenty in the poem's language and imagery to engage with. Stronger responses were focused, as encouraged by the question and bullet points, on the photographs themselves and what they revealed about the poet's love for his parents and their continuing presence in his lives. The poem yields plenty of very specific and moving description and gains power from its simplicity of description and from its elegiac concentration on what changes and what remains the same. This also explains the title: the poet looks at the background images rather than the faces of his parents, and comes to realise that not only are they his background, but also that he is himself in the back ground of the photographs and that they therefore provide a direct link between his past and his present. They are also a lingering presence on his 'writing desk' and a constant background to all he writes.

While the poet's dad and 'his background', the man-made scene of the 'pub' are gone, the rural cottage in the background of the photograph of his mother is still there and so are the 'same greens', pointing out nature's ability to renew itself and bring fresh life, eight years on, when the parents are no more. The best responses realised that this is the crucial difference between the two photographs, and that this perhaps just hints at differences between the two parents or how the poet thinks about them. Careful readers also noticed that the 'blur' and 'shadow' are comments on the quality of the photographs not on the quality of the poet's relationship with his parents, although they might be a comment on his difficulty in accurately capturing images of who they are. The poet makes all clearer in the final two stanzas: what would 'mar each shot' if the photographs had been taken by a professional photographer are what make them for him. Each photograph reveals evidence of the photographer's presence: there is a flash from the flashbulb in the indoor photograph, reflected in the father's glasses which reveal a minute image of the poet himself. Similarly, in the background of the photograph of the mother is a shadow of a man holding a camera to his eyes, which is the poet himself. Both photographs therefore show the poet's close relationship to his parents and show how he is their background, as well as the fact that they are his background. They are also both pictures of the artist recording an image, however imperfectly, and therefore relate to the poet's task as a writer.

Weaker answers saw little of any of this, and often showed a refusal to take the poem at face value and explore its surface in detail. They searched for deeper meaning not in the implicit emotional depth of the poet's feelings, hinted at not only in the words but in the syntax, especially of the final sentence, but through a narrative of their own invention. These responses were far too speculative, seizing on individual words and phrases out of context and attempting to construct a narrative of relationships which was often far from the poet's original tone and purpose. This might have been avoided had candidates paid more careful attention to the question: the rubric, stem question and each bullet point all make it clear that the poem is about the photographs and not about the parents' relationship with each other. However, weaker answers constructed elaborate theories about the parents, perhaps beginning from the line 'Neither one a couple and both bad', which was misread as referring to the parents, or the poet's feelings about them, rather than to the two photographs. The mistake was to take the line out of context, and to assume that the poem says something quite different from what it appears to say on the surface – after all, the previous line had referred to a celebration of the parents' fortieth wedding anniversary. The reference to 'our favourite pub' was also misread and misunderstood by many candidates, who constructed elaborate narratives of alcoholism and abuse from this suggestion. Similarly 'blur' and 'shadow' were taken as referring to darkness and difficulty in the relationships of parents or of poet to parents, which while perhaps hinted at are not the primary focus of this poem.

Stronger answers focused on the poet's use of the continuous present tense to celebrate the continuing presence of his parents, and on the ironic contrast between the imperfect photographs and the careful construction of the poem. To understand the latter, a concentration on form and structure is important. The poem is an extended or imperfect sonnet, full of connections made by rhymes and half-rhymes, and this relates both to the imperfect photographs and to the complex relationships and connections celebrated in the poem. Good answers highlighted particular rhymes, for example 'same' and 'frame' or 'light' and 'write' and considered how they might be linked. This is a much more effective technique than simply listing rhyme schemes. Candidates might also be encouraged to pay much more attention to syntax (sentence construction) when writing about poems. In the first stanza, sentences are very short and give a bald and unelaborated description. Some saw this as expressing choked emotion, or a difficulty in recapturing powerful feelings about the parents, which showed sensitivity of response to detail. Certainly the poet appears to be struggling to make out what the photographs describe, what they mean to him, or what they express about his 'background'. However, the next sentence takes up the whole second and longest stanza

and suggests that he quickly makes sense of the 'blur'. Simple, verbless sentences have opened out into a deeper and more detailed appreciation of the 'background'. Here the two photographs are linked, albeit by the word 'but', and contrasted, in order to see what is 'gone for good' against what has 'stayed the same'. The father seems to be a link with a vanished social world, the mother with nature and with the way it surrounds the cottage from which the poet writes now. The focus is on loss, but also on memory and on what continues to be present.

The final sentence is the longest of all. It stretches across three short stanzas, which form the second half of the poem, almost the sestet of the sonnet. As in sonnets, there is a change of subject and tone: at this point the poem becomes less elegiac and more celebratory. This was only realised by the stronger candidates in this paper, although the word 'Though' is a clear indication of a change of mood. Punctuation as well as syntax really help to shape appreciation of meaning: the colon here comes before an explanation, which suggests that what 'for photographers would mar each shot' is here something which links them – a link made by a hyphen at the end of line 14. Here the emphasis is very much on what links the photographs, rather than on their difference. What links them is celebrated by the emphatic italics '*me*', reinforced by the excited, almost breathless syntax of 'in his, if you look close, the gleam, the light'. Only stronger candidates looked closely enough to see the significance of the light here. While a pleasing number understood the literal meaning of the way in which the photographer has accidentally placed himself in the photograph, too few saw the flash as enlightenment and celebration, some feeling the 'minute size' of the image was some comment on how unimportant he had been to his father, or finding something sinister in the contrast between this 'light' and the 'shadow' cast in the final two lines. The latter surely refers more directly to the continuities between the view from the cottage shown in the photograph of the poet's mother and the writing desk in the same cottage from which the poet is now writing, reinforcing his choice of the present tense to bring these images to life for the reader. Careful, attentive and sensitive reading, instead of over-imaginative speculation, brought all these connections out in the best answers and appreciated the ways in which the poet pays homage to his parents' continuing presence in his elegy.

Question 2

This extract from Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, a text made up of a series of such 'vignettes', concentrates on the act of reading and the lasting impression it leaves, and focuses on two very different styles of writing and their lingering influence. Stronger responses showed how candidates realised that the style of writing in the extract is strongly influenced by what it describes and that the writer is imitating, and eventually merging, these two ways of seeing the world through imaginative or expressive prose. While one piece of writing is highly emotive fantasy, the other is concerned with the minute and sensitive representation of the truth: as the passage is autobiography, this is a strong hint of the writer's future allegiance, so those candidates who merely dismissed the second piece of writing as 'boring' had not understood its true impact. The question asked about the impression made by the two very different styles of writing, and many candidates were better at analysing the more spectacular excitement of *The Shan Van Vocht* than the quieter virtues of the 'model essay' written by the Schoolboy. Some misjudged the question by becoming confused over who wrote what, although a close look at the bullet points should have helped here and clarified that the novel about the rebellion was the first book the narrator had read and that the essay had been recommended to his class by his English teacher, and made him think again about what good style really is. The third narrative voice is the writer's own, no longer imitating or remembering what he has read but writing down his own memories of childhood, both his day dreams and the more mundane reality. This is especially present, as the very best candidates realised, in the final sentence which combines elements of both styles, but is there throughout the extract, accurately recording the facts about his past and skilfully imitating the language and style of pieces of writing which have made such a deep impression.

Most candidates found the first section of the extract immediately accessible and understood the idea of how the writer 'recaptures the excitement' of the novel through faithful imitation. While almost all noted how faithfully he remembered facts like the number of pages, the colour of the cover and the names of the characters, stronger responses noted that phrases like 'talking in whispers' and 'wild night of winter rain and squall' recreate the breathless excitement which the novel communicated, and show that he still remembers the warmth and savagery of the writing. Adjectives are piled high, there are repeated references to 'danger' and to emotive words such as 'great...wild...exquisite...dark...deep...beautiful.' Descriptions of nature or the environment all seem to invoke the pathetic fallacy, with proleptic storms without and warmth within, graveyards foreshadowing death. A number of good responses realised how funny the boy's relationship with the heroine, Anne, really is: not only is he in love with a fictional character, but he works up his jealousy over having to share her with the hero, Robert. Some astutely pointed out that the young boy does not really understand the novel and its political themes: it is the passion and the physical descriptions of Ann which attract him most, 'she id all the talking' and he grows obsessed with 'her dark hair and her deep golden brown eyes and her olive skin'. The writing is heavily adjectival and piles on drama and excess through

polysyndeton and clichéd expression. A word like 'exquisite' shows the boy revelling in the extravagance of language and vivid imagination; his brother's rude interruption is a funny moment as it reveals the truth. He is not really reading but 're-imagining', inventing a story rather than following exactly what is there. This is most obvious in the final sentence of the first paragraph when he imitates the passion and also the macabre Gothic imagery of the original, while urging Ann to turn away from the rebellion and towards him, and 'the endless possibilities in the dark' which suggests that the reality of the plot held less interest for the young boy than his thoughts about its heroine. The writer admits that his approach to reading was highly imaginative, and he imitates an exaggerated and extended form of writing in his choice of words, but also in his syntax through the long sentences of the first section.

By contrast, the language as well as the content of the second section is very different indeed. Good responses noticed that here too the writer is communicating the style as well as the content of what he has read. Sentences are shorter, adjectives are fewer and verbs more precise. The style is almost as plain as the straightforward homely scene described, although it is not without its imaginative flourishes, such as seeing the two china dogs 'looking as ever across at one another'. However, the concentration here is on truth and accuracy, not the wild and windy atmosphere around the historical 'open-hearth' fire. Moreover, as many noted, the talk is much less and is of local news, the return of father and homework or learning, as opposed to love and rebellion. It is a world more real to the Schoolboy, although at first he rejects its plainness. 'Everything was so simple...' was his first reaction, although he also begins to feel embarrassed about his own tendency to reach for the dictionary and describe things he 'had seen only with the Ann of the novel', which were his fantasies, not reality. Stronger candidates looked at the structure of the passage (and the bullet points) and realised that the grown-up writer gives as much space to this essay as the famous novel, showing that he values it just as highly. Again he not only remembers precise details of the contents, which show how much it remained in his memory, but he also imitates its style, with its focus on precise and realistic recapturing of genuine experience. Each piece of crockery is carefully preserved and so is the talk of the boy's mother, with its focus on real emotions and pleasures, rather than those of a wild imagination. Sounds as well as sights are also recalled to suggest that realism can be just as memorable as romanticism. Instead of passion and rebellion, this writing highlights domesticity and family loyalties, grounded in contentment and ritual. The narrator says that he is 'embarrassed', so most candidates felt that he agreed with the teacher that this was good writing, although some felt that the boy still rebelled against such dull and familiar fare.

The last paragraph is the key to answering the final bullet and therefore to evaluating the direction of the whole text, so once again this was a text which required good understanding of the ending in order to put the rest into context. On the surface, the writer may seem to be dismissive of 'such stuff' and 'ordinary life' without rebellions, love or danger and feel it is not worth writing about. However, not only does he tell us that the memory of the essay remained with him, but he has proved this by the precise way in which, as an adult writer, he reproduces its details in the paragraph which describes it. Good candidates need an awareness of the narrative voice, of who sees the events in the prose passage and how this influences the way he or she tells the story. As is so often the case in retrospective narrative or memoir, the writer is much older and looking back at his childhood and childish emotions. This explains why he brings in humour when describing the young boy's passion for the imaginary heroine and why he contrasts the boy's initial dismissal of the 'model essay' with the way it lingers on in his memory. The very best candidates, whose answers were usually placed in the top two band, saw that the final sentence actually combines elements of both worlds. As the passage is a memoir or autobiography, we must assume that it is influenced by the teacher's recommendation of 'just telling the truth', in other words giving the plain facts without embarrassment. Some noticed that this was even the case in the precise description of the places and colours of *The Shan Van Vocht*, or the accurate description of the scorn of the narrator's brother. Nevertheless, the final sentence of the passage suggests that the novel's romantic style and commitment to rebellion and yearning remains present, even as a ghost. Strong responses noted the poetry of the final phrase, showing that 'behind and above' the realism of the 'Dutch interior' are the sibilant sound effects of the alliterative language and adjectival abundance of the wild nights, the rebels and their passions: 'those wispy, shawly figures from the rebellion, sibilant above the great fire and below the aching, high wind'. They rightly noticed that the high style remains there alongside the realism and that perhaps both are needed to capture what writing means to this writer. Certainly both styles shape his writing here, and a good answer balanced out analysis of both influences and paid due respect to the influences and characteristics of each, appreciating that good analysis of prose should focus as much on style as content.