

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

**REPORT ON THE CANDIDATES' WORK IN THE
SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION**

MAY/JUNE 2008

ENGLISH B

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ENGLISH B
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION
JUNE 2008

GENERAL COMMENTS

In 2008, the final year of the first cycle of the new syllabus (2006-2008) the overall examination performance was slightly below that of 2007. Mark allocations were indicated for the various parts of the questions on drama and on poetry, and candidates were able to respond to the weighting given to each section. Mark allocations were not indicated for the prose questions, so in this Profile candidates were given greater latitude for structuring their responses.

Candidates were generally quite familiar with the texts, and there was pleasing evidence of personal involvement with the material as candidates responded with enthusiasm and emotion to the conflicts and issues raised.

Again this year, parts of questions requiring simple recall were consistently done well, but analysis of situations proved difficult for weaker candidates. Sections of questions dealing with dramatic devices or poetic devices were markedly less well done than those that required familiarity with the “story”; however, a number of superior scripts suggest that students are well able to master these aspects of literary studies once they are carefully taught. It was heartening to note that most candidates can name various devices though they often failed to identify the device in the text. Discussion of the effectiveness of the device in conveying the theme of the work tended to be a challenge for all but the really good candidates. On the whole, candidates tended to score low marks in sections of the questions requiring comments on dramatic or poetic devices.

Although questions are sectionalized, candidates need to be reminded that their responses should be in essay format. Far too many candidates sectionalize their responses—even putting the sections on separate pages in their answer booklets. There is need, too, for students to be taught techniques for producing flowing essays; connectives were noticeably absent, particularly where candidates were attempting comparisons.

Candidates need to be reminded of the importance of answering each part of the question, particularly in the prose fiction section where there is no sectionalizing to prompt them. They should also be guided by the number of marks allotted to each section, ensuring that they provide a full response when several marks are available.

It was evident that many candidates did not understand prompt words such as “Comment on”, “Identify”, “Explain”, “Discuss”, “Compare”. Students need to be taught to focus on the specific requirements of the question and answer each part as thoroughly as possible with supporting evidence from the text—not to narrate the story, and not to write everything they know whether relevant or not. When the question asks for the candidate’s opinion (“Which of the two poems do you find more disturbing?”), the response must be supported by evidence from the text; it is not acceptable in a literature examination for the candidate merely to draw from personal experience.

Teachers are reminded that students may choose only one question from each section.

Intention of Questions

All questions are designed to test the specific skills listed on Page 25 of the syllabus:

Understanding

Knowledge of Text and Insight

- (i) relevance and adequacy of content
- (ii) relevance and accuracy of examples

Expression

Organization of Response

- (i) structure and development of responses
- (ii) clear and logical argument

Quality of Language

- (i) clarity and appropriateness of expression used
- (ii) mechanics of writing (sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, and spelling)

Skills and Aptitudes Tested in Paper 01

This paper tests

- (i) comprehension
- (ii) awareness of the writer's craft (that is, the ability to say how a writer/poet achieves a given effect)

These skills require

- (i) analysis, which here takes the form of reducing a passage to its verbal constituents (for example, imagery, rhythm, tone or mood, sound of words) and the ability to say how these elements function effectively in the passage.
- (ii) attention to dramatic devices such as stage directions and "props"
- (iii) awareness of the relationship between action and motive
- (iv) awareness of the interaction among characters

Skills and Aptitudes Tested in Paper 02 (as outlined on Page 23 of the syllabus)

- (i) The ability to respond to West Indian and other literatures in English: novels, poems and plays; to make rational and sensitive appraisal of value judgments, states of consciousness and other concepts explained in literature, and to relate these to everyday living.
- (ii) Description, analysis (the ability to break down and select relevant details) and synthesis (the ability to bring together and condense in a new form information drawn from various sections of a text for the purpose of answering a particular question).
- (iii) The ability to communicate informed opinions and judgments in well-structured, analytical responses in oral and written form using the vocabulary of literary criticism.
- (iv) The ability to produce balanced critical analyses.

- (v) The awareness of the writer's craft (the writer as a person who employs various techniques in the shaping of language and the presentation of character and behaviour. This skill is tested throughout the examination and most particularly in Paper 2.
- (vi) The ability to recognize and distinguish between moral assumptions contained in a particular text.
- (vii) A grasp of concepts and values and an understanding of how these are manifested in literature.

Comments on Student Performance in Paper 1

When compared with the last two years, the questions on the 2008 Paper 01 reflected a greater focus on understanding literary techniques and their effectiveness in the genre rather than questions testing understanding of concepts embedded in the extracts.

More marks were also allocated to questions that demanded a higher level of interpretation and analysis. *Teachers and candidates should note that this trend in the weighting of marks in Paper 01 will continue.*

Average performance in Drama (6.18) was better than Poetry (5.54) or Prose (5.03) and this surprisingly disappointing performance belied the engagement with the experiences in the extracts which many if not most candidates displayed. Candidates are clearly excited by the extracts. What they need to display now is disciplined thought in response to the questions.

The first two questions on the drama allowed candidates who were most discriminating to gain maximum marks by providing complete details. They recognized that patrons were normally expected in the shop and this earned the third mark as they also mentioned the two named characters. Most candidates earned 2 of the three marks for identifying two named characters. The same gradation occurred in response to (b) with the more discerning candidates who recognized and mentioned Petit Belle Lily's different interest to the love relationship thus earning the full 2 marks.

This trend was even more marked in candidates' responses to (c) and (d) which tested candidates' understanding of the drama as a staged performance. In (c) candidates who included both the 'preparation for' and the 'crowning of' the stick-fighting champion earned the full 2 marks. Candidates were able to earn marks for citing appropriate evidence which is replete in the stage directions as well as in the action of Briscoe and his conversation with Joe. Dramatic techniques and candidates' comments on their effectiveness were the focus of (d), and here only an exceptional few earned total marks. *We cannot overstress that the focus of this paper is to allow students to demonstrate their appreciation and awareness of the literary genres and how they work.* Candidates should avoid the vague generalities and identify specifically how, for example, Briscoe dramatizes his transformation from an inconspicuously dressed customer into the potential king stick fighter in his miming.

The same pattern of focus on the literary qualities of the genre is reflected in the questions on the Poetry and Prose passages. Unfortunately and disappointingly, even when candidates identified similes they were not able to comment competently on their effectiveness. Often, they gave general or vague commentary on outstanding similes. A few exercises in close reading of texts and focused response to the writer's intention and effect would be excellent preparation for the required skills. In the prose passage, several candidates were reluctant to recognize the speaker's flawed perspective and this led to fatal misinterpretations of this

humorous passage. Candidates and teachers are again encouraged to approach Paper 01 with a determination to confidently apply the skills they honed in the study of the set texts in the genres to unseen passages.

General Comments on Student Performance in Paper 02

Once again it was evident that candidates need to be trained in the skills of structuring a comparative essay. They need to be instructed on how to read a question carefully, paying attention to each section, and, where applicable, noting the proportion of marks being awarded. While they are expected to use the sections in the questions as a guide to structuring their essays, candidates should not present their response in segments—and certainly not with each segment on a separate page. Vocabulary building is necessary; students need not merely to be able to identify an example of a character’s typical behavior or an example of mood shift, but should be able to *name* the character trait or mood that is being illustrated. Names of people and places should be correctly spelt, and problem spellings should be anticipated and prepared for. Teachers are urged to anticipate and deal with key words that may be needed by the student. Fascinating spellings turned up for words such as *Caucasian*, *prejudice*, *Ku Klux Klan*, *sarcasm*, *illusion*, *supremacy*, *crucifixion*, *scorpion*—all words that must have been used in class discussions.

It was evident that many candidates were better prepared this year to deal with poetic devices. Three steps are necessary: naming the device; quoting or otherwise clearly identifying the device; and, thirdly, saying what effect that particular device produces in relation to the overall intention of the poem.

For the Drama section, it is important for candidates not only to know in detail what takes place in any particular scene, but to be able to connect that scene with the entire play in terms of plot, theme, character revelation, mood, conflict, and so on. Candidates should understand the symbolic nature of stage props, and be able to relate those visual symbols to the themes of the play.

New Time Limit

With the 2009-2011 syllabus, the time allowed for Paper 2 will be reduced to 2 hours. In view of this, teachers may need to work with students on time management so that all three questions will receive adequate attention.

Section A – Drama

Questions 1 - 4

Some candidates again attempted questions on both of the plays; however, only one question may be selected from this section. Candidates should be aware of the sequencing of events, and should be able to discuss the relationship of a particular scene to the total effect of the play. It is not sufficient for candidates merely to recount the events or describe character; they should be able to comment on dramatic techniques such as contrast, irony, foreshadowing, suspense, etc., and, in modern plays, on the stage setting, use of lighting, music, costumes, and so on.

MACBETH

Question 1

This question focused on the conflict within Macbeth’s mind as he contemplates the act of regicide, on the ways in which Shakespeare evokes our sympathy as we watch this struggle, and on the play’s insistence that killing the King is a most reprehensible act. Quite a number of candidates misinterpreted part (a) of the question, which asked for a description of Macbeth’s conflicting thoughts and feelings as he “contemplates the murder” of Duncan. They read this as “looks at the scene of the murder”. In part (b), candidates were asked to write about how Shakespeare evokes sympathy for Macbeth, and in part (c), to explain how

Shakespeare makes it very clear that regicide is a most horrible crime. All three sections were fairly well done, but candidates need to be aware of the time sequence referred to. Time markers like “*In the period leading up to Duncan’s murder*”, “*during this period*” and “*later*” were sometimes ignored by candidates, with unfortunate consequences.

Question 2

This was the more popular of the two Macbeth questions. Many candidates referred to movie versions of the play rather than to the text itself. As in question 1, many candidates were not alert to time markers: “*as she prays*”, “*in the hours that follow*” and “*at this stage*”. Those who failed to observe the time frame required by the question tended to ramble through the play, producing evidence randomly. Section (a) tended to be poorly done, chiefly because candidates responded too briefly to gain the 9 marks available, but sections (b) and (c) were dealt with more competently.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Question 3

This question focused on Amanda’s destructive parenting methods. Some candidates seemed not to have realized that Amanda, though perhaps well meaning, causes psychological damage to her children—particularly to Laura. While some candidates handled the dynamics of this domestic tragedy fairly well, many floundered and were unable to relate to the tensions underlying the action. Perhaps because the very concept of “destructive behaviour” was unclear to many candidates, they were also unable to discuss the connection between the setting/the music and the impact on her children of Amanda’s conversation and behaviour.

Question 4

This question proved challenging for many candidates. While candidates were able to list Tom’s leisure time activities, some were unable to move from there to comment on what we can learn about him from his choice of activities. Section (b), too, proved difficult, with candidates failing to adequately justify their claim that Tom either was, or was not, selfish. Most importantly, though, candidates were generally unable to properly discuss Tom’s function in the play as narrator—and consequently as the one who most wins our sympathy and whose point of view influences the opinion of the audience. Nor were most candidates able to show that Tom’s actions drive the plot to its climax.

Section B – Poetry

Questions 5 – 6

General Comments

It was evident from a large number of scripts that teachers have been paying more attention to poetic devices, and have been showing students how to discuss their effectiveness. There were still many cases of candidates being able to name a device but not identify an example correctly, or, alternatively, to name the device and identify an example, but then to be unable to proceed to discuss the effectiveness of that device. In most cases, any such discussion was very brief, and this led to poor marks when up to 4 marks were allotted for identification and discussion of one device.

As in previous years, many candidates, when asked for their opinion, offered material extraneous to the poem instead of searching the poem itself for supporting evidence.

Many candidates were unable to identify the speaker in the poem, merely identifying him as “the persona” instead of as “a schoolboy who experiences racial prejudice in the classroom” or, in the other example, as “an adult who is talking to his/her son about the hypocrisy rampant in society”. Further, few candidates were able to comment on the effectiveness of the choice of speaker.

The classroom experience of a poem should include discussion of point of view, tone, allusion, imagery, irony, contrast, the appropriateness of the title, the effectiveness of the choice of speaker and other such devices.

It was encouraging to note that candidates generally were very familiar with the poems they chose to write about, and that they had done research into the historical moment in which the poem was produced. Another pleasing observation is that candidates responded with strong emotions to injustices presented in the poems. This enthusiasm is commendable, but it needs to be channeled into disciplined discussion of poetic devices that evoked such strong emotions.

Question 5

Some of the scripts responding to this question were outstanding, but generally it was not well done. Quite a number of candidates wrote about poems other than the two identified in the question. Generally candidates did well on Section (a), describing the kind of prejudice (race/class) in the poems, and were able to find examples of that prejudice at work. Section (b) required identification and discussion of two poetic devices in each poem. This section was tackled less confidently than Section (a) that required only recall and not analysis. It was extremely pleasing, though, to note that quite a few scripts dealt very sensitively with the use of allusion in the two poems—to fairy tale and folklore in the one, and to the Crucifixion in the other. Section (c) asked the candidate to compare the two poems, showing (with reasons) which was more disturbing. In a question of this sort, candidates should comment on the disturbing features of EACH poem and then conclude with a decision on which is MORE disturbing. Candidates who only dealt with one poem at this point lost a few marks. More important, though, is that many candidates relied too heavily on material extraneous to the poem as reasons for their choice. Candidates need to understand that in a literature examination, most supporting evidence for statements made must come from the work under consideration.

Question 6

Candidates were generally able to identify the speaker in the poems (though some persisted in referring vaguely to “the persona”), but only the better candidates were able to say why the choice of speaker was effective. Section (b) was fairly well done, with candidates competently identifying aspects of society with which the speakers were not happy, and somewhat less competently identifying aspects of themselves with which the speakers were not happy. Section (c) was where most candidates did not earn marks. Having correctly identified and illustrated a poetic device, they were most often unable to say very much about how that particular device contributed to the overall impact of the poem. The intense emotional identification of candidates with the two speakers’ concerns (racism and hypocrisy in society) was very pleasing.

Section C – Prose Fiction

Questions 7 - 12

General comments

Candidates need to be reminded that they may select their texts only from the four listed in the syllabus. Texts from the previous syllabus may not be used, nor may plays from either this or the former syllabus. Many candidates wrote on the “novels” *Macbeth* and *The Glass Menagerie!*

Quite a number of candidates lost marks for writing on two West Indian novels or on two non-West Indian novels. The questions clearly indicate that one West Indian and one non-West Indian novel should be used.

Story-telling was once again the main weakness in responses to questions in this Profile of the paper. Candidates should focus on the requirements of the question and not merely retell the story. Generally speaking, candidates managed to deal with the part of the question that required recall, but fell down on the part that required analysis.

The purpose of the questions in this section is to encourage comparison—whether or not that word is used explicitly in the question, so students need to be taught strategies for structuring their essay to bring out points of similarity and difference.

Since the questions on prose fiction are not sectionalized, candidates need to be guided by teachers on how to structure their essays. Many candidates also need guidance on correct paragraphing.

Candidates should be encouraged to study all four of the novels on the syllabus so that they will have a greater choice among the questions in this section. Next year, when the time for the exam is reduced to 2 hours, candidates may well need help in planning their essays in such a way that they focus on the requirements of the question instead of resorting to story-telling. Proper names should be correctly spelt, and titles of novels should be underlined.

Generally candidates managed better with the novels *Green Days by the River* and *The Pearl* than they did with *Crick Crack Monkey* and *A Separate Peace*. This last novel proved particularly challenging for most candidates.

Question 7

This question invited candidates to consider *conflict* experienced by a major character in each of two novels and to comment on one issue that the writer wants readers to understand from that conflict. While candidates were fairly confident while writing about the conflict, they were less sure of themselves when moving from that recall activity to discussing the *themes* of the novels they had selected.

Question 8

For this question the candidate needed to compare and contrast the situation in which a major character is affected by the power of a person, group or society. Responses that used *A Separate Peace* were particularly disappointing, with candidates making little use of the fact that the boys’ lives are so devastatingly affected by the war. Responses using the other three texts were fairly well done.

Question 9

This question asked candidates to examine the assertion that painful experiences in life help people to understand themselves and others better. Most candidates were able to identify painful experiences undergone by a major character in each text. Showing just what had or had not been learnt from those experiences proved rather more difficult. Better responses managed to weave together painful experience and lessons learned from that experience.

Question 10

In this question candidates were asked to choose novels in which the main character suffers loss. The responses here showed a serious absence of structure, with candidates listing every single “loss” experienced by the main character instead of selecting the two or three main examples in order to produce a focused essay. It was encouraging to see that some candidates, writing on *The Pearl*, were able to move beyond the obvious loss of Coyotito and of the pearl itself and to explain how Kino had lost out in terms of his relationship with Juana and his personal morality. Candidates who opted to use *Crick Crack Monkey* and *A Separate Peace* tended to have difficulty identifying the “loss” experienced by the main character, though quite a number of candidates responded very sensitively to the loss of identity suffered by Tee as she tries to adjust to life with Aunt Beatrice.

General

Overall performance in 2008 was somewhat less impressive than in 2007. Paper 2, in particular, was handled better than Paper 1. It was evident that candidates who had been well prepared for the poetry questions on Paper 2 did exceptionally well, but that there were many candidates who seemed not to have been prepared at all for this Profile; indeed, those candidates who attempted only two questions rather than three almost always omitted the poetry question. There was less story telling in the Prose section, but many candidates lacked the skills to read the question carefully and interpret its requirements. For the Drama question, teachers need to deal with specifically genre-related devices (stage setting, conflict, stage directions, etc.), but they should also alert candidates to the time frame of events in the play: instructions limiting the response to a specific time period were often ignored.

APPENDIX – 1

Question #	Text	No of Responses	Mean mark on question
Drama			
1	Macbeth		
2			
3	Glass Menagerie		
4			
Poetry			
5	World of Poetry		
6			
Prose Fiction	*		
7			
8			
9			
10			

*Students were required to select one West Indian novel and one non-West Indian novel for comparison from the following:

West Indian

Crick Crack Monkey Merle Hodge
Green Days by the River Michael Anthony

Non West Indian

A Separate Peace John Knowles
The Pearl John Steinbeck