

Examiners' Report: Criticism Exam, 2012

The examination was taken by 73 single-subject English students and 5 Modern Language Plus students.

Questions answered:

1a)	36	b)	42				
2a)	71	b)	7				
3a)	21	b)	15	c)	30	d)	12

All scripts were of a satisfactory standard, though few were outstanding. The best scripts were full of critical insight and were often stylishly written. Most scripts were able to demonstrate sound appreciation of the poetry and prose, and were able to give reasonable accounts of the approaches to criticism in question 3. The weakest scripts managed to convey appreciation of the unseen passages, but were unable to comment on style, poetic and narrative technique.

Some outstanding analyses of the Marvell poem, 'On a Drop of Dew', showed impressive knowledge of metaphysical poetry. They saw that the poem created an extended argument, using analogy, and were able to pick up on changes in metre and rhyme which effectively divided the poem into a series of stages, like paragraphs within an essay. Many answers were able to comment on the imagery effectively. Although some candidates were too ready to find religious meanings throughout the poem, others gave very perceptive discussions of the relationship between the drop of dew and the physical world, the relationship between the soul and the body, and the relationship in the poem between these two relationships. Some candidates gave very confident analysis of rhyme, but only a few could comment on metre effectively – skills in counting syllables, and in learning the difference between an iamb and a trochee, need to be developed.

Most of the answers on the Hardy poem, 'A Thunderstorm in Town', and Elizabeth Bishop's 'It is marvellous to wake up together', confidently identified similarities and differences between the two poems. Some were inclined to read too much into the Hardy poem, which left much unknown. And some answers failed to capture the tone of Bishop's poem. On the whole, however, candidates understood the poems well, but their efforts to describe technical features of the poems, and to interpret these features, were sometimes weak. While most noticed that each stanza ended with a rhyming couplet, only one or two candidates picked up that lines two and four of each stanza were linked with a half-rhyme.

Many students were too keen to identify caesura, and some attributed meaning to particular consonantal sounds and patterns unconvincingly – guttural sounds were found to be sickening; plosives were plangent; sibilance could be sweet, could create a pre-lapsarian innocence, or freshness; 'd' sounds were compared with rain falling.

For the prose commentary, only seven candidates attempted the comparison between the two extracts from novels – Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country* and Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout*. Some of these answers were very impressive, sensitive to the delicate nuances in both writers' prose, and also picking up on notes of gentle mockery. Many candidates obviously enjoyed writing on Donald Barthelme's short story 'Chablis' – and it was pleasing to read answers which let Barthelme's humour inflect their own writing. Surprisingly, some candidates failed to find the story amusing, and were rather disapproving of its narrator. While we agreed with many candidates who thought the narrator might have a problem with drink – though not many pointed out the significance of the title – we weren't convinced by some more alarmist answers which worried about

his mental health and sexuality. Many gave very full accounts of the narrator's life, which seemed to belie the minimalist nature of the tale itself.

In Section C, candidates showed themselves to be well-informed on Johnson, Wordsworth, Eliot and Barthes – though at times it felt as if they were delivering information prepared in advance rather than really thinking about what was going on in the extract. Yet it was pleasing to see how much the candidates had thought about different approaches to criticism.

The examiners felt that many answers could have been better if they had been shorter. Some answers which were too long felt as they hadn't been thought out sufficiently. More time should have been spent planning the answer and thinking about the most telling details and important points to make. Some answers repeated themselves.

Some candidates were let down by poor writing. Spelling was often problematic. In particular, 'separate' should not be spelt 'seperate'. Many candidates failed to use the apostrophe correctly. Commas were used when semi-colons or new sentences were needed.

While we were encouraged by the number of candidates who showed sound understanding of the passages, we would have liked more candidates to admit flexibility into their interpretations, to allow for ambiguity and the possibility of reading texts in more than one way.