Criticism and Theory 2015 Examiners' Report

The examiners thought that this was an encouraging run of scripts. All of them without exception showed a reasonable level of engagement with the poems and prose passages, and even the less strong scripts gave evidence of some critical skills and method. The best answers were impressively nuanced, imaginative and observant, and sensitive both to local detail and wider implications. In the set texts section, most candidates managed competent or better responses to their chosen extract. The weaker answers tended to rely on paraphrase, while the better ones often demonstrated the candidate's thorough and knowledgeable engagement with the whole of the text from which the extract came, and sometimes with other writers studied on the course.

On the whole, students wrote better about W.S. Graham’s 'Dear Bryan Wynter' than about the pair of sonnets. Most were sensitive to the fluctuations of tone in Graham’s poem, many analysed its structure and trajectory, and a few were alive to the elegy's self-referential interest in the powers and limits of writing. Candidates tended to find the pair of sonnets more challenging and elusive in tone, and often wrote about them rather stiffly, as formal exercises in sonnet form or in the deployment of literary personification.

Candidates generally showed a secure grasp of the main concerns and interests of the prose passages. Many commentaries on the extract from Lorna Sage analysed the author's choice of detail accurately and well, and made appropriate connections between the family history and the wider social history it implied. Given the presence of so many autobiographical texts on the course, it was a little disappointing that more candidates did not take up the questions posed by the genre of life-writing (but there were some honourable exceptions). The answers on Dickens and Warner usually did a good job of drawing out affinities between the exchanges, and some candidates responded thoughtfully to the critiques of capitalism and empire that the passages suggest. The scripts might have shown a livelier sense of the complex comedy in the two passages.

It was striking that the better candidates wrote with colour and vitality, while the weaker ones spent too much time either paraphrasing or dutifully spelling out the obvious. They were also often wordy and repetitious. In general, the weaker answers started at the beginning of a passage and proceeded by regular steps to the end, while the stronger ones had generated a framing argument and perspective of their own. Good answers, again, often discerned a movement or argument within the passages, and noted how they sometimes differed within themselves.

Many students tended to rely rather naively on the invocation of technical terms. While it was encouraging in principle that students could correctly identify rhetorical features such as anaphora, alliteration and asyndeton, they should try to deploy these features not as an end in itself, but so as to add something to the analysis, with nuanced reference to context. Plosives and fricatives, in particular, were often invoked as though
they possessed magical powers to convey emotion, and the word 'lexis' tended to be used in talismanic rather than explanatory ways.

The answers on the study pack of critical essays were mainly conscientious and competent. The better candidates had a good sense of where the particular passages fitted into the essays, and where the essays stood in the historical contexts of their own times. It was, however, disappointing that very few candidates had been stimulated to read further and independently in the works of the authors. The intention behind the set texts is partly to stimulate such further reading. Most of the answers were on Eliot and Barthes. Those on Eliot were frequently censorious, charging him most commonly with being 'elitist', but without analysing what that term might signify, and 'Eurocentric', but without remarking on this American's use of the Upanishads, the Fire Sermon and St. Augustine's *Confessions* in *The Waste Land*. The answers on Barthes were less censorious, though they sometimes demurred at his more extreme conclusions, and a few relevantly invoked the events of 1968.
On the whole, the examiners felt that candidates produced a wide-ranging and thoughtful set of answers to this year’s paper. It was pleasing, in the best answers, to be confronted with detailed, analytical, well-balanced and structured essays, which demonstrated both an understanding of the subtleties and nuance of individual texts discussed and an ability to offer meaningful contextualisation and comparison. The less convincing answers tended to lack specificity or rigour, failing to cite particular moments or evidence to back up their broader claims, whilst the weakest answers were often extremely short and, when they did engage with the text, never moved beyond a rather superficial or indefensible reading.

In Section A, there were a few candidates who answered two questions rather than one, offering two commentaries and an essay, rather than the commentaries or the essay. Those that answered the commentaries tended to situate the text well. The best answers offered close analyses of the passages provided, whilst supporting or countering these with precise examples from outside of that text. The weakest tended to quote at length from the passage provided, whilst making broad generalisations of what might be deemed ‘typical’ of said author. The essays were, if they stuck to the terms of the question, often nuanced and more carefully structured, demonstrating an impressive breadth of knowledge.

Section B was generally answered well. Candidates are urged to balance their answers between close readings, which unpack the subtleties of the text, whilst drawing on specific contextual knowledge to extend those readings.

Section C provided some of the strongest answers. Candidates demonstrating the ability to quote pithily and aptly from a range of sources fared well, as did those who managed to answer the question directly. Weaker answers tended to interpret the terms of the question too loosely, or to introduce too many texts without offering sufficient analysis of any single text.

Candidates are reminded that illegibility of handwriting is a real problem for examiners. It is also noted that basic spelling and punctuation errors, although not directly penalised, are disappointing and should be avoided. Finally, it is important for candidates to think carefully about the formality or informality of their critical register: a number of responses slipped into a rather casual tone or used inappropriate analogies.
Sessional Examinations 2015: Old and Middle English

Examiners’ Report

Performance in this year’s Old and Middle English Sessional Examination ranged from the not so good to the very good indeed.

On the whole, the Old English commentary exercise (on a passage from The Wanderer) was well done. Many candidates showed a good understanding of the details of the extract, and of how these might be elucidated by the poem as a whole; candidates mostly worked hard to express the significance of the minutiae of the passage that they picked up on. A few scripts approached the passage more as if students were writing an essay on The Wanderer than a commentary on an excerpt from the poem; more papers tended regretfully towards paraphrasing what the passage said, instead of grappling with analysis of its details.

The translation of the passage of unseen Old English was often the weakest element of candidates’ scripts. It was disappointing that so many people were unable to distinguish a verb in the plural from one in the singular – or indeed to recognise a verb at all. That said, a few candidates produced a near-faultless translation, boosting their marks considerably on the paper as a whole.

Commentaries on passages from the Middle English texts studied in students’ First Year in the Department were generally good, and in some cases excellent. There were some particularly perspicacious and sensitive answers on the excerpt from Malory’s Le Morte Darthur; the passage from the General Prologue to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales tended to produce weaker responses. Again, candidates who went astray often paraphrased the extracts they chose to write about, rather than analysing the details that the extracts contained. A number of candidates could have said quite a lot more about the way in which things were expressed in the passages they selected (about the ‘stylistic interest’ that the rubric asks students to comment on, along with what they find of ‘thematic’ interest); some candidates would have benefitted from structuring their commentaries around points, rather than combing the passages for things to say line by line.

The essay was a strong component in many students’ scripts; a number of the answers in this section of the paper were really excellent, showing a deep knowledge of the text, or texts, on which the candidate was writing, a very good understanding of the text(s), and – in the most impressive cases – innovative thinking about the material that the candidate was using. A few scripts made reference to wide critical reading; answers on Malory’s Le Morte Darthur, again, stood out in this respect. Quite a few of the essays on ‘the monstrous’ in Old and Middle English literature were hampered by candidates’ failure to define what they understood ‘the monstrous’ to be (or to stop to think about what reasonably qualifies as ‘monstrous’ and what does not). Recurring faults included deviation from the issue that the candidate was supposed to be writing about; lapses of memory about the details of texts; misunderstandings of elements of texts; a lack of structure in candidates’ writing; and failures in the clarity of candidates’ writing, and especially in the logic of the arguments that they were attempting to advance.
Candidates are reminded of the importance of using vocabulary and expressions that are appropriate for a piece of academic writing; of expressing themselves with concision and precision throughout their work; and of ensuring that their handwriting can be read by their examiners.