

**CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL**

**REPORT ON CANDIDATES' WORK IN THE  
SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION  
MAY/JUNE 2009**

**ENGLISH B**

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**ENGLISH B**  
**GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**  
**JUNE 2009**  
**GENERAL COMMENTS**

The CSEC examination in English B consists of two papers.

Paper 01 consists of three compulsory questions one from each mode of writing – Drama, Poetry and Prose Fiction. These modes of writing are the content profiles which form the basis for candidates' assessment. In each question candidates are required to give approximately three to five short answers.

Fifteen marks are allocated for each question for a total of 45 marks. Paper 01 contributes 30 per cent to the whole examination.

Paper 02 consists of 10 optional extended essay questions which are arranged under three sections which correspond to the modes of writing and profiles assessed. Candidates are required to answer one question from each section.

Section A, Drama, consists of four Type A questions, two on each text. These questions require knowledge and study of one text. Candidates must answer one question.

Section B, Poetry, consists of two Type B questions. These are questions of comparison that require knowledge and study of two texts. Candidates must answer one question.

Section C, Prose Fiction, consists of four Type B questions. Candidates are required to study West Indian novels as well as other novels in English from the prescribed list. Candidates must answer one question.

Each question in Paper 02 is worth 35 marks for a total of 105. Paper 02 contributes 70 per cent to the whole examination.

**Paper 01 – Short Answer Questions**

The disappointing results of this year's performance in Paper 01 reveal quite clearly that most candidates and their teachers are still under the mistaken belief that this paper is a comprehension exercise. It is not. This paper requires candidates to apply the core skills they develop in studying the writer's craft through their focus on the set texts. They are to demonstrate how well they can apply these skills to the unseen drama extract, poem and prose extract.

The genre-based focus of the syllabus and examination since 2006 should have signaled a major shift in teaching and learning of literary appreciation. Instead of a focus on the content of the texts and the themes explored, teaching and learning in English B should now focus on how the artist (dramatist, poet and prose writer) shapes his/her work to affect the minds and hearts of the readers or audience. Previous schools' reports have emphasized that the questions will remain essentially the same, but the unseen passages will change. The syllabus outlines that the objectives are meant to cover the techniques the artist uses to manipulate how the reader will most likely think and feel about what the artist produces. Teachers who faithfully follow the philosophy and intent of the syllabus

will produce students who are critical thinkers, who will be able to read between the lines and see strategies of persuasion at work and so become less gullible and less easily manipulated. Performance in Paper 01 indicates that greater emphasis needs to be placed on preparation for responding appropriately to the questions on the paper.

The mean mark out of 15 for Drama (7.04), Poetry (4.9) and Prose Fiction (8.43) charted a slight improvement in Drama and Prose Fiction from last year, but performance in Poetry fell below last year's. Teachers are urged to adopt a developmental approach in preparing candidates for success in this examination, and especially for this paper, where what is required is the application of skills they are expected to have honed in the study of their set text.

## **Paper 02 – Extended Essay Questions**

The 2009 examination was the first testing of the new cycle of texts in the 2009-11 syllabus. Following on from requests from teachers' associations and teachers all questions in Section C, the prose section, could be answered using any of the four texts. (It should be noted that this represents a significant difference from the 2012-14 examination, in which all questions will be text specific). The 2009 examination also introduced a new approach to Question 6, the second of the poetry questions. This was a general question that allowed candidates to choose the poems they wished to discuss, based on a specified rubric or theme. The aim of this question was to allow greater latitude for candidates to show their knowledge of a wide range of poems on the syllabus.

Candidates seemed to have approached the examination with enthusiasm and a high level of reader response, often showing passionate engagement with the characters and issues discussed, especially in poetry and drama. Most candidates knew the texts well. However, as in former years, some used drama and poetry texts to answer prose questions (Section C); in Section A, some relied on film versions of *The Merchant of Venice* instead of the text; and in Section B, some displayed inadequate knowledge of the poems. Some candidates appeared to have been well taught and put to good use the socio-historical contexts of the texts, including poems. Some, however, appeared to lack this knowledge even where it was necessary.

Overall, most candidates performed well on the parts of questions requiring knowledge of the texts. The analytical aspects of the questions, that is, those that required candidates to show knowledge of the writer's craft, allowed well-prepared candidates to display their skills and elicited some excellent essays. However, these aspects continued to pose a major challenge for less well prepared candidates. Candidates showed familiarity with the vocabulary of literature, but many were unable to do much more than mention the names of devices. The problem was particularly apparent in their response to the poetry questions. It appeared least in the responses to the prose questions, but for a negative reason: too many candidates seemed unaware that prose writers also use devices, and tended to respond to prose with reference only to events. The better prepared candidates included discussion of literary features and devices such as setting, contrast, irony and symbols in their responses. Many candidates were unaware that phrases such as 'how the writer shows...' require some attention to literary devices, and that words such as 'discuss' and 'comment on' call for analysis, not narration. Even so, there was a pleasing improvement in the attempts to focus on the demands of the questions rather than simply narrate.

With regard to language and organization, most candidates wrote in essay format and paragraph organization and use of English were generally satisfactory. Many who wrote in essay format attempted introductions and conclusions, and there was improvement in the attempt to make comparisons between the texts in particular questions. Some candidates produced excellent introductions that utilized all the key terms in the various sections of the questions. The better candidates also made transitions between paragraphs, using appropriate words, sentences and phrases such as ‘however’, ‘in contrast’, ‘both’, ‘in the same way’ to link the thoughts from one paragraph to the next.

However, some problems persist. In answering the structured questions, many candidates continue to write in itemized sections instead of essay format. Some even wrote each part of the question on a different page or separated by spaces from the preceding part. In some cases, all or most of the candidates from particular schools wrote in this way. Many who wrote in this format produced confused, repetitive responses because they did not conceptualize the essay as a whole. Material used in answer to one section was repeated in subsequent sections, as candidates seem to have read and answered one segment of the question, then gone on to read and answer the next segment, as in a short answer response. Students need to be taught to write in essay format, regardless of whether the question is structured or not. Instruction should also be provided on how to organize responses to non-structured questions, such as those in Section C. Candidates also need to be taught to conceptualize the question as a whole, and to frame their introductions with both texts in mind, in the case of questions requiring a response to two texts.

Students should be reminded to underline the titles of novels and plays, to place the titles of poems in quotation marks, and to use capital letters to begin all the words in titles, except for function words.

## **DETAILED COMMENTS**

### **Paper 01 – Short-Answer Questions**

#### **Drama**

Candidates experienced few problems in dealing with comprehension-type parts of the questions such as Part (b) which asked candidates to identify two stage props and Part (e) where they were asked to identify two different feelings the extract evokes in the audience. However, where candidates lost marks were in the parts of the questions which required that they show how the writer manipulated the dramatic techniques to achieve his purpose. For example, Part (b) also asked the candidates to state the importance of each stage direction identified. Part (c), which asked candidates to state two dramatic functions of the customers and the crowd, was poorly done. Teachers need to focus more on the elements of the genre and how the writer uses these elements to create meaning.

#### **Poetry**

This question was badly done as the mean indicates. Of the 19,247 candidates who answered it 279 or 1.5 per cent scored zero and only six candidates scored full marks. Part (a), which was worth one mark and merely asked the candidate to identify who “they” referred to, was not well done. Part (d) which asked candidates to identify the mood in specified lines also was not well done. These are questions which required comprehension of the poem. It was obvious from the responses to these questions that many of the candidates did not understand the meaning created in the poem. Hence, the poor performance in the other parts of the questions which required analysis of different aspects of the poetic techniques used by the writer to create meaning.

## Prose

While candidates performed better on this question than on the poetry question, performance was not as good as expected. Candidates were able to answer quite well Parts (a), (b) (i), and (e). However, Parts (b) (ii), (c) and (d) proved to be challenging to many candidates.

## Paper 02 – Extended Essay Questions

### Intention of Questions

All questions were designed to test the specific skills listed on page 23 of the syllabus.

## Drama

Questions 1 and 2: William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

As expected, most responses (a total of 71 per cent) in the drama section were on Questions 1 and 2 combined. However, Question 1 was by far the more popular, accounting for approximately 63 percent of total responses in the drama section. Question 2 accounted for a little over 8 per cent. Most candidates performed well on Question 1.

### Question 1

The overwhelming popularity of Question 1 can be attributed to the fact that it focused on the courtroom scene, the dramatic final showdown in the play. The problem of being carried away by film versions rather than focusing on the text was particularly apparent with this question. Both questions elicited high levels of reader response as candidates took sides with 'the underdog' along both racial/ethnic (Shylock) and gender lines (Portia) or took sides on more 'universal' moral lines, arguing that Shylock was immoral to want to commit murder, or that Portia was guilty of dishonesty, regardless of whether or not it was for a good cause. Many candidates had been taught the historical contexts of the play as well as the rules of argumentation and put these to good use in framing their arguments. However, as many candidates argued one-sidedly, ignoring factors such as the treatment meted out to Shylock and Jews generally, seeing the Venetians as all good, and Shylock as all bad. This seemed attributable as much to poor textual analysis as to lack of knowledge of the historical context. For example, Antonio's treatment of Shylock was often ignored.

Candidates scored well on Part (a), which required an outline of the legal issues being addressed in the courtroom.

The least well-handled part of the question was Part (b) which required candidates to explain the punishment and mercy that Shylock received. Many candidates had no idea how to structure their response to this part. Instead of pointing out which parts of their responses had to do with punishment and which to do with mercy, candidates often merely listed the things done to Shylock, with no attempt to develop the points. Part (c), which required candidates to discuss ironic aspects of the scene, elicited some very interesting and acute discussions, and some candidates focused on dramatic irony. This part proved challenging for weaker candidates as they were either not familiar with 'irony' or were unable to explain it properly. Some who were familiar with the device did not present both sides of the situation they considered ironic. Instead of fully outlined situations of irony, candidates gave hints through one-sided statements.

## Question 2

This question addressed the issue of morality in the play. This was not as well done as Question 1. Some candidates either did not understand what is meant by ‘moral’ or ignored it completely. Part (a), which required candidates to discuss two moral lessons learnt by specified characters, sometimes elicited unfocused plot summaries involving these characters as candidates sought to display their knowledge of the play rather than to respond to the question. Part (c) required candidates to discuss how Shakespeare showed that Portia had moral weaknesses. Candidates interpreted this to mean any form of ‘weakness.’ Some, especially those unfamiliar with the historical context, spoke about Portia’s ‘foolish’ obedience to her dead father.

## Questions 3 and 4: August Wilson’s *Fences*

Approximately 8 per cent of the candidates attempted Question 3 and approximately 19 per cent attempted Question 4. Most candidates had a sound knowledge of the text and performed well on both questions. Candidates identified with the characters in the text and seemed to have enjoyed writing their responses. Better prepared candidates addressed dramatic devices and strategies used by the playwright as required in Parts (a) and (b) of Question 3 and Part (c) of Question 4.

## Question 3

Question 3 required candidates to outline the final scene of the play and to show how the playwright heightened the audience’s feelings of sadness and regret while suggesting feelings of compassion and hope among Troy’s family members. Candidates who did not know the play well introduced details outside of the scene and gave vague outlines of the scene itself.

Question 4 required candidates to discuss how Wilson presents Troy’s performance as a parent, comparing his performance with his father’s as well as with Cory’s assessment of him. Candidates were able to perform well on this question as the same information used in Part (a) could be used to answer Parts (b) and (c) with different commentary. Weaker candidates gave repetitive or story-telling answers as they re-presented details without commentary directed at the specific parts of the question.

## Poetry

### Questions 5 and 6

Approximately two-thirds (67 per cent) of the candidates who attempted Section B answered Question 5. This question required candidates to respond comparatively to two poems about death: ‘To an Athlete Dying Young’ and ‘The Lynching.’ However, the fact that one-third of candidates attempted the general question, Question 6, indicates that while the majority of candidates preferred the structured question, the new format for Question 6 has significant appeal.

Candidates produced some excellent responses to both questions, and many candidates obtained satisfactory scores. Surprisingly and pleasingly, many candidates obtained their best scores on these questions. However, too many scored most of their marks on the recall and interpretation aspects. The most important skill being tested is the ability to show how poetic devices are used to highlight themes and achieve particular effects. Most candidates seemed to have been exposed to the discussion of poetic devices and could name devices used. However, discussion of how the devices actually worked, and how they were linked to the overall meaning or theme being discussed, was often vague, rambling and confused. Some candidates gave the names of devices but could identify no example of the device in the poem. Most candidates who referred to puns and oxymoron had no idea what these terms meant. The difference in meaning among crucially important terms such 'poet', 'persona/speaker' and 'character' were often not known. Candidates confused the speaker with the poet, or identified a character in the poem as the speaker. The latter problem arose frequently with regard to 'God's Work', a popular poem in answering Question 6. Mr Edwards was often identified as the speaker, possibly because he spoke a line of narrative in the poem. Often candidates did not know the poems well, and concocted their own versions of what the poems were about. Many candidates did not link the discussion of devices to the rest of the question.

#### Question 5

In answering Question 5, many candidates confused Dennis Scott's 'Epitaph' with 'The Lynching', and far too many candidates wrote without any apparent awareness of the historical context in which lynching took place. As a result, many held the erroneous idea that the lynched man was a slave, and some wrote without reference to the racial issue involved. Some candidates who did not know the poem well wrote that the crowd was both black and white. The poems, like the novels and plays, are set texts; thus, wherever necessary, the historical context should be taught.

#### Question 6

Question 6 required candidates to compare two poems that deal with the issue of power. The question had the advantage of being able to be answered with reference to almost all the poems on the syllabus. Although the question was less well handled than Question 5, candidates produced some fascinating, original and creative discussions and insights into the nature of power. Popular choices in answering the question were 'Richard Cory', 'God's Work', 'God's Grandeur', 'Colonial Girls' School', 'Sonnets from China', 'The Emigrants' and 'This is the Dark Time, My Love.' 'Sonnets from China' was often misread, but pleasingly, some candidates showed knowledge of the sonnet form and were able to comment on the relation between its structure and the poem's meaning. The same types of problems that arose for Question 5 also arose for Question 6. Many candidates compared the devices instead of showing how the devices highlighted the issue of power. Many did not know the historical context of 'This Is the Dark Time, My Love' and wrote that the poet was depicting war in Guyana.

One recurrent problem was the use of 'invented' quotations. Candidates should be encouraged to give good paraphrases if they cannot remember the exact quotations.

## Prose Fiction

### Question 7

This question, which asked candidates to discuss the writers' presentation of ways in which the traditions and values upheld by society may or may not be in conflict with an individual's potential, was attempted by 19 per cent of candidates who attempted Section C. Candidates addressed the term 'traditions' in pleasingly diverse ways, including 'folklore', 'customs and practices', and 'communal beliefs.' Some candidates addressed only traditions, while others addressed only values, but overall the question was well done. This question again highlighted the need for candidates to be taught the historical context of set texts. The absence of this type of knowledge was especially apparent in the case of *Beka Lamb*. Many candidates attempting to use the political situation in Belize as part of their argument had difficulty as they were completely unfamiliar with the historical situation. As with the other prose questions, weaker, less well prepared candidates engaged in story telling instead of organizing their responses around comment statements related directly to the question.

### Question 8

This was the least popular of the prose questions, eliciting under 8 per cent of the responses. The question required candidates to discuss how writers use the natural environment to represent concepts or feelings. Its lack of popularity could be attributable either to candidates not knowing what is meant by 'natural environment' or to the fact that they have not been taught the symbolism of nature as setting. Nature as an aspect of setting plays an important part in all four novels, especially *The Hummingbird Tree* and *A Kestrel for a Knave*. Setting, in all its aspects (natural, social, geographical), is an important aspect of the study of prose fiction. Candidates should be prepared for questions on this feature. Overall, candidates did not do well on this question.

### Question 9

This question required candidates to discuss how being different from others affected a major character in two novels, and to comment on one strategy used by each writer in presenting this difference. Approximately 24 per cent of the candidates who attempted the Prose Section chose this question. Many ignored the part of the question that required analysis of the writer's strategy. Some candidates used drama or poetry texts and so could not score any marks.

### Question 10

This question, which asked candidates to discuss the influence of family relationships on the development of major characters, was by far the most popular of the prose questions. It was attempted by approximately 51 per cent of the candidates. The question elicited some very good responses, but about 40 per cent of the candidates engaged in storytelling instead of directing their responses to the specific question. While all the texts were appropriate, candidates often did not choose appropriate characters for analysis, or were unable to present arguments even where the character was appropriate. This was particularly evident with regard to all the major female characters (Jaillin, Sophie, Toycie) except Beka. Candidates may have studied the texts with an overarching focus on protagonists, neglecting the other significant characters.

## Conclusions

Candidates seem to have become more comfortable with the genre-specific direction of the syllabus. More teachers appear to be teaching poetry successfully in a serious way, and more attention appears to be paid to the skills of language use and organization. However, more needs to be done to help students explain HOW devices work to achieve their effects, and to use specific, concrete language (sight, sound, taste, etc) when discussing images and effects. Students need to be given adequate exercises in identifying and explaining puns, oxymorons, irony, and distinguishing between the speaker's voice and the voice of characters in narrative poems. More attention needs to be given to the writers' craft in prose fiction, and students should be guided to discuss not only main characters (protagonists) but other major characters as well. Skills in organizing essays need to be strengthened. Students need to write introductions and conclusions that focus on the question and help to minimize 'mere narration.' In writing the body of the essay, they should be trained to use opening and closing sentences that keep the essay focused on the question asked.

## Recommendations to Teachers

- Give students practice in answering examination-type questions that are structured and 'unstructured.' Guiding students to see structured questions as a whole, will help eliminate repetitions. 'Unstructured questions' also have an inbuilt structure or logic of sequence that students can be guided to identify for themselves.
- Teach students the historical contexts of the set texts. Lack of knowledge of this context is especially a problem with regard to Shakespeare, Beka Lamb and the poems highlighted in the previous section of the report.
- With reference to *The Merchant of Venice*: students should know that Jews in Europe were the victims of unequal laws: for example, confined to areas referred to as ghettos; forced to wear distinctive symbols that identified them as 'other'; disallowed from owning real estate (Shylock's property would not have included land) and in most cases permitted only one form of occupation: usury. They should be aware that Shylock was the 16<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of our modern day banker and that the Rialto, where Antonio and the other merchants also gathered, was a financial centre. Students should be guided to recognize that both Antonio and Shylock were merchants, except that one sold money and the other sold goods, both for profit. Even though external research material is available, students can be guided to pay attention to the evidence of the facts above within the play itself.
- The gender-specific ironies in the play can be brought out by reference to the fact that in Shakespeare's day women were treated as 'second class' and would not have had professions as lawyers, and that on the Shakespearean stage Portia's role would have been played by a boy actor.
- Dramatic irony should be given specific attention as a form of irony associated with the genre.
- Re the poems: Provide information on the history of lynching as a phenomenon of post-slavery America. Explain that lynching is an illegal act (a particular form of murder), so the term could not have been applied to a slave master killing his own slave since slaves were considered chattel (legal property), not humans.

- Provide information on the context to which ‘This is the Dark Time’ speaks- colonial Britain’s attempt to stop the independence movement in Guyana in 1953, by suspending the constitution, declaring a state of emergency and bringing in soldiers to maintain control. Emphasize that no ‘war’ took place.
- While students at this level should not be ‘bogged down’ with excessive contextual information, some brief knowledge about the poets might help their class discussions –for example, they might find it helpful to know that Caribbean-born poet James Berry has lived in the USA and resides in Britain and that Olive Senior is a Caribbean poet who, like Berry, grew up in the colonial period; that ‘Dreaming Black Boy’ and ‘Colonial Girls School’ reflect experiences in their different locations. Students could be encouraged to do their own internet and library searches.
- Guide students to understand the following concepts: speaker, poet, character and narrator.
- Encourage students to use literary vocabulary in writing essays on prose, not just on poetry or drama. Teach texts from several angles: characterization; setting; symbols; themes.
- Make use of good student-centred texts available on the teaching of the syllabus, such as *Carlong English B for CXC* (Text with DVD). Keith Noel, Sheila Garcia-Bisnott and Carol Hunter-Clarke.