

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

JUNE 2005

ENGLISH B

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GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION
JUNE 2005**

GENERAL COMMENTS

In 2005, the third and final year of this cycle (2003 - 2005), the overall examination performance was quite consistent with that of 2004. Mark allocations were again indicated for the various parts of each question. This helped candidates to manage their time more efficiently.

Generally, candidates demonstrated an acceptable familiarity with texts and understanding of them, and displayed a satisfactory grasp of the mechanics of writing. Still, avoidable errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation are far too common across the board. Teachers and candidates need to be reminded that there is no such word as “alot” in standard English; and that “all right” is the standard form of the phrase; and that “its” is the possessive form of the pronoun (Every dog must have its day); and that “it’s” is an abbreviated form of “it is.”

Some candidates demonstrated a commendable ability to organize ideas into logical, well-argued paragraphs; to frame their essays effectively with an introduction and conclusion; and to effect a smooth transition from quotation to discussion. Too many, however, made little effort to structure their responses. It must be emphasized that while the candidate is not penalized for sectionalizing responses, more marks are given for a well-developed essay.

While most candidates performed very well in segments of questions requiring recall, most were not as competent in analysing texts. Questions that asked for a discussion of the dramatic significance, or for comments on poetic devices, for instance, tended to be poorly done.

Candidates need to be taught how to read examination questions carefully, and to respond fully or briefly, as instructed, to all parts. Their attention should be drawn to the meaning of instructional words used in the examination such as “Comment on,” “Describe,” “Identify,” “Compare,” and “Discuss.” These all require different responses, and “briefly” means just what it says. They should know, too, that proper names should ideally be correctly spelt, and the titles of works underlined.

Far too many candidates still disregard the caution that the same text is not to be used to respond to more than one question, and many continue to use texts that are not on the syllabus. Candidates should be reminded that they will be penalized for not observing these instructions.

Intention of Questions

All questions were designed to test the specific skills listed on Page 8 of the syllabus:

1. Knowledge and Insight (Profile 1)
 - (a) Relevance and adequacy of content
 - (b) Relevance and accuracy of illustration
 - (c) Quality/Clarity of argument
2. Organizing of Response (Profile 2)
 - (a) Organizing (Structure and development of relevant ideas or points into coherent paragraphs)
 - (b) Grammar and mechanics of writing (Sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, diction, etc.)

Skills and Aptitudes Tested in Paper 01

Section A tests

- (a) description, analysis (that is, the ability to break down and select relevant data), and synthesis (the ability to bring together and condense in a new form, information drawn from various sections of the text), for the purpose of answering a particular question.

- (b) the ability to support an argument based on reference to the text, a response to or opinion about a play, novel, short story.
- (c) an elementary awareness of the writer's craft (that is, of the writer as a person who employs various techniques in the shaping of the language and the presentation of human character and behaviour).
- (d) an ability to recognize and distinguish between qualities of feeling as presented in a particular text.
- (e) a grasp of concepts and values and an understanding of how these are manifested in literature.

Section B tests

- (a) the same skills as indicated for Section A. However, because of its focus on themes and the comparison of texts, Section B requires an equal measure of analysis but a greater effort at synthesis to answer questions adequately.
- (b) an appreciation of the social content and context of literature.

Skills and Aptitude Tested in Paper 02

This paper tests

- (a) comprehension.
- (b) awareness of the writer's craft (that is, the ability to say how a writer/poet/dramatist achieves his effect).

These skills require

- (a) 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 in the passage.
- (b) attention to dramatic devices, for example, stage direction and "props".
- (c) awareness of the relationship between action and motive.
- (d) awareness of the interaction among characters.

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01

Section A – Set Texts – Questions 1 - 14

ROMEO AND JULIET

Question 1

This question required an understanding of a crucial moment that turns around the drama. Candidates were required to know why Romeo flees to Mantua. Most recalled correctly the fatal duel between Tybalt and Mercutio, in which Mercutio is killed. Many stated accurately that Romeo feels responsible through his interference for his friend's death. Very few remembered that it was Friar Laurence who suggested to Romeo that he go to Mantua.

Section (b) elicited a few detailed responses, but in the main responses were too generalized.

The vast majority of responses to (c) omitted the Friar's advice and counsel to Romeo. Everyone mentioned the potion (called "portion" and "position") and its effects. Too many, however, gave information beyond the plan.

Question 2

This question required an understanding of the opening scene of the play. This question was generally well handled; (a) and (b) gave little trouble. Section (c), however, indicated how badly prepared candidates are for

a question on dramatic significance. Only 8.19 per cent of candidates attempted this question.

Romeo and Juliet proved a popular choice (the second most popular text) and, hence, an appropriate text. However, there was quite a bit of film interference. Teachers and candidates are reminded that neither video nor film ought to replace the text, on which questions are set.

THE TAMING OF THE SHREW

Question 3

This question tested the candidates' knowledge of Act 1, Scene 1 of The Taming of the Shrew. Sections (a) and (b) were well handled by most, but (c) proved difficult to many. Only 6.30 per cent of candidates chose Question 3.

Question 4

This question required an understanding of the most eagerly awaited moment in The Taming of the Shrew: the initial meeting between Petruchio and Katherina. Sections (a) and (b) were generally competently handled, but (c) proved to be the most difficult section of the question. Again, responses evinced how badly prepared candidates are for questions on dramatic significance. Only 7.80 per cent of candidates chose Question 4.

The Taming of the Shrew was not a popular text with candidates and teachers. This is not surprising, since it hardly works as text in 2005. Only the most skilful actors can pull it off on stage.

SAINT JOAN

Question 5

This straightforward question tested the candidates' knowledge of the relationship between Joan and three (3) other major characters. Neither (a) nor (b) posed any problems for the majority of candidates.

Question 6

This was a more problematic question for candidates. Like its counterpart, it required a knowledge of the relationship between Joan and three (3) major characters. While (a) posed few problems, (b) was not well done.

Saint Joan was in 2005, as it was in 2004, the least popular set book.

TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD

Question 7

This question was reasonably well done by the majority of candidates. Only Miss Maudie's criticisms posed any problems.

Question 8

This question was more popular than Question 7 and was well done by the majority of candidates. Candidates were well prepared for (a), (b) and (c).

To Kill a Mockingbird proved in the second year of this cycle to be the most popular set text. Its simple, straightforward, linear narrative proved irresistible to 77.10 per cent of the candidates.

WIDE SARGASSO SEA

Question 9

This question required a knowledge of a particular moment at the end of the novel. While (a) was generally well handled, (b) posed some difficulties for candidates. Only 8.18 per cent of candidates answered Question 9.

Question 10

Question 10 was more difficult than Question 9 in that it required a knowledge of the role of two women in Antoinette's life. Many more candidates chose Question 10 than Question 9, and the majority of candidates did both (a) and (b) reasonably well. Approximately 15 per cent of candidates chose Question 10.

A WORLD OF PROSE

Question 11

Although Question 11 required a knowledge of only one short story, (b) and (c) proved to be difficult for the majority of candidates. Both Sections (a) and (b) demanded an understanding of point of view and the significance of Hughes' choice of different points of view.

Question 12

Question 12 was better handled than was Question 11 by the majority of candidates. Sections (a) and (b) were straightforward, but (c) proved difficult for many. Few candidates went beyond the obvious.

Questions 11 and 12 elicited responses from 37 per cent of the candidates, and A World of Prose continues to be an attractive option in Section A.

A WORLD OF POETRY

Questions 13 and 14

Neither Question 13 nor Question 14 was well handled by the majority of candidates. Sections (b) and (c) proved problematic to many candidates as did (c) in Question 14. However, at least 8 candidates scored full marks in Question 13 and Question 14.

Happily, A World of Poetry continues to hold its own among set texts.

Section B – Themes – Questions 15 - 21

Question 15 – Love and Family Relationships

About 29 per cent of the candidates answered Question 15, and there were a fair number of very good responses. Candidates handled (a) more comfortably than (b). Choice of texts either positively or adversely affected performance. Repetition of texts was the downfall of many candidates.

Question 16 – Freedom

Out of the 3 140 candidates who chose to respond to Question 16, approximately 60 per cent scored more than 15 marks. While part (a) posed no real problems, part (b) proved a stiff challenge to candidates who were less comfortable with comparison than with description, as required in part (a). There were at least 4 perfect scores.

Question 17 – Heroism

Heroism perennially has been the most popular theme question. This year it proved to be the second most popular theme question attracting responses from 36 per cent of the candidates.

Candidates showed a fairly good grasp of both types of heroism, although some chose to show how the same kind of heroism is illustrated in both texts. Thirty two per cent of candidates scored 15 or higher, and at least 2 candidates scored 29.

Question 18 – Power and Authority

This question elicited responses from 13 per cent of the candidates, only two of whom scored 28, the highest mark. Thirty three per cent of the candidates scored 15 or more.

Question 19 – Dreams and Aspirations

This question rose in popularity from 2004 to become the most popular theme question. Approximately 46 per cent of candidates responded to Question 19. Over 60 per cent scored 15 or more, and there were 6 perfect scores.

Question 20 – Women in Society

This question fell in popularity in 2005. This is surprising in this age of feminism, liberation and the fact that the question encouraged candidates to demonstrate their understanding of how and why a female character exerts influence in two of the texts studied. There was at least one perfect score, and 39 per cent of candidates scored 15 or more.

Question 21 – Attitudes to the Past

This question, in the past, has always been unpopular. Again in 2005, Question 21 was the least popular theme question. Although there were scores of 29, there was not a perfect score.

The theme questions (15-21) should prove to be easier than Section A questions, since both themes and texts are known far in advance of the examination. It is difficult to understand why candidates do not perform better on these questions. While it is not wise or educational for teachers to encourage candidates to prepare full answers and regurgitate them on examination day, there is nothing to prevent teachers from ensuring that candidates know precisely how to structure an essay on a theme question. The present examination encourages and invites teachers and candidates to explore options. Since nothing is compulsory on the examination, candidates may choose as many as three questions from Section A. With theme and text(s) known, there is hardly an excuse for inadequate preparation. While teachers cannot vouch for candidates' familiarity with texts, they can and perhaps ought to provide model answers. There are, of course, inherent dangers in such a practice, but the advantages are likely to outweigh the disadvantages. At least candidates can be guided to correlate theme and text(s), since this is so often the key to the quality of response.

General

As mentioned on page 2, overall performance in 2005 remained stable. The drop in performance in Paper 02 was counterbalanced by an improved performance in Paper 01. Though no candidate wrote a perfect answer for either Question 1 or Question 2, 9.08 per cent of those answering Question 1 and 13.2 per cent of those answering Question 2, scored 16 or more.

In the questions on drama, teachers and candidates are reminded that "dramatic importance" is crucial to any proper appreciation of drama. It is really about structure and discovering what a particular scene is doing in its desired place and how this placement affects the play. At this level, the emphasis is more on particular scenes than on the entire play. Beginnings, middles, and endings are always crucial to drama, poetry, and prose fiction, and questions will reflect the truth of this observation.

Teachers are to be reminded that we are surely moving to an approach to literature that understands the three modes as related yet distinct. Questions will reflect in one way or another the need to appreciate how poetry functions as poetry and drama as drama. Questions on novels will reflect the need to understand the organic relationship between character, theme, setting and language.

Reading prose, drama, and especially poetry aloud with sensitivity can take one a long way towards appreciating literature. It can make the difference between merely responding to it and understanding how it works.

Paper 02

General Comments

In 2005, there were more responses to the prose extract (Question 2) than to the poem (Question 1): 12 432 candidates chose Question 2, while 6 841 candidates responded to Question 1. It was surprising that so many candidates chose what proved to be the more difficult question.

Six candidates got a perfect score on Question 1, while only one received a perfect score on Question 2.

Both passages required an understanding of how writers use language to describe and explore the world of ideas and emotions through imaginative structures.

More attention needs to be paid to identification and explanation of figures of speech. Candidates were able to recognize similes and metaphors; however, few recognized examples of puns and paradoxes. Moreover, while candidates were able to identify the figure of speech, in many instances they were unable to explain how the figure of speech worked in the given context. This area of weakness is one in which the examiners would like to see an improvement.

There is still a tendency to extrapolate when responding to a critical piece and candidates need to be reminded that they should confine themselves to responding to the given stimuli, rather than drawing from extra-textual sources. In using the question as a platform to preach, some candidates became sidetracked into irrelevance.

APPENDIX – 1

Question #	Text/Theme	No. of Responses	Percentage of Candidates
1	Romeo and Juliet	7418	61.8
2		983	8.19
3	Taming of the Shrew	757	6.30
4		936	7.80
5	St. Joan	162	1.35
6		174	1.45
7	To Kill a Mockingbird	3453	28.70
8		5688	47.40
9	Wide Sargasso Sea	982	8.18
10		1760	14.60
11	World of Prose	2619	14.80
12		2619	21.80
13	World of Poetry	788	6.50
14		1086	9.05
THEMES			
15	Love and Family Relationships	2280	19.00
16	Freedom	3140	26.10
17	Heroism	4365	36.30
18	Power and Authority	1573	13.10
19	Dreams and Aspirations	6416	53.40
20	Women in Society	1193	9.90
21	Attitude to the Past	1052	8.70

N.B. Numbers and percentages are based on 70% of candidate population.