

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

MAY/JUNE 2006

ENGLISH B

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GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION
JUNE 2006**

GENERAL COMMENTS

In 2006, the first year of the first cycle of the new syllabus (2006-2008) the overall examination performance declined from that of 2005. In 2006 44.65 per cent of candidates achieved Grades III and above compared with 58.93 per cent in 2005. Mark allocations were indicated for the various parts of the questions on drama and on poetry. Mark allocations were not indicated for the prose questions, so students faced an additional challenge here of structuring the essay without guidance.

Generally, candidates demonstrated an acceptable familiarity with the texts, and there was evidence of an increased personal involvement with the material and an emotional response to the conflicts and struggles being discussed. Avoidable errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation were still too frequent. Teachers should ensure that students can spell words that they will inevitably need when writing on a specific text: Macbeth, for instance, stole the throne (not thrown), he was a valiant soldier (not “solider”) and he was misled by the witches’ prophecies (not “profisies”) or some such variant). The spelling of proper names should be mastered before the examination, and titles of texts should be underlined.

Some candidates demonstrated excellent ability in organising their responses into logical, well-developed paragraphs and used smooth transitions to form those paragraphs into a well-crafted essay, complete with an introduction and a conclusion. They were able to introduce relevant quotations and move from quotation to discussion. Too many candidates, though, wrote sectionalised responses to the different parts of the question (sometimes even on separate pages) **instead of using the question breakdown to shape their responses into a flowing essay.**

Again this year, parts of questions that required simple recall were generally done well, but weaker candidates were not so competent when called on to analyse situations. Sections of questions dealing with dramatic devices or poetic devices were markedly less well done than those that required familiarity with the “story”. Since this new syllabus is genre-based, it is important for teachers to guide students to examine dramatic and poetic devices and to be able to discuss their effectiveness. A large number of students simply omitted the part of the question requiring comments on dramatic or poetic devices. 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 sectionalising to prompt them. Words such as “Comment on”, “Identify”, “Discuss”, “Compare” require different responses, and candidates must be taught how to answer such questions.

Teachers should discuss with students the importance of care in selecting their questions. This year many candidates opted to do questions for which they were unprepared—particularly in the prose fiction section of the paper. The question which dealt with a schooldays experience, for instance, was not suitable if the candidate was prepared to write only on The Pearl and Green Days by the River. Students also 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. Teachers are reminded that students may choose only one question from each section. Quite a large number of candidates wrote on both of the plays, wasting time and losing marks in the process.

The following table shows a breakdown of the candidates' choices.

APPENDIX - 1

	Question #	Text	No of Responses	Percentage of Candidates
Drama	1	Macbeth	8161	42.3
	2		5917	30.7
	3	Glass Menagerie	1523	7.9
	4		3714	19.2
Poetry	5	World of Poetry	16246	84.2
	6		2761	14.3
Prose	7	*	9525	49.4
	8		6420	33.3
	9		1271	6.6
	10		1841	9.5

* 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

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

Organisation 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 02.
- 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.

General Comments on Student Performance in Paper 01

Because this new syllabus is genre-specific, it will be necessary for teachers to devote more time to dealing with poetic and dramatic devices, and to look more closely at the strategies used by prose writers—setting, characterization, dialogue, and so on. Students have to be sensitised to the undercurrents of mood, conflict and irony in drama, and need to understand how the stage directions function. In poetry, they need to be enabled to recognise when metaphoric language is being used, and not insist on a literal reading.

A few candidates attempted to write in essay format in Paper 1. Students need to be advised that each answer should be written on a separate line. In addition, each genre should start on a new page.

Question 1: Drama

Most candidates responded with compassion to the situation of Annie and Carlton. Many candidates did not understand that Annie wanted a job, but went for limited responses: she needed bread, money or a place to stay. In responding to Question (c) about Jean's entrance, many candidates confused *entrance* with *presence*, and commented on the effect on Annie of Jean's entrance instead of the change of mood that would affect the audience. Few candidates gained full marks on Question (d) which required them to examine the words "gentle irony" (i.e. both gentle and ironic), and some students did not know the meaning of "radiant" and so had difficulty with Question (e). For Question (f) few candidates saw the contrast between Carlton and Jean (e.g. class) and some did not understand the word "impact." A few candidates gained full marks for this last question.

Question 2: Poetry

Question (a), many candidates kept to the literal level, not seeing the sleep/death metaphor in the poem. Others, misreading the poem in another way, maintained that the forest imagery was the literal meaning of the poem, and for Question (e) they discussed "process" using terms like deforestation, evaporation, condensation and photosynthesis. This tendency to hold on to a perceived literal meaning proved the downfall of many candidates.

Question 3: Prose

Candidates evidently found this passage exciting, and responses for the most part were satisfactory. Many, though, did not realise that Jonathan was a seagull. Many did not understand the phrase "terminal velocity" Question (c), and many could not identify examples of poetic language in the passage or explain what was poetic about those examples.

Paper 02

Section A – Drama – Questions 1 - 4

MACBETH

Too many candidates attempted questions on both of the plays. Only one question must be selected from this section.

Question 1

This question required an understanding of Macbeth's guilty fears and his ambitious desires after the killing of Duncan. It also required an understanding of irony as a literary device, and invited the candidate to link Macbeth's illicit rise to power with his tragic downfall, so tracing the justice implicit in the unfolding of events. The section on irony proved difficult for some candidates, and weaker ones tended to provide vague comments on the topic of justice, not providing specific supporting evidence from the play.

Question 2

This question focused on Macduff's motive for revenge and his role in Macbeth's downfall. Many candidates ignored the words "at that time", and wrote about Macbeth's fears of Macduff later in the play. Section (b) was generally adequately done, but section (c) proved challenging. Candidates were sometimes not able to distinguish between Macduff's role and his suitability as an avenger. Most dealt well with the rallying of forces against the tyrant and with Macduff's personal revenge; only the better students understood that Macduff, since he himself was not going to be king, was God's righteous tool in delivering Scotland from the usurper.

Candidates were almost unanimous in describing Macduff as having been born by Caesarean section. Surely, though, “from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d” presents us with a much less sanitised image; presumably he was either cut from his mother after her death or he miraculously survived when his mother’s belly was brutally ripped open by invading soldiers.

Candidates need to know that the words “Say whether he is a fit avenger” require more than a yes/no response. Supporting evidence is always required.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Question 3

Candidates were asked to say what could be learnt from the setting as the curtain rises on the play, to relate the sequence of events in the first scene and to outline the major themes that emerge in this scene. Most were able to identify aspects of setting, but did not say what we could learn from them. Most were able to relate the events, though not in the correct order, and some drew on material from outside this scene. The last part of the question tended to be poorly done, with candidates listing the “themes” from the last syllabus (love and family relationships, freedom, power and authority, etc.) without linking them to what they observed in the events and setting of this scene.

Question 4

This question focused on the influence of men on powerful women (Mr Wingfield/Amanda) and oppressed women (Jim/ Laura). The most challenging part of the question was the section in which candidates were required to say how Williams makes Wingfield’s influence appear “dramatically striking”. Here it became evident that the play’s dramatic devices had not been adequately dealt with by teachers. Many candidates correctly identified the life-size photo of Wingfield as an example of a device that is “dramatically striking”, but ignored the prompt telling them that 6 marks were available, and failed to expand on the impact of the photo.

Section B – Poetry – Questions 5 - 6

General comments.

Examiners noticed a widespread absence of any evidence that candidates were being taught to read poetry as a genre. Many candidate scored their marks on the (a) and (b) parts of the poetry questions, but were very weak on the (c) part, the part that tests for understanding of the genre. Many candidates had no idea what an image was and gave narrative instead of image in answer to Question 5c. The narrative merely repeated the material in parts (a) or (b), the basic recall and comprehension sections.

Some candidates who were able to correctly select images, did not know what to do with them, so they simply listed or paraphrased the relevant quotations. Others were a bit stronger and were able to say what the effect of the image was, but very few were able to say HOW the image worked to achieve this effect. It is important that students be taught the basic vocabulary of poetry (terms such as ‘image’ for example cannot be given layman’s interpretations), be able to identify and NAME basic figures of speech (e.g. simile, metaphor, alliteration), be able to identify basic structural devices (repetition, rhyme) and be able to explain HOW in particular poems these devices work to create certain meanings and effects. This does not mean students are expected to exhibit the sophistication of a CAPE student. But the fact that significant numbers were able to handle Section c of both questions indicates that these requirements are not unrealistic. They are in fact an excellent preparation for CAPE.

Question 5

Students clearly enjoyed these two poems and wrote with conviction. However, they need to be taught the skills of writing a comparative analysis. Many listed the characteristics of one mother and then those of the other instead of finding points of comparison to show the ways in which the two women are similar/are different.

Question 6

Martin Carter's poem proved more accessible to students than Auden's. Candidates were able to identify the oppressors, but were not so sure about what they do. The section requiring candidates to say what makes the oppressors appear mysterious was clearly problematic. Candidates generally wrote fairly well on the horror communicated in each poem. A number of candidates were able to write well on the way Auden uses the sonnet form to achieve his purpose, and many, too, were able to discuss the effect of the oxymorons and other devices that Carter employs.

Section C – Prose Fiction – Questions 7 – 10

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. Students must be advised on choosing a question appropriate to the two texts they wish to write on. To choose The Pearl to write about an experience from schooldays was plain foolhardy!

Students must be taught to focus on the requirements of the question and not merely retell the story of the novel. 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 sectionalised, candidates need to be guided by teachers on how to structure their essays. Generally each essay will fall into four parts—two parts for each novel. For instance, in Question 7, it was necessary (a) to identify and explain the challenge faced, and then (b) to show the ways in which the major character moved to maturity as he/she faced that challenge. In Question 8, the candidate needed (a) to describe the way that class prejudice expressed itself in the society depicted, and then (b) to show how the major character was affected by that prejudice. Students need to be shown how to read the question, to break it down into its component sections and then to write about each section as fully as possible. A reasonable rule of thumb would be to assume approximately equal marks for each of the four sections.

Generally it was found that candidates had a grasp of the story line, but often had not taken time to probe into the deep conflicts and moral questions beneath the surface. More class discussion of issues presented in the novels seems to be called for.

Question 7

Candidates who did well in this question were those who were able to identify life's challenges and analyse ways in which dealing with those challenges had transformed the major character into a mature person. They were able to "use" the novels to support the points they made and presented their points in a clear, logical manner.

Question 8

Surprisingly few candidates used Crick Crack Monkey to respond to this question, though it would have been eminently suitable, and many used A Separate Peace, which was certainly not the wisest choice. Social class was not always identified. Misreadings abounded: Kino in The Pearl was considered to be “greedy” instead of ambitious, and was accused of “wanting to be like the same whites he despised”; Mr Gidharee in Green Days was seen as an “exploiter/manipulator” rather than as being interested in Shell’s welfare. Candidates working with Crick Crack Monkey compared Tantie and Aunt Beatrice instead of addressing the question.

Question 9

Only A Separate Peace and Crick Crack Monkey were suitable choices for this question, and students who chose the other two texts handicapped themselves from the outset. Surprisingly, since it asked for discussion of a schooldays experience, the question was generally not well done. Quite a few candidates moved away from the novels to relate their own schooldays experiences. They need to be reminded that while literature often mirrors our own experiences, all examples supporting points made must be from the literary texts.

Question 10

This question on setting was well done, which suggests that teachers are focusing more on the techniques of the novelist. This is encouraging. Green Days and The Pearl were the popular choices, though A Separate Peace allowed for rich discussion by candidates who had fully understood the symbolism used extensively in this novel.

General

Overall performance in 2006 remained stable. Candidates tended to do better in Paper 1 than in Paper 2. This is probably because students need more help with essay-writing skills. In the poetry questions, particularly, more development of points was required. Narration was a problem in the responses to questions on prose fiction.

Teachers are reminded that this syllabus focuses on the three genres, and candidates will be examined accordingly. For drama, candidates need to be able to consider a given scene in detail and show how its events, mood and placement contribute to the play. For poetry, candidates need to be able to identify and discuss the effectiveness of poetic devices and to move from quotation to analysis. For prose fiction, candidates need to move away from re-telling the story to focusing on the requirements of the question. Aspects of the novel like character, conflict, theme, and language all need to be discussed in the classroom. In all three genres, candidates should be urged to write their answers in well-constructed, logically flowing essays; it is not satisfactory for them to present a sectionalised answer.