

CARIBBEAN EXAMINATIONS COUNCIL

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

MAY/JUNE 2011

**ENGLISH B
GENERAL PROFICIENCY EXAMINATION**

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GENERAL COMMENTS

The Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) examination in English B consists of two components — Paper 01 and Paper 02. 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 examination.

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

Drama consists of four Type A questions. These are questions which are set on specific texts. Two questions are set on each drama text. Candidates are required to answer one question from this section.

Poetry consists of two Type B questions. These are questions of comparison. Candidates are required to study 20 poems which are specified in the syllabus. For one of the questions, Question 5, the poems to be used are specified by the examiner. However, for the other question, Question 6, candidates choose two appropriate poems from which they have studied to answer the question set. Candidates are required to answer one question from this section.

Prose Fiction consists of four Type B questions. Candidates are required to study two West Indian and two non-West Indian novels in English specified in the syllabus. 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 examination.

The 2011 examination was the final May/June sitting of this cycle of texts. The January 2012 English B examination will see the completion of this cycle.

DETAILED COMMENTS

Paper 01 – Short Answer

Paper 01 assesses the following skills:

- i) Comprehension
- ii) Awareness of the writer's craft (that is, the ability to say how a writer/poet achieves a given effect)

Candidates are required to demonstrate the following:

- 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.
- Knowledge of dramatic devices such as stage directions and props
- Awareness of the relationship between action and motive
- Awareness of the interaction among characters

There was a slight decline in the performance of candidates on this paper this year.

The mean scores for Paper 01 for the period 2009–2011 in the table below show the trends in performance.

Mean Scores for the Period 2009–2011

Paper 01	2009	2010	2011
DRAMA	7.02	11.00	10.22
POETRY	4.9	10.49	8.32
PROSE FICTION	8.43	7.47	8.09

It is noted that while performance declined when compared with that of 2010, performance was still better than that of 2009 for Drama and Poetry and consistent for Prose Fiction.

Question 1: Drama

Nine hundred and fifty-five (4.90 per cent) of the candidates scored full marks on this question. This question tested knowledge of the difference between mere comprehension of the extract and awareness of genre and craft in the shaping of the extract. Teachers may consider the impact when, in preparation for the examination, students are not encouraged to master the art of answering questions in full sentences to ensure that they can get to the heart of the answer easier and to ensure that all parts of the question are addressed.

Most candidates were able to score the full marks for Part (a), which indicates, happily, that teachers are paying closer attention to the structural elements of the genre. Responses to Parts (b), (d) and (e) indicate that some candidates are experiencing difficulty in drawing reasonable and supportable inferences from onstage events and character actions and motives. This central skill in literary study should be emphasized by teachers. A few candidates in their responses to Part (b) interpreted ‘relationship’ as marital, ignoring the literary use of the term. Some candidates erroneously felt that they had to use words from the text to describe Harold’s tone. One disappointing aspect of the response to Part(c) which focused on how Erma builds up suspense was that less than one third of the candidates provided an explanation; many candidates merely offered a summary of Erma’s actions. The candidates who offered an explanation were oftentimes able to score full marks.

More than one third of the candidates earned full marks for Part (e) which required them to suggest a title for the extract. Candidates displayed their creative imagination in the wide and varied offering of titles and their rationales, based on a sensitive reading and response to the events in the extract.

The mean score was 10.32 out of 15.

Question 2: Poetry

Thirty-six (0.18 per cent) candidates scored full marks on this question. Most candidates earned full marks for Part (a), as they were able to identify the two signs, from the specified lines, which showed that someone had died. Most candidates were able to identify one image from the lines specified to answer Part (b), but had problems commenting on the effectiveness, as only approximately 25 per cent of the candidates gained full marks for this part of the question. For Part (c) (i), some candidates instead of making the connection with a minister of religion, inappropriately associated the ‘minister’ with a politician. Other candidates ignored the clues of the minister as presented in the poem and superimposed their expectations of his role as ‘provider of comfort,’ which, unfortunately, was not evident in the poem.

Candidates provided the evidence of something ‘horrible taking place’ for Part (c) (ii), but did not explain the horror. Approximately 25 per cent of the candidates gained full marks for this question. Responses to Part (d) indicate that teachers are prioritizing poetry as an oral medium, meant to be spoken and heard. Unfortunately, candidates had problems spelling words like ‘rhyme’ and ‘rhythm’.

Many candidates misinterpreted Part (e) as they sought to explain the lines specified in the question, rather than identifying and commenting on the speaker’s feeling in those lines. Less than a third of the candidates earned full marks for Part (e), and few captured the cynicism, disbelief or irony that emerge from a sensitive reading of the poem, without the interference of the cultural experience of the reader.

Teachers should guide students to focus attention on the poem itself, notwithstanding the need to draw on personal experience to frame an introduction to the experience of the poem. Ultimately, the poem itself may offer a different experience than what is expected, and students should be encouraged to confront that reality. Examiners suggest that teachers will continue to improve their students’ competence in poetry appreciation by:

- Allowing students to hear and recite poems and respond orally to what makes them appreciate the poem.
- Teaching students how devices are used in poetry, beyond their ability to identify the devices.
- Expanding students’ vocabulary of feeling words — for tone, mood and characters’ emotions which are inferred.
- Helping students to gauge the extent of content required for an answer by the marks allocated.

The mean score was 8.32 out of 15.

Question 3: Prose Fiction

Two hundred and eight (1.07 per cent) candidates scored full marks on this question. Most candidates were able to identify the mood for Part (a), but less than half of them indicated how the writer created the mood. Approximately the same number of candidates was able to earn full marks in Part (b) which required them to explain how the sentence, *I had not expected to see him* introduced a shift in the mood of the passage. Most candidates were able to identify the dialect as the feature which suggested that the passage was set in the Caribbean as required for Part (c), but for Part (d), candidates found it increasingly difficult to earn the four marks for explaining two ways in which the writer builds tension. Approximately 15 per cent of the candidates earned the maximum mark for Part (d). For Part (e), approximately 50 per cent of the candidates were able to earn one mark for a reason the narrator’s response to Mr Johnson was different from that of his friend. Responses to Part (e) (ii) demonstrated that only one-third of the candidates were able to capture and explain how Mr Johnson’s behaviour made the passage humorous because of his careful entanglement of the boys in their own tale.

It is instructive that Question 1, Part (c), Question 2, Part (c) ii and Question 3, Part (d), which all test candidates’ ability to explain the writer’s technique, demonstrate a similar distribution or spread of marks. Teachers who are able to have students master the concept of the author deliberately manipulating the language and form of the genre to influence the feelings and thoughts of the reader or audience can be assured of excellent results. If teachers take this approach to the study of the set texts, candidates of the examination will have been prepared for the demands of Paper 01 where they can display their application of these competencies.

The mean score was 8.09 out of 15.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAPER 01

Candidates in general need to base their inferences on a careful reading of the evidence in the passage or poem as a whole. Students need to be taught the strategies that will assist them in arriving at meaning based on a thoughtful processing of the events described. Teachers need to help students expand that notion to embrace the more immediately pleasurable elements of the comic in literature and life.

While in this paper no marks are formally awarded for the use of language, teachers/instructors are encouraged to offer students parallel Standard English constructions, to the dialect responses that students offer to the questions.

More importantly, however, is the need for teachers to confidently build on their obviously successful attempts to have the students offer and defend, with evidence from the text, their varied interpretations and emotional responses to the texts they read. This prioritizing of students' autonomous thought, bolstered by their obligation to produce the textual evidence for their conclusions, is at the heart of the critical and creative thinking that the study of literature is meant to engender.

Paper 02 – Essay Questions

The following are the 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.

Drama – *The Merchant of Venice*

Question 1

The Shakespeare questions yielded 65 per cent of the total responses for the drama section. Most candidates demonstrated good knowledge of the text but some could not apply this knowledge to the question. For Part (a), candidates were asked to describe the love relationship of one pair of three pairs given. The most popular choice was Portia and Bassanio. Some candidates did not describe the relationship but gave summaries of the encounters between these couples. A few candidates ignored the instruction and discussed all three couples. Part (b) required a discussion of the obstacles encountered by the lovers in this relationship but candidates tended to identify the obstacles only and not show how these affected the relationship. Candidates did better in discussing the *suspense* and *disguise* in Part (c). Here is a brief excerpt of a response that addresses Part (c), dealing with the element of disguise:

The element of disguise is employed by Shakespeare to help overcome an obstacle but is also conveyed as an obstacle. Even Jessica's conversion to Christianity can be seen as a 'disguise'. She must hide her true identity for the sake of love. Although Lorenzo's love is boundless, she must alter some characteristics for their relationship. This shows that true love always has some form of difficulty.

There were a few candidates who confused *irony* and *dramatic irony*.

Twenty-one candidates scored full marks for this question. The mean for this question was 16.07 out of 35.

Question 2

This was the least popular drama question as only 290 candidates attempted it (1.48 per cent). This question focused on the minor characters Solanio and Salarino and their role in the play. Candidates readily accounted for the events in this scene and enjoyed relating its comic elements, as was required for Part (a), but Part (b) which asked for a discussion of the *dramatic effect* of this scene was not adequately handled. Expected responses included *the humour created by the boys trailing Shylock; prophetic irony in Solanio's remark that Antonio might suffer if he fails to keep his bond; the tension and suspense generated by their vivid descriptions/recounting and how these characters functioned as the play's 'newspaper' in dispensing the gossip*. Part (c) required a connection of this scene to the play as a whole and suggested responses included *the ways in which Solanio and Salarino contributed to the economy of the drama since they reported on offstage events; their newspaper role (giving news on the Rialto); their support for Antonio and how they advanced the theme of money, a crucial theme in this play*.

One observation worth mentioning is that a few candidates confused the named scene with Act 3, Scene 1, in which Shylock appears onstage and questions Solanio and Salarino. This scene comes shortly after the one indicated in the question.

No candidate scored full marks on this question. The mean for the question was 13.19 out of 35.

Fences

Question 3

Twice as many candidates did Question 3 than Question 4. Writer's craft is important in appreciating Wilson's (the playwright) expectations of the audience through the ways in which the feelings and thoughts about Troy are portrayed. Although candidates relished discussing Troy, many of them confused the *thoughts* with the *feelings* in Part (a) of the question. It was heartening though to see that candidates were aware that this head/heart dilemma could yield answers that were for, against or just ambivalent. Popular responses about *the audience's feelings about Troy* showed how *he was presented at the beginning of the play as likeable, witty, engaging, romantic, and how Bono saw him as a leader (for the positive slant) and how he was presented as selfish/self-centred, as in his infidelity and treatment of Cory and Gabriel (for the negative slant)*. An ambivalent position saw Troy's portrayal as one that evoked *both* sympathy and contempt from the audience. Responses about the audience's thoughts about Troy would demonstrate how *information about him is sequenced in the play (the good things first); how the audience learns about his difficult past; and having learned all of this, how do we now judge him?* Part (b), being reader-response (giving their final opinion of Troy, with justification), yielded very good responses. Here is an example:

Troy is very unjust in his decision with not allowing Cory to go to college and live out his dream of playing football. Troy, however, uses his past failures to prevent his own son's dream from happening. This was seen as selfish as he built a fence around Cory to keep society out and in the end it actually locked Cory out of his home. Troy is hardworking and is not pleased that he could not complete purchasing his house if it was not for money that was given to his brother Gabriel who was injured in the war. I don't however blame Troy to some extent because he had a rough childhood. He was not given the emotional love as a child so he finds it hard to give this type of love to his son. His being locked up for fifteen years also shows how black men were unjustly treated and this has helped to drive an arrow of bitterness in Troy's heart.

Four candidates (0.09 per cent) scored full marks on this question. The mean for this question was 18.40 out of 35.

Question 4

Part (a) required knowledge of the pasts of Troy, Bono and Lyons. Candidates were very familiar with Troy's past but had difficulty finding textual evidence for Bono and Lyons. Consequently, many of them lapsed into narration. Part (b) required discussion on *one* of these characters and demonstration of how Wilson shows the effect of the past on this character throughout the play. Some candidates discussed all three characters. Part (c), which asked for the issues about black men that Wilson was highlighting, caused much uncertainty as candidates seemed to have problems with the word/concept *issues*. However, some candidates offered acceptable responses such as *their roles in the family (as in husband/wife relationship, parent/child relationship); role in the community; how they perceive manliness, their attitude to and involvement in sports, and their attitude to racism.*

Four candidates (0.18 per cent) scored full marks on this question. The mean for this question was 18.97 out of 35, the highest mean for the drama section.

Poetry

Question 5

This question dealt with the portrayal of death in the poems "Traveling Through the Dark" and "Epitaph". Part (a) asked candidates to describe what happens in each poem. Although most candidates were able to describe the events, in many instances key details were omitted, and, in some instances, candidates 'invented' details to fill the textual gap (as in the speaker hitting the deer or the white folks cheering the hanging body). On the whole, candidates were more comfortable with "Traveling Through the Dark" than "Epitaph" and it was quite common to have candidates confusing another poem on the syllabus, "The Lynching" with "Epitaph."

Part (b) required a discussion of the speaker's attitude in each poem. Some candidates were cognizant of the complexity of the speaker's attitude in "Traveling Through the Dark" as he is sensitive to the unborn fawn but practical in terms of adopting a philosophical attitude about death as he remains unswerving in his journey (which could also be a fitting metaphor for the road of life). The speaker's attitude in "Epitaph" allows for more than one reading and insightful candidates argued either for one of anger or that of detachment.

For Part (c), candidates were expected to identify and discuss one poetic device that each poet uses to capture the reader's attention or create an emotional response in the reader. Many candidates identified a device but failed to provide textual evidence to support the submission. It was common to have devices selected at random that could not be connected to the poems. Some candidates were unable to show how the device evoked a particular response. Generally, it proved quite challenging for some candidates to discuss the devices and link this discussion to reader-response. This example infuses the device and the effect:

The poetic device of personification is used greatly to create an emotional response in the reader. The poet gives nature human qualities to gain sympathy from the reader and also to create suspense. When the reader sees the phrase, "nature listened", we are made to feel the importance of the decision and the weight that must have been upon the persona. That the "car aimed its headlights" shows that technology, represented by the car, was ready to move on and move ahead.

Two candidates scored full marks on this question. The mean for this question was 14.80 out of 35.

Question 6

This was the general question and candidates were required to choose two suitable poems from the prescribed list to answer the question set. Candidates seemed to have a strong preference for this kind of question as it yielded 67 per cent of the responses. Model answers named two appropriate poems and described who/what is admired for Part (a). Popular choices were “Richard Cory”, “Coolie Mother” and “For My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)”. Part (b) asked for an identification and discussion of a poetic device in each poem showing this admiration. Discussion of the device was not a strong point for average candidates. The reader-response aspect of the question, Part (c), required candidates to supply textual support for a position as to which presentation of admiration is more appealing of the two poems. Some candidates merely repeated lines from the chosen poem to validate their claim.

For this response, an encouraging number of candidates dealt well with Part (b) which asked them to show how the poet used a technique to present admiration. Many candidates were able to identify appropriate devices and explain how they were used by the poet to convey a sense of admiration. References to repetition in Goodison’s “For My Mother (May I Inherit Half Her Strength)” and McDonald’s “God’s Work” and personification in King’s “A Contemplation Upon Flowers” were well handled by candidates. Average candidates were only able to identify the devices and provide a limited explanation of the connection between the devices identified and the poet’s message. Weaker candidates for the most part only referred to the device without illustrating its relevance to a clearer understanding of admiration.

Many candidates were able to give qualified justification regarding why they found one poem more appealing in its presentation of admiration than the other as required for Part (c). It was a delight to see many candidates drawing on their own experiences, and those issues in their society, such as strong mothers who sacrifice much for their children, to bolster their arguments for why an issue resonates with them. Weaker responses to this section were from candidates who appeared to lack the skills of argument and did not know the poems well.

Twenty-three candidates scored full marks on this question. The mean for this question was 17.57 out of 35.

Prose Fiction

Question 7

This question on empathy gave candidate the opportunity to be objective and to evaluate through analysis, the phrase *to what extent*. The word *encourage* also suggests the ability of the writer to persuade the reader through his/her narrative technique. This question also asked the reader to personalize the experience of the major character in the texts chosen. Overall, some level of synthesis was expected in order for candidates to do well. Only 24 per cent of the candidates attempted this question and many ignored *to what extent* and gave very general submissions which did not fully integrate the content, writer’s style or their own personal responses. Many candidates did not concentrate on major characters and far too many used ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ interchangeably.

Teachers need to concentrate a bit more on teaching point of view.

Ten candidates scored full marks for this question. The mean for the question was 16.15 out of 35.

Question 8

This question asked candidates to identify from each text, a major character and to show how the exposure to love changed him/her or impacted him/her positively or negatively. Many candidates had challenges in saying *how* love changed the character. There was a heavy concentration on romantic love as against other types, for example, parental love and love between friends. Those who chose *A Kestrel for a Knave* spoke mainly about Billy and the hawk and very few about Billy and Mr Farthing. Some candidates had problems navigating the race/class dimension of the relationships in *The Hummingbird Tree*. Although traditionally love is a popular choice, only 23 per cent of the candidates attempted this question.

No candidate scored full marks. The mean for this question was 16.10 out of 35.

Question 9

This question, which focused on the roles of mothers, proved to be the most popular question in the prose section, with almost 37 per cent of the candidates attempting it. Appropriate coverage of this question would have included *the mothers' actions and influence, and how this influence shapes the characters and events*. How the mothers' role contributes to any theme/issue in the texts and how the writers' technique help to show the mothers' role would also constitute part of the discussion. Far too many responses merely listed the litany of woes about Billy's mother, for example, or in other instances, discussed the behaviour of the women in the texts.

The responses to this question were also affected by candidates' poor choice of characters in the texts as some characters were never developed enough for students to write much about their roles. Another concern is the perennial one of candidates not mindful that they are comparing and contrasting. While it is expected that candidates will focus on the issues in the question for each text above anything else, it is also good practice for them to demonstrate an awareness of how the novelists treat similar issues and to use the language that indicates this awareness. The very good responses not only showed a grasp of both issues of the mothers' role and their influence on others but drew attention to the similarities or differences in the treatment of such issues.

Teachers are being asked to pay attention to having students adduce support for points they make as far too many of them make points without giving adequate support from the text. Good responses for this question clearly identified the issues, supported them well from the text, argued coherently and demonstrated an awareness of the comparative nature of the question. Weaker responses, for the most part, narrated without paying much attention to the skills demanded.

Five candidates scored full marks. The mean for this question was 15.86 out of 35.

Question 10

This was the least popular question, with only approximately 15 per cent of the candidates attempting it. To examine *enclosed spaces* is to see whether the characters are freed or shackled in the process. Many candidates did not consider the longing for freedom on the part of the entrapped. Flexible interpretations of entrapment went beyond the literal. Average responses were limited to physical spaces but there were superior responses that saw entrapment from a metaphorical perspective and explored the psychological, social and racial spaces.

Seven candidates achieved the maximum score on this question. The mean for this question was 20.05 out of 35, the highest for the prose section.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PAPER 02

- Text selection and text choice must be given serious consideration. Sometimes poor textual choice limits the depth of the discussion and textual evidence needed for strong arguments.
- Many candidates lost marks because they crossed genres, for example, using a Drama text to answer the question in the Prose Fiction section. No marks can be awarded in such instances as this a genre-specific examination.
- The tendency to narrate, evident in responses in the Prose Fiction section, continues to weaken the analytical element in essays.
- Teachers are encouraged to continue to reinforce and teach essay-writing skills, strengthen vocabulary, grammar, paragraphing and sentence construction. They are encouraged to find opportunities to give small writing tasks (even a paragraph at a time) to assist weaker students such as
 - exercises which target introductory paragraphs
 - finding textual evidence to develop one point.
- Even as students are encouraged to see other versions of the texts under study, they must be constantly reminded that only the texts, as they appear on the syllabus, are being tested (and not the movie version, for instance).
- Students should know the skills required when they are asked to *define, discuss, describe, determine, comment on, or show*. Teachers must prepare students in this area.
- While it was clear that students were exposed to hearing and/or reading the poems, for instance, teachers are encouraged to take them one step further; they should be empowered to master the language to *describe, explain* and *analyse* with greater clarity those experiences shared and gained through listening and speaking.
- Teachers must remind students of the potential of Literature. It is not merely a tool or an instrument of the writers' style, but is also 'lived' experience. Literature can help students to explore, question, form judgements and reinforce certain values and attitudes. This dimension, the kind of applicability, is what is sometimes captured in superior scripts.
- Candidates need to be reminded that 2011 was the final cycle of the May/June examinations and January 2012, for the January (re-sit) examinations. Knowledge of the new syllabus (and by extension the new cycle) is necessary, especially in relation to text selection.