

**UNIVERSITY OF MALTA**

**SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE**

**SEC**

**ENGLISH LITERATURE**

**May 2007**

**EXAMINERS' REPORT**

**MATRICULATION AND SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE  
EXAMINATIONS BOARD**

**SEC English Literature  
MAY 2007 SESSION  
EXAMINERS' REPORT**

**Introduction**

Some may perceive the English Literature Sec Level examination process as necessarily and exclusively a linear route following a sequence that includes, amongst other stages, the selection of texts; the teaching/learning phase; the examination; the correction of candidates' efforts and the issuing of a report on tendencies in the examination. While one has to admit that, for obvious reasons, this sequencing has to exist, it is wrong to assume that the experience is rigidly unidirectional where, each year, the process is simply followed and concluded only to be repeated the following year. More correctly, the process must be recognised as being mutable in which the syllabus, the teaching/learning experience, the examination and the examiners' report are channels which help the parties directly involved in this examination be 'in touch'. Such a connection prevents the process from becoming sterile and sustains a culture of change with the intention of improving. This may be evidenced in syllabus change; revised classroom practices; adjustments in examination questions and candidates' responses to examination tasks. In this sense, it is hoped that the examiners' report is appreciated both as an analysis of the candidates' performance in the last session of the examination as well as a document that may function to help teachers/learners at the classroom level. There is a specific reason for such argumentation in this introduction.

Given the large corpus of candidates sitting for the examination, there tends to be very little noticeable changes in the general trends of candidates' responses. For example, one cannot expect that, because examiners repeatedly underscore that candidates need to answer better questions in Paper One that require them to explain the effectiveness of devices and that essays in Paper Two manifest the characteristics of narrative texts, there will be a dramatic change from one year's answers to the next. For various reasons, such shortcomings were, are and will remain part of the candidates' answers. This reality should not, however, blinker one from not recognising difference. This year examiners have come across 'pockets' of candidates whose responses were extremely good. It is obvious that these candidates had the benefit of a teaching/learning situation that was very conscious of the points repeatedly made in examiners reports. These candidates answered questions in Paper One with a directness that indicates proper and specific coaching rather than just linguistic proficiency. Similarly, examiners found essays that leave no doubt that the candidates were experienced in writing expository Literature essays with proper introductions and an essay body organised according to argument rather than narrative. To date these 'pockets' of candidates are too few to possibly condition the overall distribution of grades in the examination, however, they need to be acknowledged and the effort of teacher and learner commended.

**STATISTICAL DATA** The table below summarises the distribution of Grades for Options 2A and 2B

**Distribution of Grades**

Grade	2A	2B	Total	%
1	96		96	3.2
2	185		185	6.2
3	434		434	14.5
4	425	103	528	17.7
5	286	259	545	18.2
6		168	168	5.7
7		248	248	8.3
U	369	339	708	23.7
Absent	19	55	74	2.5
<b>Total</b>	1814	1172	2986	100

**PAPER I**  
**SECTION A**  
**General**  
**Comments**

In the initial meetings before the commencement of corrections when markers debate what answers may or may not be accepted, it was believed that the poem *'Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle Received from a Friend called Felicity'* might present some difficulties to the candidates given the 'Americanised context'. Local candidates are distant from the idea of 'horse chestnuts being puffed' as well as 'watermelon being pickled'. It was also felt that statements like 'During that summer – which may never have been at all' might hinder the candidates' understanding of the poem. The evidence from the responses given does not suggest this. Undoubtedly, the number of meanings given by the setters helped in facilitating, at least, the candidates' understanding of the work at the literal level. In their general comments examiners point that 'the poem was well within the grasp of most candidates including those who eventually opted for Paper 2B' and '...the choice of poem was very suited to the candidates' level and age, it was interesting, relevant and appealing.'

**Specific**  
**Comments**

- 1 Only very few of the answers were incorrect. The question/answered ensured that the theme of the poem was actually summed up for the candidates.
- 2 A good number of candidates failed to earn all the marks available in this question. Most candidates gave 'during that summer' which is correct, but then went to quote 'far above and away' which makes no reference to time. The candidates failed to connect the word 'while' with time.
- 3 Most candidates answered with the correct figure of speech. Unfortunately, very few earned the 2 marks for 3b. Most of the answers got 1 mark since they were concerned with the silence of lizards lacking any reference to the greenery or lack of movement suggested by the metaphor. Obviously, this is one situation where candidates are minimally concerned with attempting to explain the effectiveness of the figure of speech in full.
- 4 Another failing question – most candidates still do not mention the sound effect of this figure of speech. Alliteration is all about sound and the majority of candidates did not refer

to the repetition of the /b/ and its effect. Most referred to the 'physical' similarity of the seeds and bullets.

A number of candidates quoted 'to be spit out in rapid fire'. The idea of visual, rhythmical and structural repetition was beyond the average candidate. Strangely enough, a number of B candidates were awarded full marks giving as an answer 'repetition of the word against'.

- 5 Less than half the candidates got the full marks for this question. Some of the wrongs were that candidates pointed out only one correct contrast; mismatched the quotes or gave one word answers.
- 6 An appreciable percentage of candidates deserved the full marks for this question. Obviously one still finds candidates who suggest ideas that the poem is in free verse because the poet is 'new and has no experience to write other styles'.
- 7 A number of candidates lost marks in this question because of imprecision in explaining themselves. Influenced by the phrase 'when unicorns were still possible', they wrote that 'unicorns' means that everything is possible. These answers were awarded one mark. The valid answers included references to childhood, fantasy and imagination.
- 8 Mostly correct, though some mentioned that the memories come back when the poet opens the jar, or when s/he tastes watermelon, etc. The general idea of the poet's memories was present in nearly all answers, but sometimes extra information tended to jeopardise valid answers.
- 9 This question gave the candidates the opportunity to express their literary interpretation of a poem, but unfortunately, the vast majority seem to have basic problems of interpretation. It is possible that they believe so much in the importance of quotes that they assume quotes (even if not explained and left out of context) are the be all and end all of all literature answers. References to the use of compound adjectives, contrast and repetition by the poet would have been more appreciated than just quotes.

**SECTION B**

**General  
Comments**

The passage seems to have been of the right pitch – sufficiently engaging yet generally accessible. This is reflected in the performance of both option 2A and 2B candidates. The first three questions, in particular, helped candidates accumulate a positive score.

**Specific  
Comments**

- 1 The purpose of this question was to help candidates to focus on the comic/humorous element of the story. Most of the candidates were able to mention three facts intended to create a comic effect. The most common wrong in the answers to this question was that candidates failed to limit their references to lines 1 – 10.
- 2 This was a question that distinguished the very good from the good candidates. The question called for an early recognition of the fact that the woman did not really mean to harm the boy. Few candidates referred to the comic element in the attack as an immediate indication; a few referred to the woman's question, 'Now ain't you ashamed of yourself?' which was acceptable. Most of the candidates showed that they realised the harmlessness of the woman very late in the story, even as late as the ending when she offered to buy the dancing shoes.

For such late references the candidates were not awarded any marks.

- 3 The majority of candidates answered the question correctly. This showed that the passage was within the reading ability of the candidates and that they understood what was actually happening in the story.
- 4 A lot of candidates managed to understand that the expression also made reference to the woman wanting to impart better attitudes to the boy. She wanted to show him that stealing was not the answer to obtaining things. Most answers were awarded full marks as they referred to the central theme of the Education of the boy by the woman.
- 5 This question exposed some misunderstanding of facts by the candidates. Some were impressed by the surname/s suggesting that the woman was rich or was a woman of title. Such answers revealed a basic understanding of the text and consequently of the greatness of the woman's reaction to being mugged by the boy. The majority of candidates linked the long name with the woman's size; others pointed at the fact that the boy would not forget the woman for a very long time. Few linked the surname with her great generosity. Any references to the woman's size; long last effect and generosity were all awarded full marks.
- 6 The answers to this question varied. Wrong answers suggested that the surprise lies in the fact that the woman was a dancing instructress. Some answers were wrong because candidates failed to explain why both the boy's words and those of the woman should surprise the reader. These were awarded half the allotted marks. The correct answers underscored the woman's kindness and the fact that the reader does not expect to discover that the boy wants a pair of dancing shoes.
- 7 The majority of the candidates answered both questions correctly, but many candidates have the habit of being vague in their answers. The first question called for something specific such as 'in full sentences', 'making full statements' or 'asking questions'. Answers like 'talking normally' or 'answering like a big boy' were not accepted.
- 8 The question tested how far the candidate could read the story with sensitivity. It was a pleasant surprise to find that a very good number felt that the boy was not a delinquent and sympathised with or pitied him, considering that this was probably his first clumsy attempt at mugging. However, there are two points to bring out here. First of all, the question called for qualities. Many candidates tend to give facts without eliciting qualities. For example, they say that the boy 'told the truth' instead of saying he was honest. Secondly, the question called for a description of the boy's character. References to the boy's frail physique, his dirty face and his poor background were not accepted. The examiners were looking for words and phrases such as: 'honest', 'not cunning', 'not street-wise', 'determined', 'artistic', 'thoughtless', 'rash', 'innocent', 'respectful' and 'afraid'.

**PAPER IIA**

**General  
Comments**

The examiners of this component of the examination agree that there has been an improvement in the quality of essays in this section. *'It was a pleasure to note that the message, often repeated in our reports, about the importance of relevance in the essays is getting through. Every year the number of students focusing on the questions, or at least making a conscious effort to appear relevant, is on the increase.'* and *'It was heartening to see a considerable increase in the number of essays that were well structured with a*

*suitable introduction, paragraphing and a conclusion.*' While this is true, it was frustrating to see a good number of otherwise competent candidates with a good knowledge of the play lack the technique of answering questions properly; candidates who insist in attempting more than one essay on a text; candidates whose knowledge of the text comes mainly from videos or DVDs; candidates who cannot seem to understand that an essay is not limited to a collation of quotes and obviously candidates who cannot move beyond the narrative.

**Specific  
Comments**

**DRAMA**

- 1 Many chose this question but there were few good answers. Some had difficulty identifying the circumstances and said that it occurs after the murder of Duncan. Most candidates did not mention that it is part of a soliloquy and completely ignored the need to refer to Macbeth's state of mind. At best, candidates showed a vague understanding of the phrase 'state of mind' and failed to describe effectively Macbeth's conflicting thoughts and emotions or to restrict their answer to 'that particular part of the play'.
- 2 This was the question that elicited several valid answers. Most of the candidates understood the question clearly and focused on a number of qualities, facts and statements that highlighted the contrasts between Macbeth and Banquo. Some of the better candidates even made references to the historical background. Candidates who simply wrote about one character first and then the other in isolation and without some reference to compare/contrast were awarded lower marks.
- 3 This was a popular question. The symbols of blood, the witches and light and darkness were the ones most chosen. Many candidates referred to instances in the play where the symbols occur but failed to relate the symbols to the idea they represent. Many of those who wrote about blood did not show how the symbol of blood changes as the play develops and were also under the impression that the symbol of blood occurs first in the play with the murder of Duncan. One may say that, the responses to this question were either rather good or considerably weak.
- 4 No answers
- 5 No answers
- 6 No answers
- 7 Of the few candidates who attempted this question most tended to give character studies and failed to understand that they needed to focus on the universal characteristics the qualities of the characters imply.
- 8 The candidates who attempted this question performed relatively well. It did not seem difficult to identify elements in the play that function to create tension. What was positive in these answers was the fact that the candidates seemed aware of the need to refer to dramatic devices used to create tension rather than just narrating incidents.
- 9 The question asked candidates to compare and contrast the different leadership styles of Corporal Johnstone and Sergeant Mitchem. One suspects that such a question is tackled in class so that the candidates who opted for this question were probably relatively well

prepared for it. The answers were generally correct and included a number of valid points.

- 10 No answers.
- 11 No answers.
- 12 No answers.
- 13 There were several very good essays on this question. The candidates showed sensitive reading of the play and a clear awareness of the qualities needed in a social worker. What was positive about these essays was that candidates were conscious of the importance of the word 'qualities' in the title. Unfortunately, one still found more than the desirable number of candidates who simply narrated what Miranda does for Jim without bringing out clearly the qualities such behaviour demonstrates.
- 14 It was interesting to note that the candidates who chose this question were aware of the few positive elements in a play full of pain and despair. Because such instances are few and far apart, candidates with poor writing skills could not 'make mileage' of these few instances and their responses seem hedged. In contrast, some candidates focused on a few incidents, explained them well and produced very valid texts. This was particularly encouraging.
- 15 This proved rather difficult to answer and there were very few satisfactory essays. Many of the candidates who attempted this question wrote long summaries of the plays often not concluding anything. The question asked for a personal response. Very few candidates 'dared' to disagree with the judges and find one play more interesting than the other. Even less, offered good reasons for their choice.

## PROSE

- 1 This question focusing on Pinkie's evil was the more popular with the candidates. The responses showed valid knowledge of the text as candidates made reference to enough incidents from the novel to manifest the protagonist's evil make-up. The responses tend to be a 'listing' of incidents held together chronologically so that the texts feel like a summary.
- 2 Very few candidates opted to explain why the novel has the elements of a good gangster story. Those who did attempt the question failed to identify a few characteristics and use these as arguments in the body of the essay. Paragraphing was again mainly conditioned by the narrative line.
- 3 Very few candidates attempted this question. Those who did wrote unimpressive answers often not tackling the question.
- 4 Most of the candidates who studied this book attempted this question. Their responses suggest that they were prepared and had studied well, however, their essays lacked the quality to deserve the highest scores as the texts were limited in their focus on the '*disturbing vision of the human situation*'.
- 5 A popular question. The funny aspect was tackled reasonably well by most candidates, though few managed to see beyond the obvious. A typical essay contained general comments taken from class notes, but this was quite harmless on the whole, since the important points required from the essay were mentioned. Again, many essays remain at

plot level, with little personal response. Some answers insisted that the story was not funny, or the narrator does not keep her promise in the end. As a result, such answers failed to get a good mark. Few responses really delved into the detective-like qualities or the comical shades of the story. On a more positive note, a number of candidates wrote essays with specific references to the story to back their arguments.

- 6 Another popular question. This was more straightforward than Number 5. Quite a number of good answers, some of them very well argued. Most essays managed to prove the point focusing on stories like 'The Landlady' for its thrilling nature, 'The Man from the South' for the shocking moments and 'Parson's Pleasure' for its humour.
- 7 No answers.
- 8 No answers.
- 9 A large number of candidates opted for this question. It was difficult to stray from the focal points, so many managed a good pass. Napoleon and Co. with the accompanying corrupt behaviour were outlined quite well, with some lines 'smelling' of regurgitated notes. Nevertheless, the candidates provided sound essays and showed they could adapt class material and write good essays.
- 10 The candidates who chose this question were, inevitably, inspired by the word 'human' – in fact, the essays were nearly totally revolving around the historical references – especially communism. This was a very valid point to discuss, but not the only one. There were other issues concerned with human nature, most of which were not really discussed. The candidates found it easy to forget to focus on other aspects.

## **PAPER IIB**

### **General Comments**

It is obvious that some of the candidates sitting for the B option are capable of answering questions set in the A paper. It is for this reason that some of the answers given by B candidates are as good as those in the A option. However, towards the lower end of the performance of B candidates the quality of responses is well below the desired standard. Some candidates demonstrate a very sketchy knowledge of the texts, are indifferent to the questions given and have very poor writing skills. The combination of these three factors conspires to produce very poor responses.

### **Specific Comments**

## **DRAMA**

- 1 A good number of candidates who answered this question showed an awareness of the change in Lady Macbeth's behaviour as the play progresses. However, very few pointed out evidence of Lady Macbeth's frailty in Act I. A surprising number of candidates wrote about a good, honest, kind Lady Macbeth 'at the beginning' before she receives the letter. Such notion could only have come from watching the film.
- 2 This was the most chosen and the best answered question. The candidates were able to focus on two particular scenes and, those who had read the text, to describe them in detail.
- 3 This question too asked the candidates to focus on two particular episodes in the play, but,

for some reason the essays tended to be vague and superficial. Few candidates explained clearly why Macbeth wanted to kill Banquo and Macduff. Again, a number of candidates described what they had seen in the film rather than what they had read in the text.

- 4 No answers.
- 5 No answers.
- 6 No answers.
- 7 The candidates who chose this question found some difficulty in remembering who's who. Who had a brother in the army? Who was married? Who had a girlfriend? Who received magazines? Besides, few candidates wrote about the significance of these references to dear ones in the context of the play.
- 8 The question elicited some interesting essays. A few candidates wrote about the misconceptions of war they had formed from playing virtual war-games on their computers. It was heartening to hear that some have realised the ugliness of war and that enemy soldiers are also human beings. Candidates were expected to back up their arguments by referring closely to the text. Essays on war in general were awarded low marks.
- 9 This question was, on the whole, well answered. All the issues were chosen by one candidate or another but the most chosen was racism. The candidates made close references to the play to support their points, though as in question 7, they sometimes mixed up the names of those involved. A few candidates did not read the question well and wrote briefly about all the issues.
- 10 No answers.
- 11 No answers.
- 12 No answers.
- 13 This question was the most chosen in this section. Many of the candidates who chose this question showed an awareness of the connection between Jim's rejection by his mother and his day-dreaming about Mount Everest. However, a number of candidates seem to have missed the point that Jim is not consciously aware of the connection and that it is only at the end that he becomes aware that his day-dreams are a reflection of his reality. A few even thought that Jim was actually trying to climb Mount Everest. It was interesting to note that not one candidate sympathised with Sharon.
- 14 This question asked candidates to focus on two incidents in the play, narrate what happened and pass a few comments about them. The word 'corruption' was taken in its wider meaning, referring to the behaviour of the police in the play as opposed to what is expected of them in a civilised society. This question was, on the whole, well answered and candidates pointed out police corruption, abuse of power, brutality and failure to help citizens in distress.
- 15 This question called for a detailed knowledge of a small part of each play. Only a handful of candidates chose this question and they found it difficult to focus on a specific incident when Jim and Mariza did not think clearly. They tended to write about the play in general.

**PROSE**

- 1 Nearly all the candidates opted to write about the relationship between Pinkie and Rose. Because the relationship is so central to the novel, even generic summaries somehow touched upon this theme and candidates' efforts include instances when they are in touch with the essay focus and others when the answer goes at some tangent.
- 2 Only a couple of candidates attempted this question and their answers immediately shift from theme to story telling.
- 3 Only a couple of candidates opted to answer this question. The efforts were generally below the desired standard.
- 4 Even this question was attempted by very few candidates. Again the quality of the answers was generally unexceptional giving the feeling that the candidates were barely familiar with the text.
- 5 A number of candidates attempted the essay on the Chippendale commode. The efforts were unimpressive with a lot of narrative. Most were generally sketchy, although this was a good opportunity to excel as it was a straightforward question. Some candidates provided quotes and showed a good knowledge of the story, obtaining an average grade.
- 6 The candidates were spoiled for choice in this question. Candidates focused on different stories demonstrating a sound knowledge of the stories. Unfortunately, many remain at the plot level, with very little personal response.
- 7 No answers.
- 8 No answers.
- 9 A number of candidates chose this question and managed to assess Napoleon's rise to power in a detailed manner, showing they had studied the novel. Napoleon seems to have impressed the candidates who do not approve of his tactics and showed this fervently in their writing. This was important because they inadvertently imputed their personal response. Well done to most of them.
- 10 Very few tackled this question and the results were acceptable. All of them agreed Boxer and Benjamin contribute to the horrible twist of events and provided a good profile of both characters.

**POETRY**

The following comments are pertinent to both papers 2A and 2B with regards to this section. On a positive note one must say that the level of responses for this section seem to be improving from year to year. More references to techniques such as the use of figures of speech, rhythm and rhyme are getting more frequent. Students no longer focus only on the theme and content of a poem, they are becoming increasingly aware that poets use a myriad of tools to achieve their final overall effect and deliver their message.

But it needs to be pointed out that sometimes these references have increased the tendency

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to have a “parrot-like” feel to the essays provided by students. Candidates seem to learn these details by heart and do not have the discernment to use them intelligently in their responses. The “photocopy syndrome” is still evident in answers by different candidates who give an almost identical word by word response to poetry questions.

Unfortunately we are still getting a lot of candidates who seem to learn notes or sometimes even whole essays about a poem or two poems and they give this as an answer, irrelevant of the question put to them. Sometimes candidates do not even put the question number in their scripts in order not to commit themselves to any question. Probably in their minds they think that this would increase the chances that that answer is accepted as correct. Obviously this clearly shows the examiner that the candidate is not properly prepared for the examination but that this is the answer that the candidate could come up with, no matter what question would be asked. This is more apparent when the same wrong interpretation of a poem is seen in the students' answers over and over again. This, unfortunately, reveals no true appreciation of the nuances of literature but just a shortcut for students to get a grade in their examination.

Moreover, these responses, many times, only have references to the techniques and devices used by a poet. For example one candidate wrote “we see a lot of word sounds, rythm [*sic*], descriptions” but then gives no examples to back up these arguments. Another noted that “the rhythm changes a lot from the first to the 2<sup>nd</sup> stanzas” but does not show how the poet achieves this difference. One more candidate reflected that “Owen gives you a setting for every stanza” but never analyses how Wilfred Owen does this in his poem. Yet another student states “this is a clear example of extended metaphor” but never writes what this clear example is and why it is relevant to that question he or she is answering.

It is important to note the changes that will soon be introduced in the Poetry syllabus. Candidates will be expected to study a selected number of poems and will be unable to apply broad pre-studied answers to the examination questions.

Chairman  
Board of Examiners

September 2007