

WORLD LITERATURE

Paper 0408/01
Portfolio

Key messages

Teachers should check that every task from the centre meets the specific requirements of this syllabus. Tasks for all three categories of assignment must be worded so that they enable candidates to fulfil the requirements of the band descriptors.

Written assignments should include marginal annotation by the teacher which comments on strengths and weaknesses of candidate performance and should clearly link to the band descriptors.

General comments

The observations in this general report should be read alongside the individual report to the centre.

The Critical Essay

The strongest responses demonstrated a sustained engagement with both the detail of the chosen text and the requirements of the task set. These responses showed a clear critical understanding and offered detailed analyses of the ways in which writers achieve their effects. For candidates to be able to demonstrate these qualities in their writing, tasks must be set which require consideration of the writing. Examples of effective tasks can be found in the *Coursework Training Handbook*.

Weaker responses included one or more of the following: unsubstantiated assertions; lengthy quotations (with key words unexplored); general comments on language and structure. In some responses, excessive and extraneous contextual information detracted from the analysis of the actual text.

Some poetry tasks were overly complicated as they included an unnecessary hurdle of comparison, which is neither required nor rewarded at IGCSE. Even in the work of more able candidates, the mechanics of comparing and contrasting detracted from the sustaining of critical analysis of either poem.

The Empathic Response

The strongest responses offered an engagingly authentic voice for the chosen character and moment in the text, integrating an impressive range of textual detail that rooted the voice in the world of the text. These responses demonstrated a sustained appreciation of characterisation, themes and language. Responses that did not successfully capture both voice and moment fared less well. Teachers can find examples of good and bad empathic tasks in the *Coursework Training Handbook*.

The Recorded Conversation

The strongest assessments demonstrated a command of textual detail and a sustained focus on the ways in which the writer *presents* the chosen character or theme. In this element of the Portfolio, a teacher's use of follow-up questions can enable candidates to explore their chosen aspect in detail. The band descriptors make it clear that for high reward there should be a focus on *the way writers achieve their effects*.

There are three administrative issues concerning the oral assessment which are worth reiterating:

- (i) Recordings should be stopped once 7 minutes have elapsed as nothing after that can be assessed.
- (ii) Centres must ensure that recordings are audible and free from distracting external noise.
- (iii) The recordings of the candidates in the sample should be in an accessible format and should be clearly labelled with the candidate number and name.

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Paper 0408/02
Paper 2: Unseen

Key messages

Candidates who maintain a focus on the exact wording of the question (written in bold in the question paper) are more likely to achieve relevance in their answers. Those who methodically work their way through the bullet points alone without reference to the stem question tend to offer a more general appreciation of the text, forgetting about the key focus word(s) in the question itself.

Those candidates who allow time for thinking about the text and planning their response are in a better position to give a relevant overview of the text in their introductions.

Candidates who are able to integrate comments on language, form and structure smoothly into their discussion tend to be more successful than those who take a more rigid approach, often assigning separate paragraphs to 'form', 'structure' and 'language' as if they were unconnected features of the writing.

There is no automatic reward for 'feature spotting'; comments about simile, metaphor, juxtaposition, etc. should be firmly followed up by an exploration of the meaning or effect achieved.

Good quotation technique goes a long way to achieving fluency and sharp focus in answers. Those candidates who can use short quotations embedded within a sentence are more likely to achieve this than those who copy out lengthy quotations followed by 'This shows ...'. Particularly unsuccessful are quotations with the 'middle' missing, replaced by ellipsis; candidates should be willing to quote directly the words they are commenting on.

General comments

The responses offered by candidates to both poetry and prose showed a clear engagement with the writing and a willingness to demonstrate skills gained throughout the course. There was evidence that candidates had been prepared for this paper and were able to respond to their chosen text type with some confidence. Strong answers explored the 'narrative' of the pieces, but were also able to look closely at *how* writers convey ideas. The best answers were characterised by an ability to respond to the writer at work, seeing the text as a consciously crafted piece of writing. All candidates made a good effort to do well on the paper.

It was pleasing to see more candidates this year working their way through the texts in sequence, showing an awareness of the development of ideas as the text unfolds. Perhaps because both the poem and the prose text reflected 'journeys' of sorts, candidates found it made sense to follow the narrative path already in the pieces. This meant that there were fewer disjointed answers – particularly in poetry – where candidates lost the sense of the movement of unfolding ideas in the writing in their search for 'features'.

As has been stated in previous reports, the best answers came from good planning. Not all plans, however, produced good answers, and some candidates seemed to spend an excessive amount of time writing out ideas before composing their essays, which often did not go very much beyond the content of the plan. A time-saving technique would be to use the question paper itself to plan, text-marking the poem or prose extract with underlinings and brief annotations. This method provides an at-a-glance visual summary of the coverage of comments, alerting candidates to the need to address ideas across the content of the piece, including the ending. The Examiner, of course, does not see these plans, but it is often evident in the quality of responses that this sort of planning has taken place as it leads to well-organised, coherent essays that cover the whole text.

A word on introductions: although it may provide a ‘way in’ for candidates to copy out the question and bullets verbatim as their introduction, it is rarely an effective method in getting started on an essay. This method often leads to a narrative/descriptive approach to the prompts in the bullets that does not take into account the key words in the main question, for example, ‘How’ or ‘vividly’. The word ‘how’, often repeated in the bullet statements, is of key importance, but sometimes ignored by candidates who seek only to respond to the ‘what’, i.e. the content of the text.

Some essays began with a reiteration of the question, followed by a three-part summary of the ‘ways’ in which the writer conveyed ideas. This can be an effective introduction to the main body of the essay, depending on the ‘ways’ the candidate identifies. The least successful introductions simply listed three mechanical techniques that the writer uses, along the following lines:

The poet vividly conveys Mrs Philpott’s experiences through the use of figurative language, structure and punctuation.

Since all crafted writing tends to use these things, there is little sense of any connection being made with the text under discussion in such a statement. Moreover, an opening like this tended to lead to a search for these features in the writing, with much empty ‘spotting’ of figurative language, arithmetic comments on line and stanza length/rhyme scheme and excessive claims for the power of commas (often identified as a ‘caesura’ whether they were used as such or not) with no reference to the words served by the punctuation, where most of the actual meaning lies.

Much better were three-part introductions which provided an overview of the *ideas* being explored in the text. A successful introduction might be along the following lines:

The poem vividly conveys Mrs Philpott’s experience of a very painful headache. We follow her search for a cure as she fumbles her way through the darkness to the kitchen, passing objects and furniture that seem to come alive, creaking and whining in the darkness, and see her eventual return to bed beside her soundly-sleeping husband.

This type of introduction follows the sequential movement of the poem and provides a ‘frame’ for the candidate to follow in the main body of their essay, where they can explore *how* these ideas are conveyed in a close study of the writer’s methods and use of language.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

How does the poet vividly convey Mrs Philpott’s experience?

As mentioned above, the key to success in answering this question lay in the candidate’s ability to take a holistic approach to the poem, rather than embarking on a disjointed search for literary features in the writing. Those candidates who invested time in digesting the poem and thinking about their response first stood a better chance of success than those who plunged straight into their essays.

Virtually all candidates were able to engage with the content of the poem, following Mrs Philpott’s ‘journey’ from her bedroom, through the house in her search for a cure and back to bed where she finally finds relief from the headache. Most candidates managed to engage with the third bullet, and there were many thoughtful responses about the significance of Mr Philpott’s dream, with most candidates picking up on the rather darker tone of these final two stanzas.

Many picked out the line *Mrs Philpott pads secretly downstairs* and commented that this showed the need for silence. Better answers went on to suggest that she did not want to wake her sleeping husband, or that her head could not stand the pain of noise. The best answers not only quoted the full line, but went back into it to pick out the individual words *pads* or *secretly*, relating Mrs Philpott’s movements to a stealthy animal, softly placing her feet down so as not to make any noise. The word *secretly* was seen as denoting some sort of tension in her relationship with her husband whom she was desperate not to disturb – an idea that the poet develops in the final stanzas.

Basic answers picked up on the alliteration in ‘fingers feel for the banister’ but, having identified the technique, were unable to do much with it. More successful responses pointed out the softness of the repeated ‘f’ sound that added to the idea of the gentleness of her movements and the need to be quiet. Many candidates drew attention to the phrase *rich dark*, but only a few were able to pick apart the meaning conveyed by *rich*, seeing the sense of the almost tactile intensity of the darkness conveyed here.

In the central section of the poem, the majority of candidates picked up on the writer’s use of personification in describing the various objects around the house: *The carpet whispers / The house is peopled by creaks / Her headache demands*, etc. Oddly, many candidates identified the ‘purring’ fridge as an example of personification, even though they went on to suggest that this made it sound like a cat. There were too many candidates making this error for it to be a simple slip, so perhaps the distinction between metaphor and personification is an area that needs to be revised by some.

Many candidates were able to grasp the demanding nature of Mrs Philpott’s headache and saw it as ‘controlling’ her actions, with the writer’s use of imperatives such as *slow, slow* and *Come on, come on*. The word *strokes* proved problematic for some who appeared to confuse it with ‘strikes’ and suggested that Mrs Philpott was beating the fridge in a violent outburst, or that it meant she was holding on to the fridge as she couldn’t stand up. Not many were able to connect it with *purrs* and see it as a caress, the way one would stroke a much-loved pet cat. Some excellent answers went on to suggest that Mrs Philpott appeases the fridge as it contains the solution to her problem and she must be kind to it.

The phrase *Loud light drums* was commented on mainly by more able candidates who identified the synaesthesia in light being able to make a noise. The best answers went on to contrast the blinding light of the fridge with the *rich dark* Mrs Philpott travels through. Most candidates commented on Mrs Philpott’s drinking of the milk *straight from the jug* as indicating her desperation to cure her headache, but *slivers of silver pain* needed more careful consideration. Many mis-read *slivers*, reading it as *silvers* and so could not access the imagery of sharpness and the piercing nature of the headache. Excellent answers identified the metallic nature of this image, relating it to the sensation of sharp knives piercing Mrs Philpott’s head, and were further able to link this image with the *jagged brain* of the previous stanza.

Weaker answers, or those who perhaps could have managed their time more efficiently, left their discussions here. Those who managed to address the third bullet and look at the final two stanzas, however, produced some interesting personal responses to Mrs Philpott and her relationship with her husband. Some basic responses simply saw Mrs Philpott as returning to bed, headache cured, and slipping in beside her snoring husband. Others did see the darker tone suggested in the final line, but went on to speculate about how Mr Philpott had murdered his wife, or how she had committed suicide. Better answers took a more measured approach, seeing the line as suggesting tensions in the marriage, which might explain Mrs Philpott’s sleeplessness and recurrent headaches. (One candidate pointed out that the poem is called *Headache*, not ‘*The Headache*’, suggesting it is not a one-off occurrence.) The need for her to creep around was seen as a result of her being actually frightened of her husband.

Finally, it was those candidates who moved beyond quoting whole lines or lengthy phrases followed by ‘This shows ...’ who were able to access the higher mark bands. Many candidates who commented on whole line quotations could easily have moved their responses up into the next mark band by simply going back into their quotation and picking out an individual word or short phrase for closer analysis. Sensitive response to the writer’s use of language is one of the more accessible ways that candidates can improve their performance and centres are advised to encourage this skill when preparing their students for the examination.

Question 2

Explore how the writer vividly conveys the impact of this moment on the narrator.

This was an accessible passage, offering a wealth of material for candidates to respond to, and it was pleasing to see that many candidates chose the prose option. The story of two girls testing each other’s courage and forging a firm friendship in the process seemed to engage candidates’ experience and imagination.

Previous comments about planning applied here as much as in the poetry option. Candidates could not hope to cover all available material in the time given in the examination, and so a judicious selection of points was vital. Again, this is where the text-marking of key words and phrases straight onto the question paper would prove invaluable in candidates’ preparation for writing.

At a basic level, all candidates seemed able to follow the narrative, picking out Lila as the leader and the narrator as the follower. Don Achille was universally seen as the antagonist of the story, and the girls' journey towards the apartment as full of fear and trepidation. The final cementing of the friendship was generally grasped as arising out of the girls' shared experience of facing their fears together.

Whilst there was much well-integrated quotation from the text in discussions, this sometimes lured candidates into a rather narrative/descriptive style of writing, where the imperative to smoothly integrate selected quotation took precedence over actual analysis of it. These types of answers read well and appeared fluently written, but ultimately fell short of a practical analysis of the writing. This type of approach is particularly tempting in responses to the prose extract where candidates want to push through the extended narrative, but they should be reminded that it is better to leave some material out of their discussion and concentrate on selected passages than to try to cover everything and end up simply re-telling the story.

Many answers started with an approach to the second paragraph, detailing the escapades of the girls as Lila tests the narrator's courage through a series of challenges. As mentioned above, however, much of this turned into a commentary on what the girls did, rather than an exploration of 'how the writer vividly conveys' the experience. Some candidates were able to comment on the *violet light of the courtyard* and the pleasantness of this image, but few were able to see that this was later only *bluish* and that it eventually turned into *the black of the doorway* as the girls approach Don Achille's apartment, the gradual darkening of the colour corresponding to the growth of their fear and horror. There were many opportunities to comment on language in this paragraph: how Lila would *thrust* her hand into the *black mouth* of a manhole and how the narrator would *immediately* do the same. Rarely did candidates pick out individual words like these to explore how they vividly convey meaning. A few, though not many, were able to pick up on the fairy tale motif of the safety pin described as being *like the gift of a fairy godmother*, later continued in the description of Don Achille as the ogre of fairy tales and the comparison of him to a dragon with *hot breath streaming from his nose and mouth*. Perhaps candidates could be encouraged to take a wider view of the text at times, looking for evidence of repeated patterns.

The following passages elicited better responses, many candidates choosing to begin with 'how the writer describes Don Achille', responding to the first bullet point. Most selected *I was frozen with fear* for comment and better answers explored the writer's use of *frozen* to convey the cold, rigid terror the narrator experiences. The fact that Don Achille had been made strictly 'off limits' to the narrator by her family was seen as evidence of his 'evil' and dangerous nature, as was the fact that he was *huge* and *covered with purple boils*. Good answers said that this made him sound 'grotesque', though not many seemed willing to explore much further, looking, perhaps, at the lurid colour of the boils that might deform his appearance, making him a sort of monstrosity. The description of him as being made out of *iron, glass, nettles* was noted by many who saw this as making him 'inhuman' and a few good answers went on to comment on the cold, hardness of iron, the stinging capacity of nettles and the sharpness of glass, adding to the sense of threat and danger in Don Achille. One or two candidates drew attention to the name *Achille* and its roots in Greek mythology, Achilles being a fierce warrior, and how this added to the fearsome presentation of the girls' 'nemesis'. It was very pleasing to see candidates bringing their wider knowledge to their interpretation of previously unseen material.

The final approach to Don Achille's apartment was often presented simply as a commentary, making note of key elements of the description. Better answers picked out the darkness and how this created a 'creepy' atmosphere, and the smell of *old junk and DDT* which added to a sense of decay in the building. Some excellent responses were seen to what was perceived as the narrator's outlandish, 'ridiculous' speculations about being cooked and eaten by Achille's wife and children, seen as evidence of a childish over-active imagination, perhaps throwing the narrator's whole account into a new light.

The narrator's relationship with Lila – the third bullet – was often addressed using this last section of the passage. She was seen as being 'devoted' to Lila and desperate to impress her, being there *only because she was*. The final gesture of offering a hand was interpreted in two ways, both valid responses. Either this was an unexpected admission of fear on Lila's part and the friendship was forged on the basis that she needed the support of the narrator just as much as the narrator needed her, or it was a gesture of support and encouragement from Lila to cement the now unbreakable bond between the girls. Both of these responses were presented in convincing ways and made for a good way to round off the discussion.

A note here on conclusions: some candidates thought it necessary to provide a formal conclusion that summarised the content of their essays. This tended to lead to a rather formulaic repetition of the key points in the main body of the essay, or to another verbatim repetition of the bullet points, both of which were unnecessary and often lengthy. The final point, if focused on material near the very end of the passage, is often enough to serve as a conclusion to the discussion and candidates should be encouraged to use their time making good points about the writing to the very end of their essays rather than feeling obliged to produce a repetition of what has already been said.



WORLD LITERATURE

Paper 0408/03
Paper 3: Set Text

Key messages

For success in this examination, candidates need to:

- Answer the question that has been set.
- Focus on the key words of the question.
- Demonstrate a detailed knowledge of their set texts.
- Substantiate their points with pertinent textual reference.
- Comment on the detail of their quotations.
- Explore how writers achieve their effects.

General comments

The strongest responses were characterised by a detailed knowledge of set texts and by sustained critical analysis that addressed the question. The most successful responses include cogent and perceptive analysis of the ways in which writers use language (e.g. the key words in their quotations), structure and form to achieve certain effects.

In **Section A**, where extracts are printed (or a poem in the case of the *Songs of Ourselves* poetry text), some candidates limited their performance by not engaging sufficiently with the detail of the extract. In **Section B**, less successful responses were characterised by a sketchy knowledge of their set text. Candidates need to be able to analyse the ways in which writers achieve their effects to reach the higher bands; this is not possible without a detailed knowledge and a wide grasp of pertinent textual detail. For both **Section A** and **B** answers, some candidates showed a reasonably sound grasp of their texts but to a great extent neglected to answer directly the actual question; this limited their performance. In general, less successful responses tended to be descriptive and overly assertive, often as a result of the lack of relevant textual detail that might have supported their points.

There was an increasing tendency to offer generalised personal response about characters and their experiences being relatable and the reader feeling as lonely, sad or frightened as a particular character. This type of comment did not lend itself to a rigorous analysis of the qualities of the writing.

Comments on specific questions

The comments below relate to the questions attempted.

Section A

Question 2: Sijie

Most candidates were able to identify the immediate context, that the printed extract was from the beginning of the final chapter, and that three months have elapsed since the Little Seamstress's abortion. Only a few responses alluded to the reversed chronology of this final chapter, pointing out that what led up to the burning of the books is revealed after the extract. Less successful responses tended merely to describe what was happening in the extract. More successful responses addressed the focus of the question and explored the ways in which Sijie made this moment in the novel so powerful. They commented on the description and personification of the striking match and the depiction of 'Luo the arsonist' drunk, crying and laughing.

Question 6: Stories of Ourselves

The strongest responses explored the effectiveness of the extract as the powerful opening to Lim's story and demonstrated an appreciation of the extract's position within the story as a whole. Moreover, these responses showed an impressive command of the content of the extract and the ways in which Lim achieves her effects. There were perceptive explorations of the sinister nature of the dream with its air of claustrophobia, malevolence and death, and also of the vivid personification of the bus and the houses at the girl's destination. Less successful responses tended to describe the content rather than explore the writer's methods, often working through the extract in a methodical way but without addressing the question's focus on 'powerful'.

Section B

Question 9: Sijie

The strongest responses had an impressive command of the detail necessary to answer the question well, and they demonstrated an ability to explore the ways in which Sijie achieves his effects. These responses examined closely the way Sijie depicts the friendship between an impulsive Luo and a more reflective narrator, and their growing apart, with the narrator's secret attempt to get the abortion for the Little Seamstress. The ambivalent 'friendship' with Four-Eyes was usually touched on, the latter an object of sympathy, frustration and anger at different times in the novel. Less successful responses tended to describe content in sketchy detail and to make unsupported assertions. The lack of textual detail limited candidates' ability to explore aspects of the writing. Often, characters were regarded as real-life people rather than authorial constructs.

Question 12: Stories of Ourselves

There were few successful responses to this essay question. It was rare to read a convincing analysis of the ways in which Narayan achieves his effects. Nonetheless, there was in the stronger scripts an *awareness* of the comic contrast between Muni's world of literature, Gods and local culture and the American's western, capitalist concerns. There was occasionally an appreciation of the role Muni's wife plays in the comic ending. The 'touching' aspect of the question was addressed less satisfactorily. The least successful responses were able to mention in general terms that misunderstanding and a clash of cultures were reasons for comedy but without the relevant textual detail to support their answers.