

Assessment Report

Scholarship, 2008

English

COMMENTARY

The examination paper provided challenge and scope for candidates to show their potential. All questions were attempted in reasonable numbers by candidates, with sections A and C providing for discrimination and independent thinking by the best candidates, who were well able to demonstrate evidence of working beyond the classroom to show independence and fresh thinking. The very best answers continue to be exceptional, although this year there were fewer of these. Candidate handwriting is becoming a serious problem. Approximately one third of essays could be classified as “difficult to read”. Some answers were illegible and answers which cannot be read cannot be marked. Candidates must be encouraged to use a dark pen to produce a clear script of a reasonable size.

Section A

The texts were accessible and challenging, with *Sea Grass* providing slightly more challenge for most. Candidates picked up on the dairy industry but too often over-wrote based on personal perceptions rather than using the evidence of the text itself. The best answers quickly grasped and assessed the interpolation of terrestrial and maritime as a careful and intentional technique, and could appreciate the integration and movement between the two. Many picked up on the ebb and flow of the meaning and equated this with the rolling, growing and encompassing grass (of the title) and the effectiveness of the enjambment as a means of expressing it. The best candidates picked up on the use of the inclusive pronouns, the isolating and non-human motifs, the wasteland-desert binary, and the paradoxes inherent in the sea becoming land and vice versa. Most referenced in some way the attitude and tone as focused/depressed/pessimistic – in line with the degradation of the Earth’s industry.

Passage to Juneau was often labelled as “opposite” simply by virtue of being the second text considered. Candidates should be wary of this sort of overly simplistic response. “Polarised labelling” tends to lead them to a check-listing approach where the labelling of the feature overrides reading and contextualising the work. The technical features of the passage(s) become expressed under a kind of blanket application characterised as the negative of the companion piece.

The best candidates consistently interwove aspects and comparisons between the passages. They read the Raban passage as richly descriptive in both writing and human activity: genealogies of trawling life were vibrantly presented and celebrated (elation and excitement). Candidates often picked up on the metaphorical parallel between engine maintenance and fish gutting, and even Raban’s attempts at naturalizing the mechanical. Most saw the passage as a celebration of human history and tradition, in contrast with attitudes presented in *Sea Grass*.

Section B

The best candidates wrote confidently and responsively. The very best answers demonstrated an honest reworking of studied materials in response to the niceties of the question or statement.

Too many candidates, however, merely reworked an NCEA level 3 response written for a different topic – and “tacked on” a new introduction and conclusion. Too often, these sorts of answers were filled with detail at the expense of argument and lacked genre-question consideration.

Section C

The very best candidates wrote outstanding answers in this section. Often these answers demonstrated a strong sense of new materials being successfully worked alongside taught materials

in a fresh and fitting coalescence; often they were built upon thematic premises – dystopian, feminist, teenage, unease, the loner/outcast – and they did not get bogged down in close analysis and irrelevant detail at the expense of rich, relevant personal responsiveness. The best candidates read the questions well and “soared” in response.

All questions in this section were selected in reasonable numbers with both the best and weakest in response to Question 25.

The best-performing candidates most commonly demonstrated the following skills and/or knowledge:

- ability to pace their work across the whole paper, dealing well with the close reading and analysis of A, the familiar genre work of B and finally the demanding reconfiguration of texts to support an integrated, topic driven discussion in C
- ability to make judicious choices of question and follow the directions inherent in the question, bringing their relevant and focused knowledge and experience of texts to support their argument
- ability to respond to a thesis by structuring fluent arguments and discussions which moved from reference/quote to applied readings/analysis while still driving relevant points
- ability to show “freshness” of response in working with their own readings and the questions chosen.

In Section A, the best candidates demonstrated:

- ability to deal with both content and crafting in a balanced discussion
- ability to take on unfamiliar passages with perceptive analysis that illustrates without resorting to paraphrase or commentary and works toward synthesised appraisals of the writers’ work
- ability to apply knowledge of techniques in a relevant and productive way to draw out the crafting or ideas of writers
- ability to achieve an overview of both texts to compare and thus describe more general effects and implications for a reader.

In Section B, the best candidates demonstrated:

- ability to balance both general and particular response to their studied texts
- ability to extract from the given questions/quotations the thrust of the required argument
- ability to reconsider, rework and even refresh learned materials and familiar texts in the light of question topics so that materials support topics as stated.

In Section C, the best candidates demonstrated:

- ability to combine breadth and depth in discussion so that enough detail of the text(s) chosen is included to support their understandings alongside an ability to move across texts/genres to make comparisons
- ability to choose appropriate texts for inclusion or reference
- ability to show clear response to the elements of the question and follow this response throughout the argument.

Candidates who did NOT achieve scholarship lacked some or all of the skills and knowledge above and in addition they:

- were unable to pace their work across the whole paper, spending too much time on sections B or C and rushing/leaving out section A; much of the work produced was unbalanced and lacked the scope to provide Scholarship level responses
- failed to respond to the true topic, redirecting materials to pre-worked arguments/essays memorised from the classroom
- showed no clear command of their studied texts and readings; this meant that they could not make judicious selections of evidence or weave discussion across the various sections of the paper.

In Section A, candidates who did not reach scholarship level showed:

- failure to focus on spotting effects or their absence to take general stock of the ideas of both passages, thus losing sight of the instruction
- discomfort with unfamiliar texts; they resorted to paraphrased commentaries rather than integrated analysis and fell back on attempted explanation and uncritical/unresponsive repetition
- inability to develop and structure a coherent discussion when dealing with reference and close analysis rather than recollected knowledge; comment was more often tacked on and failed to develop a coherent discussion
- distraction by the ideas of the extracts (and their own prior knowledge of associated issues) and they wrote an expository discussion of themes and relevance rather than a text and craft-based comparative analysis.

In Section B, candidates who did not reach scholarship level showed:

- piecing together of passages of pre-worked materials rather than adapting/responding to the given topic or question
- inability to select from their studied material; they often retained extraneous reference, detail or quotation which did not pertain to the chosen question/topic
- inability to move beyond particular studied “past-essay” areas of a text or texts; many were consequently too narrow in response and comment, and demonstrated little understanding of their selected genre.

In Section C, candidates who did not reach scholarship level showed:

- they were working on a “universal/timeless” ideas approach to their collections of texts and produced this in (weakly) adapted form
- they were mistaking the generally discursive thrust of the topics for superficial/generalised idea discussions and failed to delve into texts or their close reading experience; the worst produced transactional writing on a general theme of their own invention
- retention of “pocketed” discussion of individual texts or authors and an inability to blend and mix their readings/responses in a relevant and integrated discussion.

Other comments

Section A

Candidates need to spend time learning essay writing style. They should be encouraged to avoid writing long-winded introductions which merely highlight their own attitudes. Candidates need to get straight into a clear and relevant discussion which responds directly to the hypothesis they have chosen.

Candidates need to amalgamate techniques in their discussions with a view to showing how language works in terms of writers' purposes. Providing a "checklist" approach to "text 1, then text 2" should be avoided.

Candidates should have followed the directives in the question, i.e. they should have compared the attitudes of the writers to the ways human industries react with our planet and moved backwards and forwards between the texts in doing this.

Section B

Candidates need to consider carefully exactly what the question is asking. "Characterisation" is not the same as "character study", "mistaken identity" is not the same as "identity crisis", and so forth.

Candidates need to demonstrate understanding of their chosen genre and selected details must be relevant and accurate; "comic interludes" selected for discussion should be comic; references should come from a range of texts that illustrate the genre.

Low level or other unsuitable texts which do not build credible arguments at this level should be avoided simply because candidates do not write well about them or reference them with perception; these include:

- *Harry Potter* books and films
- *Lord of the Flies* book and films
- *The Bible* (not a novel)
- *The Aeneid/Odyssey* (these are Classics texts, and mostly treated as such)
- *The Lion King*
- *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer
- Jodi Picoult books offered as serious literature
- *The Bucket List* (film)
- "Chick-lit" as serious literature
- *The Notebook* by Nicholas Sparks (also a film)
- *Noughts and Crosses* by Mallory Blackman
- *Shawshank Redemption*.

Section C

Candidates need to have had the opportunity to spend more time discussing how to interpret questions in this section (thinking critically) and to be encouraged to consider the range of reading and thinking around classroom texts. Often candidates make very good arguments with completely unrelated texts, but generally not if they do more than working at a plot level. Texts need, therefore, to be "significant" to humanity in general in terms of style/characterisation/ideas/universality. Candidates should use three or four texts to prove their case. Too many merely give a "rapid romp" through a number of texts without coherently proving a case in response to the question.

Essays too often deal with "what" rather than "how/why". Candidates should respond to the actual words in questions – "aesthetic" (Question 22) was rarely understood; New Zealand literature (Question 18) was rarely referenced adequately; in Question 23 most candidates missed the discussion of content and style; Question 21 was rarely more than a rant about "txt" language.

Texts which candidates used exceptionally well in section C included the following:

- *Black Swan Green* by David Mitchell
- *The Road* by Cormack McCarthy
- *We Need to Talk About Kevin* by Lionel Shriver
- *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* by Jonathan Safran Foer
- *On Chesil Beach* by Ian McEwan
- *Into the Wild* directed by Sean Penn
- *V for Vendetta* directed by James McTeigue
- *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac
- *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt
- *Pierpoint (The Last Hangman)* directed by Adrian Shergold.

Often these texts worked best when candidates used them to counterpoint other more traditional texts (the taught material), and in the process created new (and unorthodox) understandings which they often expressed in highly fluent, creative language showing excitement, responsiveness, passion and sheer joy! These were a pleasure for markers to engage with and reward. Candidates should know their audience – markers are English teachers and like to be inspired to re-think and re-read on the basis of fresh new arguments and thinking.