

Commentary on candidate evidence

Candidate 1

The evidence for this candidate has achieved the following marks for this element of this course assessment component.

The candidate was awarded **15 marks**.

Genre

Creative writing – prose fiction

Content

This piece of writing, a skilful and tender portrayal of a love story between two Russian men, treats its central thematic concerns with sustained thoughtfulness, insight and imagination throughout.

Structure

The skilful shaping of this piece contributes significantly to its impact. The story begins in Moscow as the sun sets and follows Lev's journey home to his apartment block. The account of the journey is interspersed with letters from his lover, Sasha; memories of their first experiences together in Moscow and a flashback to the occasion they became blood-brothers when small children, slicing their palms open with 'a shard of broken glass'. The story culminates in Lev's arrival at the apartment block where the maimed Sasha, now returned from Afghanistan, is asleep in their bed. The narrative ends on an uplifting note of defiance, 'Despite their best attempts, they'd failed to take Sashenka's blood. Or at least, failed to take it all' and also offers a celebration of their relationship.

The recurring motif of blood provides the story with an effective internal coherence. The simile 'like blood pounding in your ears' is followed by numerous other references: Lev's memory of 'the warm flesh and blood' of Sasha; the identification of Sasha's blood type in the army; the childish exaggeration 'enough blood to fill the Don'; the pain of the blood-brothers ceremony; Sasha 'seeing blood on my hands'; Lev's image of the blood flowing through their two bodies and finally the closing line, 'Enough of it still ran through Lev's veins for both of them, through their hearts every time they beat in their chests'.

There are other examples of effective links and deliberate connections in the narrative structure. These include the references to 'constellations' and the night sky in the opening section of the story which are then echoed in the description of 'Sashenka's constellation freckled cheeks' towards the end.

The flashback to childhood games when 'they'd used to sharpen sticks to play at soldiers' offers an ironic comparison to the deadly experience of Sasha's military experience as an adult.

Tone/mood

This piece of writing demonstrates a skilfully created and rigorously sustained tone/mood. The writer generally avoids the pitfalls of becoming overly mawkish or sentimental; instead the love story unfolds in a sensitive and very controlled way. There is a clearly distinctive authorial voice evident in the work.

Expression

A skilful use of style, techniques and language is consistently demonstrated in the piece. There is a high degree of originality in some of the writing.

Setting is suggested economically and always adds something to the narrative. 'Nights like the beginning of a bruise' and '. . . the darkened street, whose lamps had yet to realise that all daylight was now gone' are just two of the many good examples of this.

Other incidental details 'the only one of them with a working watch'; 'the loose boards behind his Dedushka's shed' serve to create the very convincing world inhabited by the characters. The use of the Russian names in various forms never jars and adds another satisfying layer to the story.

Sentence construction often adds impact. The use of triads such as 'Not like a train . . . or a bus . . . or a tram . . .' enhances the narrative and the writer also seems well aware of the power of rhythm in their writing: '. . . the arm that held the hand that held the scar they shared was gone.'

The relationship between Lev and Sasha is evoked with subtlety: 'I've been tracing my finger over where I've written your name, and where I've written mine'; '. . . everyone else managed to stay together without stupid, childish scars (although Levushka and Sashenka were never like everyone else)'.

Commentary on candidate evidence

Candidate 2

The evidence for this candidate has achieved the following marks for this element of this course assessment component.

The candidate was awarded **15 marks**.

Genre

Discursive writing – informative

Content

This piece of informative writing makes a judicious selection and use of source material to create a stylish and captivating biographical essay on the jazz trumpeter Chet Baker.

The treatment of the material reveals a sustained thoughtfulness and insight throughout as the candidate focuses upon the beginnings of Baker's love of jazz in childhood, the exhilaration of performance, but with references to the darker aspects of Baker's life, and final demise woven through the essay.

Structure

This essay is not an exhaustive, detailed exploration of the entirety of Baker's life; it is a piece of writing which judiciously and skilfully juxtaposes Baker's performances with scenes from the more challenging moments in his life, most of which revolved around drug addiction. There is evidence throughout of skilful shaping and sequencing, which contributes significantly to the impact of the essay.

The essay begins with the lead up to an early Baker performance as 'a young boy, no more than fifteen years old', and then moves back to his early years when his father 'suggested playing a brass instrument' and then to Baker's Christmas gift in 1941 where he received his first trumpet. This moment, described as when the 'pine needles' of the Christmas tree 'held on to the gift with subtle, delicate fingers of fern and fronds. Pine needles swept, crept and fell slowly into the gleaming brass bell that would ring glory for many days to come', is skilfully linked to the 'pine needles' of the next section of the essay where the candidate returns to that initial performance and then Baker's move to busking on the 'sidewalks of California [where he] poured his heart out into the brass [in] sun baked boulevards lined with pine trees dying in the heat' and the 'Silver needles danced and fell through the viscous air, surrounding Chet's trumpet as they had all those winters ago.'

The essay then shifts on to 1964, and Baker's deprivations as he was striving for 'perfection' and Baker's burgeoning drug habit, a habit which brings with it

brutality as he is chased for apparent drug debts, and then to the beginnings of his downward trajectory which is symbolically signalled with: 'The applause dies away. Chet looks up with a tender grin. He's finally finished.' Three short sentences which point to the end of a performance, but also the end of a career.

The candidate also skilfully integrates metaphorical drug references in the early part of his essay as a form of foreshadowing and inevitability: 'the trumpet hooked him on to the drug on jazz'; 'He was a jazz junkie'; 'playing was his drug' and 'Chet ran after the highs.' The essay moves on in time to Baker, later in his life, in Amsterdam and the increasingly deleterious effects of drug addiction on Baker – 'he started to slowly knock his head against the wall which he fell against' – and his death as he climbed outside his hotel, remembers a moment in time when a young boy received his first trumpet for Christmas – which links skilfully with the opening of the essay – but then 'ran out of handholds [...] His legs kicked uselessly at thin air [...] as he started to fall very, very slowly [...] And the cobbles swooned upwards to kiss him'.

The essay does not end on a low point, but once again returns to Baker in performance and the exhilarating nature of his performances, his sex appeal, and the continuing power of his music as it ends with Baker once again counting in his band: 'He whispers "one, two, a one, two, three, four".'

Tone/mood

One of the strengths of this piece of writing is the candidate's committed and clear stance throughout: there is an obvious interest and engagement with the subject matter which is evident in a tone/mood which is skilfully created and rigorously sustained. In particular, the candidate creates the powerfully charged atmosphere of an early public performance in his teens as his 'Quivering lips shake as he puts his mouth against the mouthpiece, tasting the abrupt tang against his trembling lips'; the mellifluous description of playing on the 'sidewalks of California' where the 'liquid symphonies of brass cascaded out of the mouth of the golden river, sparkling and twinkling as it flowed into thirsty ears'; and the latter years on the final page where 'Chet licks his lips [...] Smoke snakes around his fingers, which tap a slow waltz against the valves of his trumpet [...] Chet's gaze shifts towards the house band. They grin back at him, drenched in sweat, but ecstatic.'

This is deftly contrasted by the darker descriptions of his neighbour confronting Baker because of his incessant practice, 'the hinges squealed after days of lying dormant, and the neighbours anger died crawling up his throat'; his assault by 'a gorilla of a man' as 'Knuckles slammed into teeth with a shudder. Fire exploded inside Chet's mouth, filling his face with agony and blood. [...] The reverberations of the thud still vibrated along Chet's broken jawline'; and the powerful description of Baker's drug-taking: 'Gas on; shirt up; belt around arm. The small rock started to crackle and fizz in anger, and Chet turned the small blue flame as high as it would go. The seething teaspoon was sucked up, held high, then plunged into the gnarled vein that nestled deep in the recesses between Chet's first and second toe.'

Expression

Throughout the essay, it is clear that there is a skilful use of style, technique and language. The candidate's use of substantial range of stylistic devices to deliver an informative essay could be seen as unconventional, but – in this instance – the use of the range of technique is both apt and affective.

The candidate confidently employs metaphor throughout, with the aforementioned extended drugs metaphor used as a foreshadowing device, the use of 'golden'/ 'gold' throughout to enhance the idea of purity and rarity of the talent and sound of Chet Baker, as well as possibly a subtle inference towards heroin addiction too; the use of contrast used powerfully in the description of his awareness of the 'notes in the air that fluttered by: melodies of warmth and cold, fire and ice, happiness and bitter, bitter rain', description which points to the powerful contradictions in his life; and the effective and skilful use of sentence construction to control cadence, tone, and mood throughout, such as: 'The whole place feels electric; ecstatic; alive', and 'He fumbled. A wrong note. A slipped finger, a miniscule mouth movement, and immediately the audience snapped out of their trance.'