



General Certificate of Education

Classical Civilisation

CIV2B Homer *Odyssey*

Report on the Examination

June examination - 2010 series

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CIV2B Homer *Odyssey*

It was again clear this year that most of the 2000+ candidates who chose the *Odyssey* as their topic had read the poem with interest and enjoyment. Many of the responses to the longer questions revealed a real depth of knowledge and intensity of opinion. As last year the few really poor papers seen lacked this secure knowledge base. Two thirds of candidates chose Option 4 for their structured question, while fewer than a hundred answered the 30-mark question on speeches (Question 11) in Section Two. The short answer questions in Option B (Question 06 and 07) were generally better known than their counterparts in Option A (Questions 01, 02 and 03), while the opposite was true of the two 10-mark questions: Question 04 on Odysseus was more confidently answered than Question 08 on Eumaeus' living quarters. To achieve at least Level 3 in these questions based closely on a passage, candidates need to quote from or refer very closely to the text. It is frustrating to be faced each year with some well-argued answers which do not do this. The two 20-mark questions on the roles of Athene and Eumaeus respectively achieved a very similar mean mark; the much more popular 30-mark question (Question 10) was answered slightly better than Question 11. This was largely due to a small but significant number of really poor answers to the latter.

Option A

Most candidates started well with Question 01 on Alcinous' motives, but made references in Question 02 to Odysseus' senility or cowardice, which may be implied but are not among the comments made. The bard's song about Odysseus' many travails preceded this passage, so was not an acceptable answer to Question 03, although the later song about the wooden horse was allowed. There were many pleasing answers to Question 04, with an average score in Level 3. There was a good range of material in the passage, and most candidates employed a range of points to illustrate Odysseus' pride and self-confidence, with good discussions as to whether this stretched to arrogance. Likewise, his physical strength was well covered, with some very good answers which drew out, using examples, the contrast that arises between Odysseus and his hosts who now 'cowered' at his exploits. It perhaps needs repeating that some candidates reached only Level 2 or lower because of infrequent (or occasionally non-existent) direct reference to the passage. Again, in Question 05 there was plenty of material available, although a significant number of answers went beyond the books required by the question. It was possible to use the stories of Books 9-12, for example, to show Odysseus' ability to help himself by his story telling while at Alcinous' court, but not to discuss at length reasons for Athene's lack of help against the Cyclops, Circe etc. This said, there were many good answers here, the best interweaving the two lines of argument. A few exceptional scripts discussed the possible nature of Athene as a divine personification of the skills and wisdom of Odysseus.

Option B

Despite a number thinking Athene added rather than removed the mist at this point, or that she now put forward a plan for destroying the suitors, most candidates dealt well with Question 06, while Question 07 caused few problems for the majority. Attempts at Question 08 on Eumaeus' living area were, by contrast, rather varied. The level of detail Homer employs here is considerable, so it was disappointing that a number of candidates repeated a few general points without a single reference to the passage. On the whole, although the majority of candidates achieved Level 3 or 4, there were more poor answers here than on Question 04 in Option A. Satisfactory answers talked of the thoroughness of the picture, quoting examples of materials, construction methods and the sense of order; often they pointed out evidence to suggest it had been a one-man task. Some went further, claiming it to be a palatial edifice to rival Alcinous' palace, or seeing in the 'dark heart' of the logs reference to the hearts of the suitors; others were of the opinion that, with Odysseus' home in effect the property of the suitors, Eumaeus'

hut was now symbolically the real palace of Ithaca. Few candidates moving on to the essay question, Question 09, used material from the passage to establish Eumaeus' credentials as a main player in the story. Most, however, did weigh up well both sides of the question in their answers, offering evidence for both a low and high level of importance for Eumaeus. This led to a pleasing number of answers at Level 4 or above. Common misconceptions among the weaker answers included a belief (with severe knock-on effects) that Odysseus revealed his true identity to Eumaeus in Book 14, or that he played no part after the return to the palace. More perhaps than was true of Athene in Question 05, here it was important to have a thorough knowledge of every appearance of Eumaeus.

Option C

This was by far the more popular 30-mark essay; knowledge of this mainstream topic was generally sound and most candidates gained marks at Level 3 or above. The best answers looked at the question both ways before settling on a definitive answer. Penelope was often the starting point and usually set the tone for what was to follow. Many saw an interesting contrast between the traditional domestic view of Penelope emphasised in some parts of the poem and the trickster who was the equal of her husband elsewhere. Her passive but vital role as the prize at journey's end was often mentioned. Calypso and Circe drew a good deal of discussion; candidates who debated whether their short but crucial contributions constituted being 'in the background' found a fruitful line of argument. Many were confused by Arete; starting with a determination to prove her 'vital', the more they argued her case, the less convinced they became. It was often similar with Nausicaa and Anticleia, while the importance of the maids in Ithaca was much debated. Overall, there was much opportunity for discussion and most candidates took advantage to provide a balanced account.

Option D

The relatively small number of answers to this question suggests that candidates feel more confident in dealing with specific character studies than concepts such as use of speeches. Performances from those who attempted this option were mixed: about a third of candidates reached Level 4 and there were some excellent answers; many of these referred to a limited but focused range of characters, using the bullet points as a check list rather than an imposed essay structure. Some memorable examples used Odysseus as a central theme, bringing in conversations with characters such as Athene, Nausicaa, Telemachus and Penelope to illustrate different aspects of the argument. The exchanges between Odysseus and Nausicaa in particular were often well remembered. There was, however, a larger proportion of weak answers here than anywhere else on the paper. Some candidates either lost sight early on of the need to look at their chosen characters through the medium of speeches or, in a few cases, talked in general terms without referring to any actual speeches.