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LITERATURE (ENGLISH)

Papers 0486/01 and 0486/04

Paper 1 (Open Books) and Paper 4 (Closed Books)

General comments

A pleasing number of Examiners commented that the work of their allocation had been as good as they remembered it, if not better. All felt that there was a detectable decrease in work of the lowest quality. There were many confident, lively, thoughtful and direct answers seen and the Examiners re-affirmed the likely reasons for this continuing achievement. At the centre of this is, of course, the IGCSE Teacher who has embraced the aims of the syllabus with ever developing expertise and enthusiasm. Elements in the Syllabus also have made a contribution. Freshness and individuality of response is encouraged by, for instance, the Syllabus's determination to embrace a variety of tasks like the empathic task and in its refusal in its question setting to make easy the regurgitation of material learnt from cribs or the writing out of the prepared essay. The empathic tasks were significantly more successful this session. Not surprisingly, Tybalt featured prominently and there were many zestful assumptions. However, others which stuck in the mind were Lady Chiltern, Cyril, and even Willie and Sam in conversation.

The set book list continues to work well. All the texts had at least some take-up and all made real literary demands on the reader, with nothing on the list a patronising unduly 'easy' option. This is done because it is felt that candidates, even those of mediocre ability, benefit from being challenged rather than patronised. It is also worth re-iterating that the intention is to continue to incorporate less canonical texts on a regular basis. Centres wishing to recommend texts for inclusion are encouraged to write to CIE. It is pleasing to note this year a much more even split between texts than in previous session, though inevitably some remain very much more popular than others, and there was very little take up of Matthee.

It was now quite rare to find answers to extract questions which did not attempt to engage with the detail of the extract, though perhaps the exception to this rule was the question on Major in *Animal Farm*. (It remains so difficult to get some to appreciate *Animal Farm* as literature!) It was also encouraging that there were few scripts where communication broke down (whatever the candidate's language background). It continues to please how many of those had interesting things to say about their reading. Lastly, rubric infringements were minimal. We do seem to be reaching a position where most seem to be the result of sad but straightforward candidate aberrations or attempts to side-step the requirements of the Syllabus.

Some standard critical observations from Examiners continue. However, overall these should not gainsay the positive comments; they are intended as a guide to steps which could bring about further raising of standards. The criticisms concerned such areas as the failure of some candidates to realise that they must engage precisely with the terms of the question in order to receive good reward. This applied most to the poetry tasks and **Questions 5** and **6** in particular. Responses to all the *Animal Farm* tasks suffered at times from a candidate apparently feeling that an answer in the general area would suffice, with some not even that close. **Questions 30** (on *Mosquito Coast*), **34** (on *A View from the Bridge*) and **41** (on *Romeo and Juliet*) at times suffered the same fate. An inability to respond to humour continues to be a problem at times across some whole Centres, even when comic texts have been chosen for study. The reaction to Sir Toby was occasionally unremittingly hostile and a number were quite insensible to the delights of Lady Markby. Examiners also made some criticism of the way some candidates who chose questions which allowed them to select parts of the text for comment often failed to look at their selections in sufficient detail. In such tasks a personal response was usually required to the detail of the language, a response which sometimes completely failed to materialise.

However, despite there being much extremely good work, the greatest range of achievement continues to be found in the poetry section. In some Centres the poetry answer was regularly the one where the candidate had performed worst. There was the familiar observation that some candidates still think that merely to note poetic features is to explore language and its effects. This was often noted in the Heaney section where all three tasks had explicitly at their centre a response to poetic language. However, a greater problem was with **Questions 5** and **6** which deliberately asked the candidate to approach the poem from a particular angle. What the Examiner received was sometimes a simple run through of the poem/poems chosen, with no or very little attempt to take notice of the question. In some cases there was a simple failure to read the question. Quite a few attempted to write about everything in their chosen two poems from **Question 6**, failing to see that they were not required to do so. However, more commonly such candidates had no grasp of what they should be looking for.

Perhaps, though, part of the problem really lies elsewhere than in the nature of the tasks. Last year, for the first time the poetry questions had attached to them a mandatory list, first of all to stop candidates making wholly inappropriate choices of poems for the question, but also to discourage candidates from thinking that their favourite poem, and the only one which they had prepared thoroughly, would be possible to fit into at least one of the two questions on offer. It may be that those who have not drawn lucky on the starred poem of the year now look at the list attached to the other tasks before they look at the question, thinking that, even if they cannot understand the question, they will at least get reasonable reward for writing out their prepared material on the poem in the list. If this is so, it needs to be spelt out to candidates that they will not be so rewarded.

However, much of the above occurs only here and there. As has been said above, there is much that escapes such criticism, the product of manifestly excellent teaching.

Comments on specific texts

Poetry

Questions 1 – 6

Seamus Heaney: *Death of a Naturalist* and Douglas Hydes, ed.: *Touched With Fire*

The complaints have already been voiced above. There was much comment that noted excellent work on both starred questions, particularly on the Brontë. There were at times straight problems of understanding. Surprisingly this extended to poems such as 'Death of a Naturalist'. Poetic tone and voice were not terms which were universally grasped but there were some very good attempts at **Questions 5 and 6** and 'Turkeys Observed' brought forth some delightful responses to Heaney's humour. It also notably failed to do so in some answers.

Prose

Questions 7 – 9

Garnes & Egford, ed.: *Twentieth Century Short Stories*

Responses on the passage-based question seemed to vary considerably from Centre to Centre. There was much excellent work, but also some that plainly showed the candidate quite unable to relate the scene to the Captain's predicament. The same applied to the empathic task, some candidates seeming to think that Cyril was almost as insightful as Mansfield. Others had him exactly. As has already been stated, there was much excessive seriousness in the Greene, which often did not matter because at least many candidates recognised the basis for the laughter, if not finding it in their hearts to approve of it.

Questions 10 – 12

Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*

There was general approval of most of the work on this text. **Question 10** in some cases produced a wonderfully subtle view of Jane's modified rapture at finding herself in such company, though the majority were inclined to over-simplify things somewhat and miss the cool tone. Of course, this was often related to a candidate's lack of ability to respond to the words in detail. The choice of a moving episode was sometimes apt, at other times perhaps more related to a previous class essay. The Red Room turned up frequently but less frequently was it possible to see why the candidate found it and the writing moving. Grace Poole was assumed quite successfully, though perhaps her personality did not give much stimulus to the imagination.

Questions 13 – 15

Thomas Hardy: *The Woodlanders*

There was not much work on this novel, but what there was at the very least competent, sometimes more so. Surprisingly, some could not pick out the ironies in the extract but a few revelled in the way Grace pays out Fitzpiers for all his cruelty. Pleasing argument of the merits and demerits of Melbury was common, though some of them tended to be black and white, veering towards really unwarranted harshness. The empathic task differentiated sharply. Only a minority were quite able to deliver Martyn's quiet fatalism.

Questions 16 – 18

Doris Lessing: *The Grass is Singing*

This was not a very popular text but the Centres who took it on did at least competently. Unsurprisingly, passage-based question was the most attempted and few were not able to mine relevant detail from the passage. Of the two parts, the subtle nature of the relationship between the two men differentiated more sharply. **Question 17** answers usually made some attempt to argue a point with evidence from the book and some were eloquent on the evils depicted in the novel. Few attempted the empathic task. There were one or two very good assumptions but the rest found it difficult to capture the voice and a few seemed to have little precise idea of Marston's position at this moment.

Questions 19 – 21

Dalene Matthee: *Fiela's Child*

There were too few answers on this text this session to make general comment appropriate.

Questions 22 –24

George Orwell: *Animal Farm*

There was a wide variety of performance on this text. Some Centres clearly realise that long historical references to the Russian Revolution in a literature exam will not advance the candidate's cause much and have encouraged their candidates to look hard at Orwell's *writing*. Those could deal with **Questions 22** and **24**. Alas, quite a few could not and this particularly showed in the extract question. Some were even so far outside the fable that they argued that animals really ought to respect humans because they could not exist on their own. For some the idea that there was hilarious satire in this book seemed to be news to judge by the way they chose totally inappropriate moments. The standard was higher and more uniform in the answers on Snowball and Napoleon, though a number simply gave character sketches and a minority seemed to think that Snowball was simply perfect.

Questions 25 – 27

Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club*

This was a popular text and there was much approval of the quality of work. Many Examiners expressed surprise at the delicacy and subtlety with which candidates responded to the enigmas of Ying-ying. Equally, there was little weak work on **Question 26**, though the material at times could have been more wide ranging or more focused. The problem with tackling **Question 27** was that candidates tended to narrate the chosen episodes rather than analyse how Tan's writing made them moving. However, again there was some good work seen.

Questions 28 – 30

Paul Theroux: *The Mosquito Coast*

This was well done in the main. **Question 29** was the most frequently attempted. There were some really thoughtful examinations of the pros and cons of being brought up by Allie and a good deal of personally involved writing. Some candidates wrote in a very one sided manner, though, failing to see Theroux's larger picture and ranging over only a narrow part of the book. In such work, Allie was reduced to a simple abuser of children. However, what impressed very often in this text was the detailed knowledge the candidates had and this showed itself in the extract question. Here many were able make connections very ably. Few did **Question 30** and the choice here of episodes was not always particularly helpful in illustrating the awesome power of Nature.

Drama

Questions 31 – 33

Athol Fugard: *'Master Harold' ... and the Boys*

Examiners who saw work on this text reported positively on the answers. Most candidates were able to pick up some of the undercurrents in the telephone conversation and in **Question 33** were also to make some interesting evaluations of Hally according to the contrasts offered. In the passage-based question, however, it was not common for candidates to show an ability to grasp the boy's jumble of feelings when it comes to his father. The success of the empathic task has already been mentioned.

Questions 34 – 36

Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*

This was a popular play and there was a wide range of answers to the tasks set. The passage-based question was one of the few in which there were some rather weak answers amongst the many which were competent to excellent. One or two of the answers seen ignored the passage almost completely and more generally Catherine was not looked at in sufficient detail, quite a few failing to understand what a crucial moment this is in the relationship. Too often the dramatic development of the scene was not delineated clearly. These candidates simply moved from detail to detail. **Question 35** on the other hand usually produced some sort of argument, though the range of evidence advanced as support was sometimes not wide ranging enough. The empathic task also followed the same pattern of producing work over a wide range. Some captured Alfieri wonderfully well, others simply told the story.

Questions 37 – 39

Arthur Miller: *All My Sons*

Relatively few Examiners saw much work on this play. All the tasks seemed to work well, though the empathic question had few takers. There was some thoughtful argument in **Question 38** and there were some insightful responses to atmosphere in the passage, but rather too many simply could not get beyond noting the idyllic quality of the scene, failing to bring out the undercurrents. One Examiner noted that the importance of the tree was rarely brought out.

Questions 40 – 42

William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*

The extract task was a sharp differentiator, between those who could respond well to the dramatic situation, to Juliet's shifting moods and the language which communicated them, and those who could do no more than make general comments. Indeed, some seemed to have only the most hazy grasp of the context, which, of course, is crucial here. In **Question 41** most attempted some argument. Quite a few ranged widely and well over the possibilities offered by the drama, but rather too many were unable to develop an argument which had much focus and balance. For instance, some seemed to be seriously arguing that the two lovers needed simply a sharp slap to bring them to their senses. Others simply produced their essay on fate in the play. The success of the empathic question has already been commented upon.

Questions 43 – 45

William Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night*

The Centres who chose to do this play seemed in the main to have encouraged the candidates to think about it and to probe its detail and humour. As has been said above, though, Sir Toby suffered the fate of all who are not sufficiently moral and was roundly dismissed by some. It was not so much that they disapproved; it was their inability even to recognise there was any possible argument to the contrary that distorted the play. The ironies of the extract slipped by quite a few. However, this was often made up by the second part of the task where most had some grasp of Viola and Orsino and sometimes made quite a warm and sympathetic response to Viola's poignant dilemma. **Question 45** was occasionally well done but rather too often lapsed into a description of the various relationships without much developed argument.

Questions 46 – 48

Oscar Wilde: *An Ideal Husband*

Here the extract task was the least popular, which, given the difficulty some candidates clearly have grasping Wildean humour, was probably as well. Some of the answers here were weak. There was, though, much more confidence on display in responses to **Question 47** and in the empathic task. The latter produced some answers that went to the centre of the character's morality, with all its attendant hypocritical possibilities, and quite a few caught the woman's anguish and bewilderment well. Some, though, failed to see that she had yet to come down off her pedestal and made the conversion all too easy and too early. Quite rightly, few found a good word to say for Mrs Cheveley and there was some good developed argument with detail.

Paper 0486/02

Coursework

General comments

As usual, every Centre will receive a short report on its own coursework from the External Moderator.

The vast majority of comment has been greatly positive. It is most pleasing to report that this session shortcomings in aspects of task setting, internal assessment and internal moderation were few and far between. Indeed, most External Moderators commended Centres for the accuracy with which they undertook assessment, for the information they provided about how work was assessed and for the neat presentation of the folders. Congratulations are the order of the day.

External Moderators often commented on the range of texts being written upon in the folders. In some instances there could still be more adventure encouraged in the candidates. It is recognised that our Centres vary widely in the conditions in which literature is taught and in the availability of books. However, it continues to be rather disappointing still to find all candidates within a Centre writing class-taught responses on the same texts that are very similar across the Centre. Is this because it is thought safer to tie the candidates into a restricted area? If so, it has to be said that often it does not succeed. It was noted that in quite a few Centres where this was not the policy the result was a marked freshness and energy. Ideally, coursework should not attempt to be a pale reflection of the examination.

Occasionally titles could have benefited from the rigour with which questions are set in the examination. There are still occasions when the Moderator found that the candidate was setting off simply with the injunction to write about the book or the poem. The framing of the task to give the candidate a clear sense of direction is vital.

There is no Syllabus requirement when writing about two poems to compare them. Indeed, without a well worded task such a requirement can risk leading the candidate away from things that really matter in the poetry towards banal statements on content comparison (Poem A is against war and has rhyme whilst Poem B is for war and has no rhyme).

Although there are still a few cases of very limited commentary, overall Centres are using the individual candidate record cards much more fully now, it is pleasing to note. But a problem now seems to be that the assessment criteria are sometimes being copied out word for word. However, the External Moderator is also looking for evidence that the individual qualities of each folder have been measured against the criteria. This necessarily involves addressing in the final commentary some of the particular features of the essays in the folder. One last point on administration: Teacher marking of the essays must be seen by the External Moderator; candidates must not produce new 'fair copy' of work that has been submitted for assessment.

Paper 0486/03**Alternative to Coursework****General comments**

Robert Frost's poem 'Out, Out –' clearly made a great impact on this year's candidates. Responses were often refreshingly personal and rooted in a close reading of the words of the poem.

Most candidates enjoyed the way the saw was described, some likening it to an angry dog or snake, and responded to the effects of the repetition, onomatopoeia and personification. Many candidates saw the incongruity between its sound and the serene background. They responded to the menacing foreshadowing of the events to come in the early description of the timber-yard routine and the poet's wry comment on it.

Astute candidates were also aware of the unusual narrative style as the incident developed. Some identified what they termed as 'black humour' in the saw seeming to know 'what supper meant' and then hungrily devouring the boy's hand and some commented on the play on the word, 'hand', in 'He must have given the hand.' Not all comments on these features were successful but the fact that candidates observed them at all and tried to make sense of them was to be applauded. After all, the poem's tone is difficult to tune into in places and credit should go to candidates sensitive enough to recognise this, however dimly. Of course, a few candidates were able to relate these unusual narrative features to their overall interpretation of the poem, but they were exceptional.

There were also some moving responses to the way Frost describes how the crisis initially affects the boy, with his 'rueful laugh', and his final breaths. Candidates did not need to emote extravagantly to demonstrate they cared. The best responses remained rooted in an analytical approach to the words used, with an awareness of their overall context. By this they usually also communicated their feeling for the narrative.

Good candidates often identified matters that Frost did not develop. Weaker candidates persisted in trying to fill in these gaps and generally, by doing so, distorted the impact of Frost's poem. Examiners had to discount unsupported speculation about uncaring parents, the sister callously ignoring the boy's pleas for help, incompetent doctors and so on. Some candidates also wished to draw simplistic morals from the poem, seeing it as a diatribe against child labour, for instance, or as an ecological revenge for deforestation. The first could be partially supported by some of the details, but the second was founded on baseless presuppositions.

The end of the poem clearly caused candidates to feel uncomfortable as Frost indeed must have intended. Many identified the last few lines as an indication that the individuals surrounding the boy were unbelievably cruel. The most astute were able to broaden their understanding of the way the incident was described to an understanding of the human condition in general, and commented on the fragility of human life. Examiners, of course, did not expect them to recognise the *Macbeth* allusion in the title, but many candidates nevertheless saw that life was "a brief candle". They also commented on the sad need for the rest of human activity to continue as represented by the seemingly heartless reactions of the bystanders.

After presenting a generally favourable report on this year's work, the Examiners would like to conclude by identifying a regular weakness in candidates' approach to this sort of task. As a general rule, the better candidates tackled the question directly; weaker candidates tended to paraphrase. There was much variation in the standard of paraphrase from the purely mechanical, which could attract very few marks, to the sensitive recreation of the essence of the poem, albeit in narrative form, which may have answered the question by implication but did not make its points explicitly. Narratives at this end of the spectrum often used short quotations quite liberally and their selection showed an appreciation of the poet's words. It was possible by this method to achieve a reasonable grade. The highest grades, however, were reserved for those candidates who answered directly and analytically, with well selected quotations accompanied by clearly developed comments illustrating the subtleties of the poet's use of words.