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LITERATURE (ENGLISH)

Paper 0486/01 and 0486/04

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

General comments

None of the questions appeared to present any major problem of understanding for the candidates; there were few cases of misreading. As last year there was work seen on all the texts, though some texts remain vastly more popular than others. The *Touched with Fire* selection was usually the poetry choice of Centres, almost always amongst those taking Paper 1; *Romeo and Juliet* and *Animal Farm* were the most popular prose and drama texts respectively.

Most Examiners reported evidence of a widespread basic competence in most Centres. Only occasionally did they find pockets of really poor work that suggested a lack of even the most basic knowledge of the texts. Generally, there was evidence of solid preparation for the examination, and subsequently, most candidates seemed to know what was expected of them. With some exceptions, most of the questions triggered answers which at least engaged with relevant issues. In the majority of work, there was a clear recognition that reference to the detail of the text was a requirement. In pockets this engagement with the detail of the text went well beyond the simple use of quotation or reference, some of which could have been pre-learnt rather than understood. It displayed just how well the candidates had responded as individual readers to the effect of literary language. In such work, the Examiner read a developed and coherent argument in response to the question, which displayed at every turn the candidates' ability to range through the text to find that which was most pertinent to the task and to show just how much they had been stimulated by their reading. Naturally, such candidates achieved high marks.

Nevertheless, the majority of Examiners continue to report that there are too many candidates who do not perform quite as well as they might. One reason for this, in so many instances, was the failure of the candidates to maintain a focus throughout on the task. In extract questions there was often a tendency to wander from the passage or conversely a failure to set the extract firmly in its context in order to draw out its significances. At times, in a popular extract question, such as **Question 40** it was difficult to tell whether the candidate was regurgitating a standard essay on the characters of *Romeo* and *Juliet* in the play, or exploring this particular example of their personalities.

All Examiners reported this year that there were few rubric infringements.

Last year the principal Examiner's report commented upon the time wasted by candidates in writing introductions which say nothing of substance, and unfortunately this still remains an issue. Sometimes, a whole page may be covered and the candidate has done no more than metaphorically clear her or his throat before speaking. Nothing can be rewarded until this point is reached and it is all a waste of the candidate's time. It is often such simple things which explain why candidates may finish a grade below that to be expected. Their scripts simply do not have the range and scope a more judicious use of time might have given them. All of this was pointed out last year yet still the practice of writing empty introductions goes on in places.

Other areas have been the subject of critical comment over the years and improvement has again not been as obvious as might be hoped. Reports have often emphasised that the display of literary terminology when it is paraded without understanding will not be rewarded, yet a significant minority of candidates still seem more concerned with noting figures of speech in poetry than actually coming to grips with the effect they create and the way that effect is created. It will come as no surprise for Centres to learn that *Dulce et Decorum Est* figured prominently in the answers to **Question 5**, yet some candidates were unable to show *how* the words created the horrifying scenes that candidates so often asserted they did. Candidates need to be helped to see what is required when a task demands engagement with the language of poetry. Similarly, with *Animal Farm*, Examiners once again noted that still quite a few candidates apparently believe that accounts of the Russian Revolution will gain them reward even when all the questions specifically focus attention on the fable as literature.

Over the years, there has been much comment on the way some candidates give the impression of having prepared a text simply through the reading of study aids. As a result, they are lost when they are asked to think about the text from an individual and personal angle. Their knowledge of the literature is so general and partial for them to cope. They have apparently not been encouraged to think for themselves in any way. For instance, it was noticeable this year that too many candidates attempting **Question 44** had clearly given no thought to Feste's role in the play and were surprised that anyone should feel that he contributed more than the occasional laugh along the way.

In summary, there remain a minority of Centres where it is thought considerable improvement is possible and should be sought. However, the majority of candidates of all abilities continue to produce pleasing work, which reflects considerable credit on those who have helped them to prepare for the examination.

Comments on specific questions

Poetry

Questions 1 - 3

A small minority took this option, but Examiners who met work on these poems were more positive than on the other poetry option. Indeed, all thought the candidates' performance satisfactory, particularly on **Question 1**.

Questions 4 - 6

There was quite a lot of good work on *Mending Wall*. It would appear that very few candidates were unable to write something sensible about the two personalities involved, though a few had some difficulty in distinguishing who said what and subsided into muddle. It was gratifying to find quite a proportion able to engage with the subtleties of Frost's language in order to bring out, for instance, the humour of the poem. The work on the other two questions was significantly more problematic. Reference has already been made to the difficulties a few candidates seem to have in really engaging with poetic language. On a more basic level, Examiners noted that quite a few candidates ignored the tasks set and simply wrote about their chosen poem, often not very well. Hence in **Question 5** Owen's language could be marginalised as the candidate wrote about the horrors of the First World War and the poet's opinion of Jessie Pope. However, there was much work that really set out to probe the language as asked, sometimes with striking success. Good work was also seen on the Nicholson and Thomas poems but, for quite a few, they were poems whose language and meanings proved elusive. Some, for instance, failed to connect the imagery of the former to the wartime in which it was set. In **Question 6**, though there was some really probing work, more often Examiners faced the problem of how to assess answers which virtually ignored the injunction to select moments of sadness or joy and simply wrote generally about each poem. It was difficult to ascertain whether this was a failure to read the question or an attempt to avoid the need to probe in detail the poetic language at particular moments. Either way, little reward could be given in such instances.

Prose

Questions 7 - 9

Most who attempted **Question 8** had little difficulty in documenting the horrors of the world created by Forster, and making sensible comments about it. Rather more rarely were candidates able to pinpoint how the writer makes it especially horrific. In **Question 7** Examiners met much thorough detailing of the lumber room. However, it was surprising how only a minority of candidates engaged fully with the actual question: to reveal the lumber room's significance to the story as a whole. There seemed too little understanding of the way the room highlights the sterility of the Aunt's household and the attitudes it stands for. Only a few attempted **Question 9**, but those who did usually made an appropriate choice of material and explored with some success how the suspense and the surprise was created.

Questions 10 - 12

This was a popular text and there was general approval for the quality of work. Both **Questions 10 and 11** showed that candidates found Jane an engaging and compelling figure who warranted thought. The turmoil in her life was well delineated when candidates examined the extract in the former. In the latter, candidates illustrated that they were accustomed to discussing the paradoxes of her personality. If there was a weakness, it was the comparative lack of involvement with the specifics of Brontë's writing, particularly in the extract task. That uncertainty showed itself more clearly in the empathic task where candidates usually managed to find some appropriate material for Mr Rochester, but not very often a continually convincing voice. Too many produced generalised high drama without trying to convey the sudden swings of this man's feelings.

Questions 13 - 15

Not much work was seen on this text. Most who did **Question 13** picked up some of the uneasy conversation and there was the occasional really insightful grasp of a changed relationship. In most answers to **Question 14** there was some engagement with the plight of both women, and some interesting judgements made, though not always with sufficiently detailed evidence from the novel. **Question 15** was avoided.

Questions 16 - 18

This was not a very popular text, but it nonetheless produced good work from the candidates who responded. One Examiner wrote of the shrewdness with which candidates responded to both Mary and Dick Turner. There was some really probing work on the detail of the passage and some quite searching argument in regard to Dick, showing awareness of just how Lessing continually shifts perspectives. There were also some quite convincing assumptions of Mary in **Question 18**.

Questions 19 - 21

The quality of work on this novel was satisfactory without being very exciting. Most chose to do the extract question and almost all did so with a modicum of efficiency, by going through the passage and listing the characteristics which emerged. What was often lacking was any real engagement with the character through the writing; things were logged rather than responded to. There were a few quite interesting answers to **Question 20** which made some sort of a case for Van Rooyen instead of simply despising him. Given the choice of the above, perhaps it was to be expected that none seemed to want to tackle **Question 21**.

Questions 22 - 24

Examiner's comments about the work on this very popular text too often expressed disappointment at the quality of the answers. This disappointment particularly centred upon **Question 22**, where over and over again it was noted that candidates seemed quite unable to make any response to Orwell's satire, even in a passage where the antics of Squealer and Napoleon so obviously border on the ludicrous. Mostly the candidates simply *explained* what was going on, at times even taking time off to let the Examiner know how the events supposedly corresponded to historical happenings. Occasionally there was light in the darkness when a candidate engaged with Orwell's scornful laughter but, sadly, it was rare. The other questions were better done. There were some genuinely amusing assumptions of Mollie, though some candidates gave her far too much insight and one even thought she was a cat. Boxer quite often elicited committed responses which argued a convincing case. Of course, some simply wrote a character sketch without making any effort to work within the parameters of the question but these cases were actually rarer than might have been expected.

Questions 25 - 27

There was a somewhat variable response from Examiners to the work on this text. Some found candidates who reacted strongly to the descriptions of marriage to be found in the extract and to the picture of old China in the novel as a whole. These candidates probed Tan's writing and brought out its power to shock and surprise. The same kind of work was found on occasions in the empathic task. Some entered with verve into Rose's moment of triumph. However, what was lacking, in too much of the work, was such engagement. There was widespread knowledge of the details of the book but little response to it as literature. This was most noticeable in **Question 25** where candidates often wrote bland accounts of the marriage customs detailed and seem quite unmoved by, or unaware of, Tan's description of the callousness displayed.

Questions 28 - 30

The extract question was by far the most popular and was generally well done. Most grasped that this was a seminal moment in Charlie's understanding of his father and delineated the differences between the two of them. Quite a few probed further, commenting on Mother's cryptic comment and recognising the way the writing makes for some ambivalence towards Allie. Bordering on madness though they might have thought him, these candidates nevertheless responded to his vision of the future of this dismal place. Equally encouraging were the number of answers on **Question 29**, which showed that a good deal of thought had been given to the rather enigmatic figure of Mother. However, some hardly helped themselves by concentrating on the beginning and middle of the book and failing to use the much more straightforward material of the book's ending. It was a pity that none felt confident enough to become the paranoid Allie in **Question 30**.

*Drama***Questions 31 - 33**

There was a general consensus that the work on this text was at the very least competent, occasionally more than that. In the extract question, not surprisingly most candidates were able to point to some of the basic differences between the two characters, though some did little more than describe and failed to bring out the significance of the detail. Also, some relied too heavily on knowledge from the rest of the play rather than using the words and actions of the extract. Examiners noted in **Question 32** that most candidates were able to construct an argument and to find important moments in the play to support their case. Surprisingly, not many attempted **Question 33** but it clearly provided stimulation to those who were of a thoughtful cast of mind.

Questions 34 - 36

In this popular text the quality of work varied widely. The extract question really differentiated between those who were able to look closely at what the writing reveals about these two very different characters, and those who relied on a general knowledge of the play. The latter answers usually degenerated into a character sketch of Eddie, and Alfieri disappeared from view. **Question 35**, the most popular question, provoked some interesting argument with detailed support from the play. It also resulted in some fairly unconvincing responses which suggested that some candidates had little detailed grasp of tone. At times the argument seemed to be suggesting that Miller makes Catherine mainly responsible for the events of the play. Others dismissed her from their answers in a few lines and simply wrote on Eddie's guilt. The few who tackled the empathic task usually achieved an assumption of Marco that had some measure of the man and his situation.

Questions 37 - 39

Not many Centres offered this play and the quality of the work was patchy. This was particularly the case in regard to the extract question. Too many candidates curiously saw the question as an invitation to write about words, punctuation and stage directions without any reference to the content and significance of the episode, and hence the point of it all. In **Question 38** there were some thoughtful probing of Larry's developing significance in the play. Others, though, did little more than narrate events that were connected to Larry. This range of response carried over into **Question 39**. Some really probed the possibilities and the remaining obstacles facing the couple. Others wrote answers which predicted an outcome right out of Hollywood. Such candidates, ignoring the complexities of Miller's play, did little more than simply assert that because they are in the love the couple should marry.

Questions 40 - 42

The extract question was probably the most popular in the paper and, as has already been suggested, differentiated sharply between those who were able to respond to the detail of language and those who simply resorted to using material from prepared character sketches. Fortunately, the former were in the majority and some showed a most gratifying ability to handle the nuances of language. **Question 41** often produced lively and thoughtful answers, well supported from the text. However, it was noticeable that at times the parameters of the response were disappointingly limited; too many candidates seemed unable to consider the possibilities of the first description, sometimes making quite absurd claims for the friar's wisdom, despite the obviously catastrophic result of his stratagems. Those who chose **Question 42** seemed to do so out of weakness, since most showed themselves quite unable to engage with Shakespeare's dramatic poetry in any detail, usually resorting to a simple account of dramatic moments in the play.

Questions 43 - 45

For **Question 43** there was little really good work. Most candidates could make allusions to the developing plot and a few noted some of the ironies. Unfortunately, there were very few who showed the slightest sign of being amused by the way, for instance, Olivia behaves. The work on Feste was similarly disappointing. Ironically, it was because very few seemed to have any idea that Feste's function could stretch beyond the humorous. Such failures can only point towards candidates simply not studying the play in sufficient depth. Not surprisingly the empathic task was popular and often well done; Malvolio's self regard was often well captured. However, once again there were too many moments when he was given things to say which suggested the candidate was not aware in detail what Malvolio would know. In addition, some found it hard to hit a tone appropriate to this very proper man. Occasionally he was made to sound more like Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Questions 46 - 48

The encouraging aspect of this text was that the few who attempted **Question 48** did have some success in detailing what makes Wilde so amusing at times. As was to be expected, the majority of candidates who had studied this text did one of the other two questions; the standard was generally satisfactory. In the extra question, most were able to chart the twists of the episode, though only a few were able to fully engage with the features that make the end to this Act so dramatically compelling. Similarly, most responses to **Question 47** were able to construct a reasonable argument, usually suggesting that Wilde is indicating that Chiltern deserves a second chance. However, the arguments usually lacked a detailed basis in the play. Only rarely did one find a candidate even mentioning Chiltern's speech at the end of Act 2 or probing how Wilde presents Lady Chiltern's shifting judgements of her husband.

Paper 0486/02

Coursework

General comments

As usual, all Centres will receive a brief individual report, so this general report once again will pick out a few overall features of the work presented and of the way the component was administered.

This year the assessment and administration caused few problems. The great majority of Centres had their marks totally endorsed and in none were there any really significant changes. All had managed to encourage most of their candidates to produce worthwhile work, some of it very good, and the number of folders which did not merit reasonable reward was very small.

Last year this report spent some time on emphasising the importance of the candidates writing to tasks which enabled them to meet in full the syllabus objectives. That problem has diminished but remains in places. Therefore it is perhaps worth reiterating the point that tasks which do not encourage the candidate to engage with the ways in which a writer creates meaning will result in essays which are full of narrative and paraphrase and hence will be unlikely to merit high reward. It is not enough to ask the candidate to write about the content of a text. Questions beginning with *What...* as opposed to (say) *How...* will usually fall into this category of not requiring the candidate to think about the text as a piece of writing.

The administration this year was generally excellent. The folders, were, without exception well produced, indeed sometimes they were almost works of art in themselves. In most instances, the student record card was extremely helpful in guiding the Moderator to the characteristics of the folder. There are still exceptions though. Occasionally, though a reasonable amount had been written, there did not seem to have been sufficient care taken over the words. For instance, the description of a folder which deserved a top grade could differ very little from one which deserved no more than a middling grade. In other instances, the description contained hardly any information, just one line telling the Moderator about the candidate's demeanour in class. This is of no use to the moderation of the candidate's folder. What was surprising was that this year in only one instance was this a failure of a Centre as a whole. It seemed to occur in a set or sets within a Centre which otherwise did things properly. This would seem to suggest that standardisation throughout the department is not felt to be as necessary in this area as in regard to the agreement of the marks. Please note that it should be as important to the Internal as to the External Moderator since this is a vital part of validating the basis upon which the assessment has been made.

Nevertheless, overall the Moderator felt the Centres deserved congratulation on their work in this component.

Paper 0486/03
Alternative to Coursework

General comments

The Examiners were delighted by the variety and freshness of most candidates' responses to the extract from the story, *The Rain Horse*, by Ted Hughes. It was clear that the majority of candidates enjoyed it and felt able to articulate their responses in their individual ways. The Examiners were particularly pleased that so few candidates resorted to stale and rigid pre-set agendas that have sometimes been adhered to in the past, irrespective of whether they were appropriate to the question or not.

There were very few instances where candidates did not show a basic understanding of what was happening in the passage. The misreadings which did occur tended to be localised. There was, at times, confusion about whether certain phrases referred to the horse or the man. This was particularly so with the sentence, 'He lowered his head slowly, slithered back down the bank and crouched'. The word, 'inane' was often read as 'insane'. Very frequently, candidates found it difficult to distinguish between the voice of the narrator and the deliberations of the central character. This was predominantly with reference to the second paragraph, where the words, 'The horse was evidently mad', were taken to be unambiguously factual.

Perhaps a more serious tendency amongst the weaker candidates was an over-confident eagerness to display their own personal knowledge and experience without showing an accompanying ability to read the extract with the requisite attention to detail. Many candidates had experience of horses and were keen to register this. The Examiners, of course, welcome a readiness to bring such experience of life to their reading. However, candidates must realise that the examination is a test of how advanced their skills in reading literature are, and must use such knowledge only in so far as it enhances their reading. A sizeable minority of candidates were so keen to reveal that horses are docile, friendly animals that they were blinded to Hughes' suggestions that this was clearly an *extraordinary* horse. Such answers often heartily condemned the man for his treatment of the horse, not appreciating that the weapon he sought was for self-defence rather than to inflict harm for its own sake.

Nevertheless, an encouragingly larger group embraced with enthusiasm the mysteriousness of the language describing the horse. Engagement with ambiguity and ambivalence is one of the higher skills of literary appreciation, and the Examiners were impressed by the way many candidates approached the challenge of the set task. Some candidates were very honest and said that they were confused by exactly what was going through the man's mind in the story, but enjoyed the atmosphere and the sense of the mystical. This showed they were a substantial part of the way towards a rich appreciation. Less convincing were the one or two who were even more honest, one indeed saying that he would prefer to be playing football than trying to puzzle out what lay behind the story, while many had ingenious theories about the significance of the man's encounter with the horse, but expressed them rather too dogmatically. As one Examiner expressed it, 'The use of the words, 'might', 'perhaps', 'could be', was often a differentiating factor'.

Essentially, the Examiners were rewarding the depth of the candidate's engagement with the passage, irrespective of what conclusions he or she came to. The depth revealed itself in any number of ways, through responses to: the dismal and eerie atmosphere, the complexity of the man's psychological state of mind, empathy with the man's plight, or speculation about the horse as a projection of the man's guilt or deep-seated fears. The sheer variety and sophistication of such explorations made the Examiner's task daunting but exhilarating.

However, it must be reiterated, that for the highest grades, it had to be apparent that the candidate's conclusions had been reached through a close and intelligent reading of the words of the writer. It was tempting for candidates who felt that they had just discovered the 'secret' of the story to spin away from the passage.

Overall, the work of the candidates was extremely heartening.