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LITERATURE (ENGLISH)

Papers 0486/01 and 0486/04

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

General comments

Continuing expansion and continuing improvement seem to be the watchwords for this year. It is becoming gratifyingly clear that the advice which this report has been giving each year is leading to work which in almost all cases shows some engagement with literature and in many instances a great deal more than that.

Before being more specific about the performance, it can be reported that the great majority of tasks stimulated at least some candidates to respond in a lively and informed manner. As was said last year, the aim is to set questions which encourage thought in the exam room rather than the presentation of prepared material. (On this matter see below.) To this end there will always be found some tasks which perhaps surprise candidates who are hoping to be able to write out, for instance, a character sketch of a central personality in the text. Of course, that material may well be relevant in a slightly different format. This year it was noticeable that some of the more potentially (or ostensibly) 'difficult' tasks produced answers which were amongst the liveliest written and which certainly differentiated ability accurately. The empathic questions all produced at times a delightful response and a number who attempted questions such as **7, 11, 22, 41, 44** and **47** often did so to good purpose. On the other hand the few who attempted **8, 26** and **35** for instance did not seem as well equipped to meet the demands of those particular tasks.

All the texts on offer had been studied, though there were wide differences in popularity. There seems to have been limited take up so far of *Poems Deep and Dangerous*, whilst in the **Prose** section answers on *Animal Farm* far outnumbered anything else in the section. To some extent the same could be said of *Romeo and Juliet* in the drama section but here there was significant representation of all the other dramas.

As to the performance over the whole paper, though there was as always a wide range of achievement, in Paper 1 (Open Books) it was rare to find work which did not at least attempt to answer the question directly. On Paper 4 (Closed Books), however, matters were not so satisfactory in this respect. On this paper there were still too many instances of candidates introducing material which had clearly been prepared and which had little relevance to the task set. It cannot be stressed too much that in this syllabus this will lead to little reward. Candidates are required to respond to the particularities of the task which in turn has been designed to test not only candidates' basic knowledge of a text but also their ability to think about it.

To return to the positive, though, there was also a greater number of candidates who realised how important it was to try to engage with the language of the text. As will be shown later, not all seemed to have a very good grasp of what this entailed but at least the intentions were apparent. This is, of course, a step in the right direction since nearly every task required that the candidate should not just assert things in a vacuum. As has already been implied, there was much work that conveyed not only the candidates' powers of analysis but their enjoyment of their reading as well. Many Examiners noted how many candidates had the confidence to express individual views of their reading based on sound evidence. This is what literary study should lead to, as opposed to a reliance on mere parroting of the words of study aids.

Examiners also noted progress in a number of specific areas. Perhaps because in the teaching there seems to be an increasing emphasis on looking at the effect of literary language, the standard of poetry answers seemed to show an obvious improvement. As encouraging was the response to humour. Not so many years ago it was normal for this report to bewail the apparent absence of laughter in the classroom. This was particularly evident when an Ayckbourn play first came onto the syllabus. From the answers it would have been quite impossible for anyone to detect that *A Small Family Business* was a comedy. Happily this seems no longer to be the case in regard to plays as diverse as *Absent Friends* and *Twelfth Night* and some of the empathic answers were memorable in this respect. Marge, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, even the wry remarks at times of Benjamin and Allie's wife added to the pleasure of an Examiner's reading.

Of course, as in every year, there were failings, some of which could be explained by the candidates' ability, some down to things which perhaps could be altered by the adoption of a different approach. There can be done about the former. One suspects that each year the complaint about the lack of focus in the answer to the passage in extract tasks arises simply because the candidates cannot cope with the detail of the text. It may feel, for instance, much safer writing about such things as the Russian Revolution in regard to *Animal Farm* than engaging with Orwell's writing. However, it continues to be common to meet with answers which have copious reference and quotation but which communicate little evidence of the candidates' capacity to analyse what they are quoting or referring to. The injunction to support argument with detail requires more than inert quotation or reference to figures of speech. For high reward what is used must be probed for its resonances and implications.

On a simpler level, it should be possible for many candidates to release more time for thinking and for writing that which can be rewarded. For instance, it really seems a waste of time to write out the question before embarking on the answer. Also, it remains true that few introductions say anything which can be rewarded; most of them are no more than a pronouncement of the obvious, a clearing of the throat as it were. However, at least that may have the result of the candidate feeling more comfortable at getting on with the task. What is indefensible is the practice of writing out at length essay notes before putting anything on paper which can be marked. In some instances these covered more paper than the answers. It is true that overall few scripts suggested that candidates were short of time and it is clearly worthwhile for candidates to spend a little time mapping out the direction in which they intend to go. It is important to achieve a focus in the answer nor is it true that long answers are invariably better than shorter ones. However, in the final analysis the scope of an answer is an important criterion in the assessment and what is not there cannot be rewarded. That much improvement can be achieved by paying attention to really quite mundane things is illustrated by the fact it is now rare to find candidates ignoring the instructions on the cover of the paper.

So, overall the Examiners found much to praise in the performance of this year's candidates.

There follow some comments specific to the performance on each text.

Comments on specific questions

Poetry

Questions 1 – 3

Most of the work in **Question 1** was satisfactory if rarely penetrating. Many candidates had difficulty in probing the detail of the poem to bring out fully its vividness and a few seemed to think that the diviner was the rod. **Question 3** was the most popular and the best done. There were some answers which integrated the attitudes of the two poems very well at the same time as bringing out the differences of approach. In the best answers there was an impressive understanding of the way words and images created their effect. Others betrayed their inability to read closely by, for instance, confusing father and grandfather. **Question 2** was the least attempted and seemed sometimes to be chosen out of weakness. Though some Centres wrote well, quite often the humour of *Turkeys Observed* was not grasped and the response to *Poor Women in a City Church* was too often to produce a simple paraphrase of the poem.

Questions 4 – 6

Relatively few candidates chose this selection. Hardly any of those attempted **Question 6**, **Question 5** saw several good responses to *Mountain Lion* but of the rest quite a few struggled to convince in their answers to **Question 4**. Most were able to reveal something of Larkin's attitude to advertising but rarely were they able to show how his words gave that attitude power, and some simply lapsed into a general diatribe against advertising.

Questions 7 – 9

This selection was the most popular and there was some impressive work to be found. This sadly extend to the relatively few who attempted **Question 8**. They had little idea how to relate sound to meaning and effect and sometimes only referred to one poem. They did not seem to realise that the task was asking for them to explore examples in either poem. They were not expected to analyse two poems in depth. More often than not sound was merely noted whilst some failed to talk about it at all, merely describing features of each poem. Conversely, the other questions often evoked detailed and probing responses, though there were occasionally some startling mis-interpretations. One candidate in **Question 9** seemed to think that Achebe's Madonna was the pop singer and, though this poem produced plenty of feeling, analysis of the poetry was less in evidence. Few, however, were unable to convey something of the sadness of one of the poems listed, though a number thought quotation and reference were of themselves enough to establish the power of the writing. Thus the Wordsworth sonnet often received detailed treatment which did not always bring out the 'wonder'. However, there were some truly impressive responses to both questions.

Prose**Questions 10 – 12**

The work on *Twentieth-Century Short Stories* usually reached a satisfactory standard. Encouragingly, most tackling **Question 10** realised that the description of Vashti's life style was not intended to evoke the reader's approval. Occasionally in the past Forster's irony has been lost on certain candidates. It remained true, however, that only a minority of candidates were able to do full justice to the power of the writer's scorn. There were some thoughtful responses to **Question 11**, weighing up both possible perspectives on Elizabeth Bates. Most candidates showed knowledge of the story but sometimes this translated itself into a straightforward character sketch which paid scant attention to the task in hand. **Question 12** was rarely attempted and the answers ranged from the lively and amusing to the very weak and pedestrian.

Questions 13 – 15

There was some good work on *Jane Eyre*, particularly on **Question 15**. Here there was some impressive examples of regulated hatred aimed at such characters as Mrs Reed and Mr Brocklehurst. One candidate even made a case for Jane herself on the count of her character being a feminine cliché. There was some engagement with Helen Burns's plight in **Question 13**, though some answers simply described her life without relating the answer to the ways in which Brontë makes that life so moving. A few candidates begged to differ with the proposition that Brontë did manage to make it moving, which seemed a fair enough stance. The response to the extract in **Question 13** was solid without often being insightful. There was rather too much description and rather too little detailed analysis of the personalities involved.

Questions 16 – 18

There was quite good probing of the detail of the extract with some responsive comment on Desai's descriptive powers in *The Village by the Sea*. Only a minority, though, saw how she made this so significant to Hari at this moment in his life. There was some thoughtful arguments about what the novel shows about Indian women's lives but few answers linked it in any detailed way to Desai's writing. **Question 18** was usually done well, quite a few realising that Lila's was a forgiving nature.

Questions 19 – 21

The Grass Is Singing was a minority choice. Of those most did the passage **Question 19** and rarely without some efficiency and quite often with insight into the relationship depicted. However, a majority could have given more attention to the detail of the passage. The very few who did **Question 20** usually had something sensible to say, though again the detailed attention to Lessing's writing was too often missing and curiously some did not think that Moses could be important to the answer. No Examiner reported seeing work on **Question 21**.

Questions 22 – 24

The entry for *Fiela's Child* was again rather limited. The great majority attempted the passage-based question presumably for its drama. This was variably conveyed. Some really engaged in detail with the power of Matthee's writing, others merely described and paraphrased. There were a few quite good arguments in response to **Question 23** but Examiners reported few assumptions of Sellina for **Question 24**.

Questions 25 – 27

There was a large number of candidates offering this text and it was gratifying to find that most attempted to address the question instead of filling their essays with writing about connections between the Russian Revolution and Orwell's fable in a way that could not be awarded against the Literature grade criteria. Indeed few were unable to communicate something of poignancy of the extract, though rather too many spent too much of the answer in territory outside the passage. It was quite reasonable to set the context but to devote simply one or two paragraphs to the passage as a few did was to invite disaster. Also, some seemed to think that detailing such things as the suspense and tension of the writing was directly addressing the task. (Perhaps they misunderstood the meaning of *moving*.) Of course, it could be made to do so but only by taking the next step. That said, there was much engaged and detailed writing which impressed. **Question 26** produced rather more problematic work. Some was excellent in the manner in which it investigated how Orwell presented the various animals but others simply reduced the task to a description of Napoleon's evil ways or the animals' stupidity. There were some memorable assumptions of Benjamin and a few who equally memorably missed the target, having the cynical donkey as a tearful potential leader of the next revolution, this time against the pigs.

Questions 28 – 30

The Bonesetter's Daughter clearly made some impression on those who had studied it. There was some nice understanding, indeed some insight, into Ruth's difficulties and a similar understanding of Art's predicament was evident in the empathic task. The extract also produced some satisfactory work but Examiners noted that some candidates focused little on the poignancy of Precious Aunty's situation and did not seem sufficiently aware of Lu Ling's knowledge at this point in the novel.

Questions 31 – 33

Hardly anyone attempted **Question 32** on *The Mosquito Coast*, perhaps because the passage-based task offered such rich opportunities. These were sometimes taken; there were some really excellent answers which fixed accurately the significance of this passage in the development of our view of Allie. The very best saw just how powerful and prophetic was the final description of him. At the other end of the scale there were some who seemed to think that Theroux was asking the reader to be sympathetic to the character. Given the slightly shadowy figure of Mother in the book, it was gratifying how many created a credible response for her to her husband's scheme. Some caught excellently her love for her man in conflict with her love for her children and saw that melodrama was not her style.

Drama**Questions 34 – 36**

The empathic task on *Absent Friends* produced some very funny assumptions of Marge, even if they tended to be somewhat repetitive, perhaps, as one Examiner suggested, an indication of the limits of her character in the play. There was also at times evidence of a keen awareness of the comic possibilities of the extract and its ironies, though as usual there were some who did little beyond laying out the general situation with virtually no attention to the detail of the writing. Few did **Question 35** and in truth some floundered around trying to find something focused to say. There was a wide range here, for some had a very clear grasp of the issues and wrote very well.

Questions 37 – 39

The strongest answers on *'Master Harold'... and the Boys* were to **Questions 38** and **39**. There were some very moving and accurate assumptions of Sam and what one Examiner described as authoritative and compassionate descriptions of South African life as shown in the play, though in the latter case there was rarely detailed contact with Fugard's writing. The extract task was the most popular and the least well done. It differentiated sharply between those who knew the context and were able to detect in the nuances of writing the subtext and those who simply read things at face value. These tended to be very much too sympathetic to Hally.

Questions 40 – 42

Most appreciated the general significance of the passage and showed general knowledge of the situation rather than too few really looked at the detail and probed Miller's stage craft here. Sometimes there was a reliance on the stage directions than on the dialogue. The weakest just relied on plot summaries. On the face of it **Question 41** seemed potentially difficult and there were a number of very weak answers. However, it also appeared to attract some candidates who really knew the play and who produced some impressive surveys of the neighbours' dramatic impact. There were variable results in **Question 42**. Some caught splendidly Ann's combination of trepidation and determination whilst others had only the haziest understanding of what she would have known at this point in the play.

Question 43 – 45

Romeo and Juliet was the most popular drama text on the paper and it brought forth a wide range of responses. In the passage-based task there was plenty of evidence of the ability to handle the detail of Shakespearean dialogue and most relished the bawdiness of the scene. In the better answers Examiners found insightful comparisons being made between the three youths and there were some incisive judgements about the treatment of the Nurse. Rather too many answers, however, dealt with Mercutio alone and simply described what he said. There was similarly a sharp differentiation in the quality of answers to **Question 44**. Some really had nothing to say beyond noting that there was a feud and then in some cases writing their essay on Fate. Conversely, others really probed in detail the hothouse atmosphere which the dramatist creates in his setting, even looking at such things as arranged marriages. As expected, there was a large take up of **Question 45** and Examiners found some seriously good lyrical Romeos in their reading. However, again a number paid little thought to what he might be thinking at this particular moment and just produced a generalised gushing stream of consciousness. At the other end of the spectrum others had him thinking prosaically about what he might wear at the ceremony.

Questions 46 – 49

Though not as popular as the other Shakespeare play, in some ways the work on *Twelfth Night* was less variable in quality. The extract provoked some very sharp and insightful judgements, in which for once the comic perspective was given its due rather than everything being reduced to a simplistic moral judgement. **Question 47** proved a rather more difficult nut to crack and was not widely attempted. Whilst there was some interesting argument, most candidates tended to be cautious about engaging fully with the challenge of the task. On the other hand, there were some splendidly spirited assumptions of Sir Andrew for **Question 49**. Obviously this rather gentle fool touched a chord in many and few had him breathing uncharacteristic fire and fury.

Questions 49 – 51

An Ideal Husband presented problems to a proportion of candidates, especially when they tried to handle the opening of the play. Some simply could not get beyond what they thought was the snobbery of the people. Clearly Wilde's wit would seem to go over such candidates' heads. More surprising was the inability to respond to the issues of the play as invited to in **Question 50**, though there were some secure and insightful answers probing the corruption at the heart of the plot. Those who did **Question 51** seemed much more confident in capturing Sir Robert's situation and tone of voice and the best answers on this text were usually to be found here.

Paper 0486/02

Coursework

General comments

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

In the great majority of cases, they will see that the Moderators' view of the work presented and of the administration has been very positive, as in past recent sessions. The range of texts offered by the candidates was within some Centres impressive (and overall across all Centres there was an impressive roll call of world literature in English being responded to). Some response to last year's complaint about the lack of variety of texts and tasks was evident.

However, whilst the range appeared wide, in fact in quantity it was heavily dependent on a few titles which were commonly found on examination set texts lists. There must also be some concern about the quality of the reading in some Centres, who seem to be offering evidence of a candidate reading simply one novel, one play, one poem and a short story. Some thought must be given in future whether this is a satisfactory response to a component which is designed to encourage wider reading.

In regard to the nature of the tasks set, many Centres saw the need to create questions which provided the candidate with a sharp focus and required engagement with the text as literature, in other words engagement with literary language. However, this approach remains far from universal and too many candidates are in effect being penalised by being set tasks which make it difficult to fulfil all the assessment criteria. Most commonly, the candidate is simply invited to write a review of a novel or play or to compare two poems. It is important that candidates do not get trapped into writing large stretches of narrative and exposition of content.

However, the most notable problem in respect of task setting this year arose from the increasing popularity of the empathic task (welcomed as that is). Such tasks do require a great deal of thought in their formulation. An empathic task must not encourage the candidate to move away from the author's created world into one invented by the candidate. As in all literary tasks, the candidate must show by some route knowledge of the text. The empathic task is simply another way to that end and, whilst it sets out to encourage a degree of imaginative invention, that invention must arise out of what is at least implicit in the author's created world. It is also a route that can rarely reveal a candidate's response to the detail of a *poem's* language. Hence empathic work is probably best avoided as inappropriate at this level for engaging with poetry. In addition tasks which ask the candidate to re-write the end of a text positively encourage a bypassing of the writer's intentions. If there is a wish to focus on the end of a novel or play, then some texts encourage the reader to think about the future beyond the end of the action and most are responsive to an imaginative task which has a character in the text reflecting on what has happened. Here the candidate has to think what would be apt for the thoughts and voice of such a character.

In regards to the basics of administration and assessment, the comments were largely positive. A minority of Centres' marks were scaled (usually lightly) up and down to bring them into line with the standard, but there was very rarely any problem with agreeing the order of merit. Moderators reported continuing general satisfaction with the presentation of the folders and the documents which are required with them. It is now usual for the Moderator to receive helpful comment set out in the terms of the assessment criteria on the student record card, referring to the qualities of the folder rather than to the candidate's personal characteristics as a student. Most remember how important it is for the External Moderator to find in the packet a copy of the mark sheet together with the summary form which shows the marks before and after internal moderation.

In just a few Centres little care seems to be taken in the administration despite the strictures of the previous year's report. It is important that all work bears evidence of having been read by the teacher, if there is no validation of the work according to the stringent requirements laid down by CIE, CIE would be within its rights to refuse to accept the marks for the component.

Paper 0486/03

Alternative to Coursework

General comments

Candidates generally found the extract from Susan Hill's story, *The Albatross*, accessible and also very powerful. They had little difficulty in identifying many different ways by which she built up suspense. There were so many "ways", indeed, that candidates had to be very selective, and the Examiners found that often it was the quality of the selection of detail that determined the success of the answer. The Examiners were pleasantly surprised by the perceptiveness of many candidates who understood that the vividness of the imagery of the latter part of the extract reflected the emotional frailty of its central character, Duncan. Some of the most perceptive said that while the language and imagery were "hyperbolic" or "exaggerated", they still affected the reader's experience of the incipient storm and built up suspense. This recognition of the interplay between imagination and reality was extraordinarily mature, and yet not uncommon.

Other candidates, who selected their material at a more straightforward level, however, provided worthwhile answers. It was good to see how many candidates responded to the words, “build” in the question. They commented on the quiet start, reflecting that, even in the first sentence, there was a progression between the contrasting words, “softly” to “hard”. They saw the sense of quietness before the storm began to take hold, depicted through the desertion of the town. Many also commented on the increasing violence of the imagery. There were excellent responses to the depiction of the behaviour of the animals, one or two specially able candidates finding literary precedents for this.

What Examiners found especially reassuring, this year, was that there were so few narrative answers or paraphrases. When candidates do, in effect, retell the story, there is little that can be done to reward them except to search for some awareness of the question in the way they have shaped their narrative. Such dispiriting differentiation has been, in the past, a major part of the Examiner’s task, but, happily, it appears from this year’s experience, that candidates are now responding rather more directly and analytically to the set questions.

However, a widespread feature of the answers of weaker candidates, this year, was the inclusion of lists. Examiners suspected that a significant minority had entered the examination room with a preconceived agenda, which they intended to apply to the prose or poetry, whatever its content. Such candidates, typically, identified features like personification, lexical fields and alliteration, with little but the most fundamental commentary on why they were effective. In short, they identified rather than *explored* as the question requested. The drawbacks of such an approach are clear. In such cases, for example, candidates aridly identified personification in the clause, “The sea was racing” but, having completed this item in their agenda, saw no further need to comment on the vividly monstrous incarnation of the sea in Duncan’s imagination, “tearing the bricks up like roots of a tooth, sucking the whole street up inside itself”. “Lexical fields”, for such candidates, often meant the inclusion of lengthy lists of almost randomly selected words, mostly wrenched out of context and consequently deprived of much significance. The search for alliteration was almost bound to be successful, but few of these candidates distinguished between the instances where the effect of the device was significant, perhaps in the case of the phrase, “fur flying” and where it was incidental, even accidental, as perhaps in the phrase, “went weak”. There was a fundamental difference between this mechanical approach and that of those who first read the passage sensitively, experienced the piece as a whole, considered its *unique* qualities and only then worked back to explore the details of how the writer had achieved this.

The contrast in approach was most evident in candidates’ commentary on the similes in the passage. The weaker candidates had to wait only until the third line before they found the simile, “dense as stone”. Of course, it was worth identifying. Some developed a good commentary on it as well. Those who had come with a specific agenda, however, could now sit back – they had done their job of identifying a simile and could search on for other features. Stronger candidates, however, responded to it, but they proceeded to devote more of their attention to the similes which were the product of Duncan’s fevered imagination. They may not have even mentioned the term, “simile”, but they noticed how the increasing intensity of the images reflected the way Duncan’s fears fed on themselves, the childishness of some of the imaginings, their “apocalyptic” nature (a word used by a number of candidates) and the oblique references to death. Some hesitantly, but sensitively, responded to the structures and rhythms of these sentences, noting the repetition of “and”, as Susan Hill depicted the nightmarish images accumulating in Duncan’s mind.

Examiners are delighted to report that these constituted the majority of candidates, this year, and they treasured each individual insight into how Susan Hill had managed to move her readers so powerfully, knowing that such appreciation comes from many months, or years, of development of close, personal response to many different pieces of literature, which cannot possibly be replicated by following a hastily acquired, all-purpose agenda.