

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 2010/01

Paper 1

General comments

There was a great deal of work at all levels which was refreshingly lively. It is, perhaps, as well to remember how important pleasure should be in this area of the curriculum.

In the Poetry Section *Touched with Fire* was the most popular. There was a limited amount of work on the Coleridge selection and *Poems Deep and Dangerous*. In the Prose Section Desai featured prominently, perhaps because of the novel's comparative brevity and straightforwardness. However, as was suggested last year, this was not always a simple advantage to candidates. Certainly, there was much rewarding and accurate work at all levels on this novel but occasionally Examiners wondered whether able candidates found it a struggle to signal their superior qualities of insight. The work, and not just at the higher levels, which tends to stick in Examiners' minds more often comes from more complex texts and this was the case in this year's examinations. Certainly the stimulation afforded by Dickens, Greene, to name but two, was often evident in the responses. There was not as yet much work on *The Siege* but what there was boded well for the future. Again, as last year there was no overwhelmingly popular drama text. Examiners met a lot of work on *Macbeth*, some of it very good indeed but Williams and Shaw also featured strongly and it was not unusual to come across engaged work on the Ayckbourn and the Lochhead/Moxley duo.

As always, it is difficult to assign blame in those few areas where the resulting work was rather disappointing. Last year there was some discussion regarding candidates who interpreted *moving* in its most literal sense. There was little evidence of that this year, perhaps because the word was linked in the task with another word which made the intention clear. Some problems, as ever, could be blamed on plain misreading. It was really difficult to see why a number of candidates in **Question 14** chose to centre their answers on Pip's personality after his receiving money, unless, of course, they were keen to re-work a class essay and couldn't think of much to say about the early part of the novel.

However, most candidates had clearly read their texts with attention, most attended to the question and attempted to answer it in a direct fashion. Following on from what was said last year, it was noticeable this year that fewer candidates wasted time with long empty introductions which did little more than simply repeat at length the things the question asked them to consider. Perhaps the chosen extracts this year were particularly enticing, but whatever the reason Examiners noted that the starred questions were the most popular choice. Quite often they were done impressively. Gone are the days when candidates seemed to think that the extract was merely the peg upon which to hang the semi-prepared essay on the whole text. The ability to tease out of the extract significant detail is now quite widespread, and many candidates showed at least the desire to engage with the language and to analyse how it creates its effects. As regards the more discursive tasks, there was plenty of evidence of the capacity to argue a point as most of these tasks required. It was, for example, quite rare to find an answer to **Question 38** which simply gave a character sketch of Lady Macbeth. There were some outstanding empathic answers this year as well and very few which failed to convey appropriate things for the character to say. Of course, in this kind of task one is rather dependent upon the power of the original writing. There was much competent work, for instance, on the father in **Question 12** and on GaoLing in **Question 26**, but Examiners thought some assumptions of Aunt Augusta, the hitchhiker and Dick Dudgeon reached another plane altogether and were a joy to read.

Of course, Examiners saw some work of much more limited scope. If one has to pick out an area of particular problems, then once again it has to be in the genre of poetry. Of course, there was a great deal of good work in this genre, probably more than in recent years, but it was a sharp differentiator and there were a significant number of Centres where the poorest mark on the script was consistently for the poetry essay. As has already been suggested, perhaps this year there were one or two poems whose meanings were simply too allusive for some candidates to pick up. Certainly, these poems proved disastrous choices for those who had not studied them in any detail. Some candidates seemed to be labouring under the delusion that because a poem was on the exam paper and was short something could be made of it there and then

in the exam room without previous study. Conversely, where poems had clearly been studied, poems were often handled with confidence. This was the first year, for instance, where Examiner 1 saw a tranche of good work on *To His Coy Mistress*.

Other problems surfaced in regard to the way poetry was approached. In some Centres, paraphrase with analysis is still the preferred way to deal with a poem and in addition it still needs to be emphasised that the noting of poetic devices and the simple assertion of their power gains little reward. Candidates are expected to show how the words cast their spell. At the other end of the spectrum, just occasionally Examiners came across work in all genres where the drive to write about features of the language became so extreme that the candidates saw no need to expound the basic meanings of the text. Hence the Examiner could find no evidence that the authorial purposes had been understood by the candidate. This approach could also be found in the other genres. One Examiner came across work in which candidates seemed more concerned about noting what they had been told were semantic fields than engaging with literature. Literary terminology can be a useful tool but it can also be a bad master.

Being hugely popular, responses to the passage-based questions were an accurate reflection of the ability range. It follows that Examiners met familiar patterns of failure. As usual, most common of these was inattention to the detail of the extract. However, the great majority now do recognise that to centre the answer on the extract is a major imperative. As was said last year, the problem now is to get the balance right between this and showing awareness of the context in which the passage occurs. There is no magic formula for arrival at this balance since the context is more important to the understanding of some extracts than to others. In **Questions 28 and 31**, for instance, it could not be of much importance. Conversely, in **Questions 13,16,19,25 and 37 and 40** a placing of the passage in its context was crucial for a proper understanding and rather often this was not forthcoming.

Given the popularity of the passage-based tasks, it might be asked whether sometimes this was a choice from weakness rather than strength in that a number of candidates were not very well equipped to cope with more discursive questions or, perhaps more pertinently, did not know enough about material which were not at the absolute centre of the text. Hence, questions which required candidates first of all to show knowledge of the text by choosing a part of the text relevant to the task were often avoided, as were those on supposedly minor characters. As a consequence, the rich opportunities for lively writing on characters such as Pumblechook and Burgoyne were largely eschewed.

Drama is still being treated by some candidates as something that is read like prose fiction. Hence, questions which require some imaginative engagement with stage spectacle tend to perplex candidates. One realises that the chance to see drama in the flesh is very limited but these days video and DVD offer in some instances an alternative, as does deliberate encouragement of candidates to visualise what is happening on the stage. The most extreme and bizarre example of the failure to do this is found in the way some candidates think stage directions work. There were rather too many candidates who think that copying out what a playwright indicates to the actors about a character is answering a question which requires the candidate to explore the character through action and dialogue, in other words as the audience sees that character on the stage. There are even a few who write about stage directions as if they are part of the dramatic experience of the audience and hence proceed to explore them as a piece of prose writing in a novel.

Other familiar difficulties continue to be noted by Examiners. Whilst it is now quite rare for a candidate to pay no attention to the question, some candidates simply did not pay sufficient attention to the exact wording of the task. **Question 14** has already been mentioned but there were others. *Ode to Autumn* was sometimes written about without any reference to *joy and pleasure*; sometimes no attempt was made to explore the *complexity* of the mother/daughter relationship in **Question 26**; occasionally in the Greene tasks no attention was given to the need to explore the humour of the novel. Just occasionally in the empathic tasks, Examiners encountered flights of fancy quite unconnected with anything that the text suggested was possible. As has been said, some characters presented problems of voice which were more difficult to solve than others. Examiners could be charitable towards that but such charity was hardly appropriate for answers which suggested, for instance, a Duncan deeply suspicious of Macbeth or a Dick Dudgeon pondering on what his love life with Judith might have been were he not about to be hung.

There were relatively few rubric infringements this session.

Comments on specific questions

POETRY

Coleridge

Only a few Centres offered these poems. Those that did produced work which was quite often of high quality. Clearly the candidates for the most part relished the imaginative possibilities which Coleridge's poetic world offered them. In the main they responded to the fanciful mysteries of all three poems featured with work that was detailed and insightful. Occasionally, though, imposition of 'meanings' tended to inhibit exploration of the varied possibilities of the poetic language.

Poems Deep and Dangerous

Again, very few candidates offered this anthology. In the few answers seen there was very little attempt to probe the nature of the poet's memories of his parents and very little understanding of the detail. For example, the mother's photograph was not taken at her wedding. Where the poem had been prepared, there was some more successful probing of the poem's possibilities, particularly the way the image of the son unites the two photographs. In **Question 5**, again, the precise background of the Larkin eluded many. The Soyinka was done more successfully, though Examiners noted how many candidates became so righteous about the racism in the poem that they missed Soyinka's rueful humour completely. Those who essayed the Keats, however, often did so with conspicuous success, bringing out the poem's bleak mysteries very well. Most who answered **Question 6** wrote about *Bogymán* but, as in past years, Examiners found understanding sometimes limited. In this question the ending of the poem was a crucial element and was often barely grasped or simply ignored. There was very rarely any real response to the poetry.

Touched with Fire

Most Examiners found that the Marvell poem had been well prepared and few answers did not have some basic understanding of the poem's point. Of course, an engagement with the progress of the imagery and the change of tone as the poem progresses was only communicated by the more able. There was also quite a lot of evidence of engagement in **Questions 8** and **9**. In the former, the Frost proved difficult for a number but not apparently for others. There was some delicate enjoyment of the Keats and of the Thomas. **Question 9** was usually done at least competently but often candidates ignored the word *powerfully* in the question and were content just to elucidate the poem's argument. This was particularly the case in regard to the McNeice. Surprisingly, despite the explicit phrasing of the question the point of Betjeman's satire was sometimes not made clear. Some managed to suggest that he was criticising rodents and even those who did make the link with humans explicit failed to see that the 'voice' of the poem was being satirised as well. Sadly, few relished the poem's wit. Some, misreading *the voice of my education*, thought that the protagonist of *Snake* was a child.

PROSE

Village by the Sea

A majority did **Question 10** and there were few who did it less than competently. Most were able to pinpoint examples of the De Silvas' good works. However, very often important details escaped the broad brush approach. Many saw no difference in personality between husband and wife. The responses to **Question 11** were in the main competent but Examiners found little of real insight. For instance, it was noticeable that most were content to write more about the difficulties than the happiness of the family. There were a significant number of empathic answers. Perhaps this was because appropriate content was hardly difficult to create. However, the father's voice proved more elusive and this may have slightly limited the range of reward.

Great Expectations

Question 13 was the popular choice and proved to be a good discriminator. There was much evidence of a good knowledge of the context, though occasionally a candidate would seem to think that Magwitch had stolen the pie. Quite a few candidates were able to engage with the language to an impressive degree, probing the dramatic power of, for instance, the final part of the extract. **Question 14** was not quite so well done. As has already been said, some did not seem to think that they had to write in any detail about the early part of the novel. A number did so very well, however, bringing out some of the most memorable features of Pip's unhappiness. There were also, though, perceptive accounts of the moments of pleasure and comparative innocence, in which candidates drew pertinent parallels with the world Pip would later enter. Surprisingly, given the rich possibilities of Pumblechook's personality, few attempted **Question 15**. However, those that did rarely failed to create something that was recognisably the character, whilst a few had him down to the last syllable.

The Siege

Very few answers were seen on this text. **Question 16** was a good example of an extract task which required an understanding of the context. Those who recognised that this was before the siege, of course, recognised the real poignancy of this moment. Times are hard but much worse is to come did Anna but know it. A number of answers were able to make much of the writing in this context. Not so, alas, those who did not know the novel well enough.

Question 17 did not demand such intimate knowledge of detail and hence the answers were more uniformly competent, though too many ignored the ways by which Dunmore makes Anna *memorable*. Most candidates who attempted an assumption of Pavlov at least knew what constituted apt material and some captured quite convincingly the voice of this apparatchik. Others gave him much too much emotion.

Travels with My Aunt

The responses to the extract were very variable. Some engaged well with what made the passage amusing and elucidated its importance in the development of Henry and Augusta's relationship. However, quite a few did not seem to realise what had been her profession and that Augusta was actually Henry's mother, hence quite missing the piquancy of the moment. Some also virtually ignored the opening part of the extract and thus again missed a crucial part of the reason for Augusta's outburst. **Question 20** had few takers but the empathic task was popular and often well done. Here again, though, there was the suspicion that some thought Augusta was Henry's Aunt.

The Getting of Wisdom

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

The Bonesetter's Daughter

Most candidates in **Question 25**, the most popular of the tasks, managed to pick out some features from the extract which were generally relevant to Ruth's personality in the novel. Some, though, simply thought Ruth to be busy and did not seem to see her obsessive need to get her life under control. This task over the years required fairly delicate balancing between extract and novel and some managed this very well. However, others simply used the extract as an excuse to move at length into the rest of the novel. Even some of those who made the extract their chief focus left out important things in it. Art, for instance, and even LuLing were sometimes ignored. In **Question 26** the choice of incident was overwhelmingly and appropriately that which caused LuLing's attempted suicide, though the playground incident also featured. Examiners also allowed the incident which caused the death of Precious Auntie, though, of course at that time LuLing did not know who was her true mother. The weakness of some answers was that they did not bring out the complexity of the relationship in detail, being simply content to describe the incident. In **Question 27** most of the assumptions competently hit upon apt material of an up-beat nature, the escape from China and her husband figuring prominently. However, some made it rather too much so, ignoring such things as GaoLing's possible feelings of guilt concerning her sister and her concerns for Miss Grutoff.

Into the Wind

Again the great majority did the extract task and often did it well. Most candidates recognised the imperative of engaging with the detail of the writing and attempted to do just that. Quite a few were very good at tracing how minor details develop the tension until there is a real sense of general menace. The obverse of this were candidates who simply mentioned the emerging racial aspect of the scene and left it at that. As always with this kind of task, Examiners were asked to see menace in rather unlikely things, such as the bittersweet characteristics of lemons. **Question 29** was much less popular but candidates had no difficulty in finding appropriate stories about which to write and bring out the drama of change, though, perhaps because of the task's nature, some candidates found it difficult to avoid extensive narration. There were a few astounding assumptions of the hitchhiker which to Examiners' delight captured all of the man's perky outrageousness. Conversely, some showed that candidates had the shakiest knowledge of the story, for instance creating a personality who was both apprehensive and apologetic for what he had done.

DRAMA

The Shakespeare plays were by far the most popular from this section.

Absent Friends

In **Question 31** some candidates responded in a lively manner to the irony at work and reacted well to the differences already apparent between Diana and Evelyn. Others, however, became locked into a description of the setting or writing about the scene completely from hindsight and hence really ignoring the way the playwright goes to work on his audience. **Question 32** was not popular and, whilst some showed again a good grasp of how a scene gained dramatically from the audience's superior knowledge, too many were vague and discursive. **Question 33** was better done, quite a few capturing John's fidgety personality and his priorities in life, like his thinking he has just brought off the most fantastic deal. However, others showed minimal grasp of detail by having him, for instance, looking forward with eager anticipation to the party.

Cuba and Doghouse

Question 36 was sometimes done with passion. Candidates clearly identified strongly with this boy's sense of outrage at the abuse which had been visited upon the family. Some of the best answers had a splendid streak of quite adult sardonic dismissal of father and dog, whilst also preserving a sense of the vulnerability of the young person. The other questions were not quite so well done. It would appear that once candidates are asked to move away from the central relationship in *Cuba*, they begin to struggle. **Question 34** was approached more often as something to be read rather than viewed, with little attempt to imagine how such things as the opening spectacle might work upon an audience, and in **Question 35** it was noticeable that those who used *Doghouse* found it easier to focus on relevant material and often did so with much more encouraging results than in the companion play.

Macbeth

All the questions had a significant number of answers. The extract task saw some penetrating exploration of Macbeth's state of mind, bringing out well his rapid mood swings and even occasionally looking in detail at the dramatic power of the verse. However, sometimes there was a sense of mild disappointment at the limited scope of the answers from some Centres. These often failed to place Macbeth in any kind of context, to see how Shakespeare clearly wishes his audience to relate the soliloquy to the Macbeth of previous times. They often completely missed the sense of desperation evident even at the beginning of the extract and some also misread his reaction to the death of his wife. The standard of responses to **Question 38** was less variable. The great majority pleasingly addressed the parameters of the question directly and most were able to give some account of her monstrous qualities with support. They struggled rather more when it came to suggesting her wifely qualities, being content to give her a pat on the back for sticking by Macbeth after the murder, without quite asking themselves what would have been the alternative at such a juncture. The best candidates tended to be those who saw how the alternatives were often sides of the same coin, that what made her monstrous at times also suggested the ends to which she was prepared to go for her husband and what damage that in the end did to her. The empathic task was well done in the main. The material was usually apt and most captured with some irony Duncan's trusting nature and his euphoria at the performance of his 'loyal' kinsman. However, not even Duncan would have entered Inverness with the suspicions some candidates gave him.

Twelfth Night

There were some pleasing responses to **Question 40**. Most candidates showed sympathy for both Viola and Olivia in this impossible situation: Olivia in love with an illusion and Viola, unable to reveal her identity and bound to Orsino through love and duty. Better answers not only responded to the power of the situation but also commented on the incident as a turning point in the action and as a central moment in the exploration of the theme of appearance and reality. It was good to see that most candidates focused closely on the words and did not digress into irrelevant narrative, but more analysis of the language would have enhanced many answers. For **Question 41** most candidates were able to comment on the dramatic function of Sir Toby and his friends in terms of offering light relief to the audience, and answers were discriminated by the extent to which they commented on the effectiveness of the contrast between the scenes of low life and those of rather high-flown romance. There was also opportunity for comment on the chaos created by these characters and on the significance of the Malvolio sub-plot, in introducing a blacker note to the general optimism of the play. Better answers showed the contribution of the characters to the theme of appearance and reality. Some made the interesting point that Sir Toby is on a level socially with Orsino and Olivia and offers a bridge between the classes. Answers to **Question 42** ranged from uncontrolled gushes of pure emotion, to thoughtful and sensitive recreations of the character. The best were able to integrate echoes of Orsino's actual words into the voice and provided convincing explanations for his behaviour and of his reactions to his new friend, Cesario.

The Devil's Disciple

Candidates performed rather variably on this play. The extract question was usually done with some efficiency, occasionally rather better than that. Answers tended, though, to concentrate on Mrs Dudgeon and quite often just reduced her to a nasty, bitter old woman for whom no-one could have any sympathy. A few totally misread Anderson, accepting the truth of Mrs Dudgeon's judgement and seeing him as an aggressive hypocrite. **Question 41** was rarely attempted and only a few seemed able to relish Burgoyne's wit. Some candidates seemed to think that stage directions could do their work for them. In **Question 42**, quite a few made a good attempt to capture Dick's character, conveying quite well his mixture of insouciance and passion. Others, though, invested him with a love for Judith or a degree of breast-beating quite foreign to the character.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Examiners found much commendable work on this play. Many read a significant number of answers which indicated considerable engagement with the characters and the issues as well as the ability to write confidently about Williams's skill as a playwright. This was particularly in evidence in **Question 43** where many managed to probe the language Blanche uses to describe Stanley, the tension created by the audience's awareness that it is all being overheard, and the significance of music and train. Weaker answers, however, often almost ignored Blanche's speech, did not seem to realise that Stanley was listening and tended to drift away to generalities about the dramatic action as a whole outside the extract. In **Question 44** there was a great deal of insight shown into the relationship Stella had with Stanley. Some managed to probe its complex contradictions very well indeed, with detailed support from moments in the

play. Conversely, in some instances the task became converted into more a character sketch of Mitch. In others a few candidates failed to confront in any way the central role that sex played in the play. Examiners were pleased with the quality of the answers to the empathic task. One or two expected surprise that this was so in regard to the character of Mitch who is perhaps not one of the most interesting or memorable characters in the play. However, perhaps it is a tribute to the playwright that so many were able to make something of Mitch's innocence and essential decency.