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FOREWORD

This booklet contains reports written by Examiners on the work of candidates in certain papers. **Its contents are primarily for the information of the subject teachers concerned.**

LITERATURE (ENGLISH)

GCE Ordinary Level

Paper 2010/01

Paper 1

General comments

Unlike last year, most of the texts were taken up in reasonable quantities. Of course, there were popular choices. The great majority of candidates wrote on the poems from *Touched with Fire* and in **Drama** many answered on *All My Sons*. In regard to the **Prose**, there was no significantly popular choice, though the Desai novel and the Short Story selection were met with very frequently.

The questions on the paper seemed on the whole to be accessible to the great majority of candidates. This is not to say that during the marking period problems did not emerge.

A minority of candidates continue to read the question without sufficient care. **Question 9** gave rise to a good example of this. The candidates were directed to consider how the poets used 'simple direct language' to good effect. It may be that this was rather more challenging a task than it appeared to be but what was most noticeable was how regularly candidates did not even bother to *consider* the proposition. They simply saw a poem they thought they could write about and duly did so. It may be remembered that some years ago, because so many candidates chose to write about their favourite and often wildly inappropriate poem, when given a free choice of poems to link to a task, it was decided to specify poems for tasks. Now the problem is that some candidates see the poem they want to write about and do not seem to consider whether they can really answer the *question*.

The failure to consider the implication of every word in the question is not confined to the poetry section. Key nouns, adverbs and adjectives were quite regularly ignored elsewhere. Perhaps some candidates need to have teachers reinforce just how important these words can be, particularly if the candidates expect high reward. They are often intended to stimulate personal engagement. In most tasks words like *memorable*, *amusing*, *vivid*, *wonder* give the candidate the opportunity to explore the excitement and the power of the writing. Correspondingly, the failure to take that opportunity will inevitably mean a restriction in the reward which can be given.

However, despite the occasional disappointment in the work produced for some questions, the general response of Examiners was positive. Indeed, quite a number thought that the performance of candidates was continuing to improve. Many encountered little poor work and some were very enthusiastic about what they had marked. What particularly impressed them was the apparent commitment communicated by most of what they read. In most instances there was clear evidence that the text had been studied with some seriousness, and at times the detailed knowledge shown was impressive. Despite the strictures above, the great majority of candidates at least attempted to answer the question directly with appropriate detailed support for the argument pursued. Even better, there were quite a number of candidates who seemed, where appropriate, to take it as quite natural to argue a case rather than to simply explain and describe. It was reassuring to find that many candidates have their own ideas and are prepared to support them with vigour from the text. This is a tribute not only to them but also to their teachers for giving them the encouragement to think with some independence of mind. Perhaps, this approach is signalled most clearly by the numbers who now gravitate towards the empathic tasks. Whilst this is not an unqualified route to improvement (see below), it remains true to say that at all levels of ability Examiners met work on empathic tasks which was more lively and of a higher level of insight than the essay or passage-based answers on the script.

It is worth highlighting several matters of particular concern raised by Examiners.

The first of these has to do with the approach to literary language. After years of underlining the importance of candidates engaging at some level with the way writers convey their thoughts, a preponderance of answers now show that candidates realise there is some requirement for them to look at how words work. However, there is still some way to go before the majority of candidates manage to do more than describe and assert rather than really probe the expressive power of a phrase. Some will never be able to do this but Examiners are still being faced with self-evidently able candidates simply noting a figure of speech or commending a passage for its power. It is only the next step which brings reward.

Another area has also been highlighted in the past, and that concerns the structuring of an essay. It may be a virtue in certain disciplines to encourage candidates to write introductions and summaries. However, in a literature examination nothing is gained by setting out the question which you have to answer in a lengthy preamble and then by way of summary simply repeating material at the end of the essay. In addition, what is the point of neatly writing out the question and underlining it? If it were true that the rest of the answer always suggested that a candidate was spending as much time as possible putting off the moment when it had to be revealed how little of the text was understood, then it would be explicable. Unhappily, this was often not the case and the Examiner was faced with quite able candidates wasting precious time. In a sentence, candidates should be encouraged to move without general preamble to considering the substance of the task.

Thirdly, as was the case last year, it is necessary to utter a word of caution over empathic tasks. Some candidates did seem to think it an easy option which did not entail having close knowledge of the detail of the text. On the contrary, whilst quotations may be and indeed are usually inappropriate, everything given to the character to utter will reveal very clearly just what the candidate knows about the detail of the text. Also, whilst a candidate of limited linguistic ability may still do better work than when attempting a traditional task, for the high reward which goes to a candidate who is able to assume a convincing voice some linguistic skill will be required.

Lastly, a footnote and one that it is pleasing to say is a footnote. It is pleasing to report that there were few rubric infringements which, considering their frequency some years ago, is an illustration of just how well this syllabus is taught.

There follow more detailed comments upon the candidates' responses to individual questions.

Comments on specific questions

Poetry

Questions 1 – 3 – *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*

Most Examiners saw no work on this selection and what was seen did not seem to inspire much enthusiasm. There was occasionally an attempt to grapple with language and its effect but too often the response featured spasmodic reference to the text with little real grasp of how language works and little overview developed. This was most evident in **Question 2**.

Questions 4 – 6 – *'Poems Deep and Dangerous'*

More offered work on this anthology than on the Coleridge but it was not substantial nor was it much more encouraging. It was clear that most candidates found the poems difficult. In regard to *Ars Poetica* few could proceed beyond a de-coding of the poem and in **Question 5** most were quite unable to grapple with concepts of originality and unusualness, simply writing down what they liked about the poem. In **Question 6** there was better work, in that most, though certainly not all, at least grasped the basic points of each poem. However, once again most could not proceed further and engage with language. The Soyinka poem suffered most through a failure to grasp its ironies.

Questions 7 – 9 – ‘Touched With Fire’

This was by far the most popular anthology and there was correspondingly a much more encouraging quality of work seen. Examiners wrote of the occasional superb answer on *Horses* and generally there seemed to be satisfaction with the level of understanding in regard to this poem and the response to the detail of its poetic language. The main problem was that quite a few candidates did not bring out the time lapse or at times even seem aware there was such a shift at the centre of the poem. Again, the work on **Question 8** could be impressive. There were some notable examples of imaginative insight into the *wonder* of all three poems, particularly in the case of the Soyinka and the Lawrence. The Thomas proved more difficult but even here there was work which showed the candidates to be completely unfazed by, indeed to be relishing, the torrent of words. Ironically, it would appear that candidates can find it easier to deal with verbal fireworks than to engage with powerfully direct language as was required by **Question 9**. There were notable exceptions to this, both in response to the Heaney and the Jennings poems, where candidates explored the way the accurate matter-of-fact description in each poem made the poignancy of what was described all the more powerful. Unfortunately, too many solved the problem by ignoring the question.

Prose**Questions 10 – 12 – ‘Twentieth Century Short Stories’**

There was some very strong work on these short stories and not very much that was less than competent. The Forster passage was worked over quite often with some real grasp of the irony at work and how that mediated the author’s hatred for certain ‘modern’ tendencies. The less able usually conveyed some understanding of the thrust of the passage but were limited in the detailed support they offered, whilst also making little attempt to probe authorial means. Again, there were some impressive answers on the Lawrence, revealing the complexity of the possible reactions to Elizabeth Bates. However, despite having a task which deliberately hinted at the possibility of there being sympathy for Walter, many seemed unaware of the implications of the story’s ending and the way it reveals Elizabeth’s sudden understanding of how much she had contributed to the unhappiness of the marriage. Overall, the empathic task was the least successfully tackled task on this selection, which did not mean that there was not some very good work. Indeed, one Examiner described some answers as a delight. However, for many the Aunt’s voice proved curiously elusive and there were a number of assumptions which were very unconvincing. Can one really believe that Saki’s *soi-disant Aunt* would have a crisis of conscience after the events of the day? In some cases it was clear that the candidate had little knowledge of the detail of the story, thinking, for example, that the Aunt had herself been to Jagborough Sands.

Questions 13 – 15 – ‘The Village by the Sea’

There was considerable approval of the work on this novel. Few were unable to place the de Silvas in some sensible context and a number penetrated to the details by which Desai signalled the impact their arrival had on the village and the assumptions they brought with them. **Question 14** presented more of a challenge, which was not always taken up fully. Most answers showed some knowledge of the circumstances of his departure but rather too many simplified it into a wise and premeditated move for the good of the family. Likewise, in **Question 15** most had quite a good grasp of the matters which would be foremost in Lila’s mind, but only a few touched on her possibly equivocal feelings about Hari’s leaving her to face these difficulties. In addition most struggled to find a distinctive voice for the girl.

Questions 16 – 18 – ‘Great Expectations’

The work on this novel was variable. One or two Examiners found some superb answers on all three questions but others found some shortcomings. This was particularly so on the extract task. The majority had some idea about Dickens’s satire of this kind of ‘school’ but sadly, whilst most noted the chaos, only a few were really able to tackle the hilarity of it all. Likewise, in **Question 17** most performed competently in laying out the reasons to despise Pip but few saw that Dickens also created a dimension which encouraged pity as well. The same range was found in the empathic task, a few entering into creating Magwitch’s thoughts and voice with gusto but the majority having only a rather general grasp of what might be apt.

Questions 19 – 21 – ‘Travels with my Aunt’

Most Examiners noted how commendable the work was on this text. They remarked upon the enjoyment of the book and its humour surfacing in all three tasks. Many candidates had clearly found Aunt Augusta a hugely diverting character and this showed in their answers. Here the word ‘memorable’ was very often placed at the centre of the answer. Though in the extract task most candidates were able to point to significant aspects of Henry Pulling’s conduct, rather fewer were able to engage with the amusement afforded by it. The empathic task was not attempted by many. Perhaps they found the prospect of trying to catch Wordsworth’s very characteristic tones rather too daunting. However, Examiners did find some who were notably successful in doing so.

Questions 22 – 24 – ‘Fiela’s Child’

General approval seemed to characterise most Examiners’ reports on candidates’ work here. The passage-based question was the most popular. Most candidates seemed to find the extract stimulating to write upon and a satisfying number were able to respond to its power. Some, though, were very selective in their use of detail and missed crucial moments. It was also not uncommon for candidates to completely ignore the requirement to respond to the passage’s poignancy. In **Question 23** quite a number chose wisely and there were some insightful comments about Barta in particular. The few who attempted the empathic task at least understood the issues involved, even if they did not always manage to convey much of Nina’s vulnerable and fiery personality.

Questions 25 – 27 – ‘The Getting of Wisdom’

Far too few answers were seen for any appropriate general judgements to be made.

Questions 28 – 30 – ‘The Bonesetter’s Daughter’

Only a limited number of answers were seen on this novel and the general level of achievement seemed to be rather modest. Most candidates showed knowledge of the text in both the extract and essay question but often could not proceed much beyond extensive narrative, whilst the few who attempted the empathic question were often efficient as far as content was concerned but struggled to find Auntie Gal’s voice.

Drama

Questions 31 – 33 – ‘Absent Friends’

Examiners’ reports on this quite popular text showed some divergence, depending no doubt on the Centres which appeared in their apportionment. The divergence seemed to hinge on the degree to which candidates engaged with the play as a comedy. Some showed much appreciation of the way Ayckbourn in the extract portrays the mounting chaos, whilst others just described it. The divergence was less obvious in **Question 32**, possibly because the task encouraged some review of the ‘serious’ issues of the play. However, even here, it was noticeable that some simply could not engage with notions of irony. In the empathic task there were generally some accurate assessments of what Paul would be thinking but with some the tone adopted was very dubious, completely missing the man’s profoundly unpleasant self-centredness.

Questions 34 – 36 – ‘Cuba’ and ‘Dog House’

There was a limited take up of this play and a wide range of achievement. There was some competent work on the extract itemising the nature of the relationship, although most showed little response to the humour in the writing. In **Question 35** most candidates made sensible points but the choice of adults tended to be very selective rather than wide ranging. Some of the best answers were to be found in responses to the empathic task. Clearly candidates identified and strongly sympathised with Pats’s predicament. However, one or two Examiners questioned whether the text really did support the highly optimistic thoughts given to her by some candidates.

Questions 37 – 39 – ‘All My Sons’

This was a greatly popular text and it produced a wide range of work. The majority showed some reasonable knowledge of the play but quite a few struggled to come to terms with the parameters of the tasks. In **Question 37**, for example, most had some idea about the issues involved as far as Chris was concerned but were much less aware of the real reasons why Joe did not want his son marrying Ann. Hence, the word ‘convincing’ was sometimes dealt with on a rather superficial level. There was some interesting argument about the opposing views of Kate, though again the judgements of quite a number of candidates were rather one track and also rather questionable. For instance, is the fact that Kate has insisted that Larry is coming back simply an example of a devoted mother? In the empathic task, there was quite a high level of competence in selecting pertinent material for Ann’s thoughts. Some, however, made the voice far too hysterical for Ann or so cold and calculating that Joe’s suicide seemed hardly worth commenting upon. However, quite a few captured this level-headed but compassionate woman rather well.

Questions 40 – 42 – ‘Twelfth Night’

This was a popular text. There was quite a lot of positive comment about the work on the extract question, with Examiners noting the way some candidates were able accurately to chart the shifts of sympathy through the passage. There was a surprising amount of sympathy for Malvolio, sometimes too much so in that his arrogant complacency was not really grasped. There were also quite a few answers which did not give nearly enough attention to the detail of the passage. Indeed, a few managed to ignore it almost completely. **Question 42** was not so confidently done. Clearly candidates understood that the play was not merry laughter throughout but most struggled to isolate appropriate moments and at times seemed unaware of the real tone of the chosen instances in the play. The irony at the expense, for example, of Orsino and Olivia was often missed and their situations and speeches taken at face value. There were, however, some very nice assumptions of Maria, conveying the strength and liveliness of her personality. However, Examiners commented on the number of candidates who seemed unaware of the nature of her relationship with Sir Toby.

Questions 43 – 45 – ‘The Devil’s Disciple’

There was a wide range of achievement on this text. The general feeling in regard to the extract task was that it could have been better done. A few really did manage to convey the sarcasm, wit and intelligence of Shaw’s creation but many over-used Shaw’s own descriptions rather than showing how the dialogue made the character live. Quite a few, alas, had little concept of such things as sarcasm and hence could make little of the task. **Question 44** produced a greater level of competence, possibly because the play can hardly be studied without Dick Dudgeon being at its centre. Again, though, there was a tendency to describe rather than really *engage* with the ways in which Shaw makes him *heroic*. The empathetic work on Judith was also variable in quality. Some candidates caught well her mixture of shame and growing maturity at the end of the play. However, the task really did show up those who had only a very general knowledge of the play. For instance, some had her still appalled about her husband’s conduct and planning to elope with Dick.