LITERATURE (ENGLISH)

| Paper 2010/01 |
| Paper 1 |

General Comments

Most of the texts attracted a good range of responses. Once again *The Getting of Wisdom* was the key exception; most examiners saw no work at all on this novel. In the prose section, *The Village by the Sea* was the text most frequently encountered, but not in significantly greater numbers than the others. *Great Expectations* and *Travels With My Aunt* also proved popular choices. In the drama section, *Macbeth* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were significantly more popular than the other plays. As to the poetry anthologies, *Touched with Fire* was the most popular. Examiners saw relatively little work on the Coleridge and not much more on *Poems Deep and Dangerous*.

Many examiners commented upon the absence of really weak scripts in their apportionments. They commented approvingly on the way the majority of candidates had clearly been taught the importance of attending to the question and its exact wording. Most candidates showed at least reasonable knowledge of the texts they had studied and even more pleasingly often appeared to have given some thought to the issues they had raised. The next step, of course, as usual was the crucial one. Had they responded to these texts as literature or as an exercise in mere 'decoding'? Whilst there was plenty of evidence of the latter approach, most examiners also found much in which the candidates threw themselves into tasks with self-evident pleasure, responding to and analysing the effect of literary language. One or two examiners, indeed, expressed themselves delighted at times with the powers of argument and quality of insight shown by some candidates. The once common failings of not addressing the question directly, of not supporting ideas with detail from the text, and of having limited knowledge of the basics of a text would seem to be on the decline.

Of the various forms of questions asked, the extract tasks were the most popular. Sometimes examiners felt that the question was chosen by candidates because they felt more confident in handling a specific passage. When that arose from the belief that they could hide their lack of knowledge of the text more effectively in this mode, the result was usually disastrous. The engagement with the specific detail of a text is, of course, extremely revealing as well of a candidate's overall knowledge of that text. Fortunately, the majority passed that test without problem, though there are still rather too many who in their answers do not really engage sufficiently with the detail of the extract. For instance, in a number of cases answers to **Question 13** wrote generally about the significance of Miss Havisham's immolation but failed to engage with the extraordinary power with which Dickens conveys the moment. In this kind of task for really high reward it is essential that the candidate indicates the ability to engage with literary language beyond simply asserting its quality.

The empathic tasks are now being more confidently attempted and there have been improvements in their handling this session. Given the range of text options, one is conscious that some of these tasks may be more inviting than others. Evelyn and Stanley, for instance, more often leapt off the page than did Mrs. De Silva and Essie. However, it was pleasing how rarely examiners felt the need to question the aptness of the material assigned to the character to speak, given that this is the kind of task which shows, for example, only too clearly a candidate's hazy grasp of context and of a text's chronology. When, for instance, a candidate has Macduff mourning the murder of his family as he rides to England, the reader is right to doubt that candidate's knowledge of the drama.

The more standard 'essay' tasks were often tackled the least well. There were exceptions to this: **Questions 38** and **44** were popular and responses were often splendidly argued. However, too often candidates seemed to have difficulty in getting beyond a character sketch, ignoring the requirement to show authorial purposes and the means by which those purposes are conveyed. Hence, for example, Anderson's character was described, but often his dramatic role was not. The invitation to choose an appropriate moment in a text on the face of it would seem to be a rather generous task. Unfortunately, it does not always seem to lead to a particularly appropriate choice, where weaker candidates assume they can write about

simply what they can remember or have prepared despite the material being scarcely relevant to the parameters of the question.

A number of examiners made comments about how the three forms – drama, poetry and prose - were approached. Clearly candidates continue to seem most at home writing about prose, at least where character and theme was central to the question. It was pleasing that there seemed rather fewer candidates who appeared to think that plays were really novels in dialogue. There was a general consensus amongst examiners that we are seeing a rise in the proportion of candidates who are able to write convincingly about drama as something created to be acted in front of an audience. This was particularly so with responses to *Macbeth* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The ironic effects of *Absent Friends* were also much better appreciated than in previous sessions, though similar areas in *The Devil's Disciple* proved more elusive.

There was a consensus that poetry still seems the most testing of the forms for candidates. This is not to deny that there was much excellent work in which there was evidence of engagement with both content and poetic language. However, it was also true that a significant minority still could not proceed much beyond offering a paraphrase or simplistic decoding of the poem about which they were writing. Even where they made some attempt to write about language, quite often there would be little beyond the mere noting of figures of speech and an assertion as to their effectiveness. Quite often there was no direct link made with the question. Thus, there were quite a few answers on 'Mid-term Break' which revealed that the poem had been prepared for the examination but which completely failed to use the material to probe the way in which the poet makes the situation dramatic. Elsewhere, there was some evidence that the poems in the asterisked questions had not been prepared and were actually being read unseen. This was particularly unfortunate when it came to elusive poems such as 'A Holiday' and 'One Flesh'. In both cases, examiners came across some quite inappropriate readings.

Candidates who top and tail their literary essays in examination conditions with over-long introductions and summaries are spending valuable time writing generalities which are hardly likely to bring much reward. They should be encouraged to engage with the task at once.

One or two examiners wondered as a result of some responses to some tasks whether some candidates were studying texts far too selectively, by simply looking at one or two most obviously central areas. When an examination question asked for ideas on other important areas of the text, these candidates tended to flounder. There were a significant number of candidates who had no real idea of the character and role of Jaggers in *Great Expectations*, and some were similarly vague about Macduff in *Macbeth*. It would be worth emphasising to future candidates that they must assume in IGCSE that they will be faced by questions on the whole of a text.

Overall, though, the message conveyed by the examiners was a very positive one, indeed possibly as positive as it has ever been, and candidates and teachers are to be congratulated upon their achievement.

Comments on specific questions

<u>POETRY</u>

Questions 1-3

Not many centres offered work on this anthology. In the starred question examiners read much work which did not advance much beyond simple paraphrase, though there were some occasionally perceptive responses. Similarly, in **Question 2** candidates had some difficulty in selecting pertinent moments. Some did little more than tell the story, though some were very successful in isolating features which created surprise. There were very few answers to **Question 3** but a small handful showed considerable insight.

Questions 4-6

Again, this anthology was not a popular choice, and there were examples of candidates manifestly failing to grasp even the basic meaning of the poem being written about. This was particularly so in regard to 'A Holida' and 'Snapshotland'. The answers on **Question 5** were better, though rather disturbingly the some candidates seemed to think that 'Mountain Lion' was spoken by the mountain lion. Also, both here and in **Question 4** the poems were too often used merely as a launch pad for thoughts about global warming.

Questions 7-9

Examiners reported a wide range of achievement. This was particularly the case with regard to 'One Flesh'. This is, of course, at times an elusive poem but it was pleasing how many did have some quite delicate understanding of the situation, though only a minority were able to analyse in detail the effect of the imagery. There was also much questionable speculation, some of which pointed to plain mis-reading. Examiners read that the couple were divorced, that the poem's voice was that of a child, even that the couple were dead. In **Question 8** the best work was on 'Refugee Mother and Child'. Here there was often deep sympathy conveyed, with some telling analysis of how the language conveys the poignancy of the scene. There was also some good work on the other two poems, though here examiners met simpler and sometimes rather inaccurate description which never engaged with the factors that created the vividness of the poetry. **Question 9** was a popular choice and 'Mid-term break' was the most frequently visited poem. There were a minority of good answers on all three which really brought out how the language made moments in the poems particularly dramatic, but conversely too many candidates ignored the explicit requirement to engage throughout with the dramatic elements of the poem. Too often examiners were given a competent run through of the poem, with just the occasional assertion that it was dramatic as an aside.

PROSE

Questions 10-12

The most popular task was the passage-based **Question 10**. This was quite often done well, and examiners noted a number of answers which really delved into the language and how it communicated the scary situation. There were also many who simply described and paraphrased and even some who paid little attention to the detail of a packed passage. **Question 11** was not so well done. Here candidates found it difficult to achieve a focus. Some simply rehearsed the standard essay on the effect that Bombay had on Hari; a few even concentrated upon showing how this affected his actions on his return to the village. Even those who did concentrate upon life in the big city tended to describe incidents rather than showing how Desai makes all this vivid. There were, however, some good answers which did precisely that and good answers were somewhat more in evidence in **Question 12**, the empathic task. Mrs De Silva's voice tended to be elusive, though there are moments in the novel which do give a reasonable lead to it. However, most chose suitable material for her thoughts and a few really did convey a good hearted woman who is nevertheless rarely in any doubt about her own authority to pronounce judgement. There were, however, a few catastrophic misreadings arising apparently from candidates thinking that Mrs De Silva was Hari's mother.

Questions 13-15

The passage-based task was the most popular and was reasonably competently done, at least as far as placing the passage in the context of the events of the novel was concerned. However, the task asked for much more than this; it required detailed contact with the power of the writing. Sometimes it got that and then the answer became very impressive, but all too often candidates simply picked out moments and asserted how powerful they were. The other two answers were less popular and less competently done. Examiners had the feeling that in both tasks central areas of the novel had simply not featured in study. There was some competent detailing of negative features of Dickens's London, with some candidates imaginatively responding to its horrors, though the way Dickens relishes the energy and vigour of London hardly ever seemed to feature. More significantly disappointing were some answers to **Question 15.** Jaggers is a major presence through the novel and yet examiners reported that time and again candidates had not even grasped the major facts of his role. Many seemed to have so misread the character as to think him a benign paternal figure, anxious for Pip's welfare.

Questions 16-18

There was quite a reasonable take up of *The Siege* and it clearly had evinced some considerable interest if the quality of the answers was anything to go by. Quite a few examiners noted how well candidates delved into the passage and brought out effectiveness of the imagery for **Question 16**. The work on **Question 17** was rather more variable. Some candidates found it difficult to select apt moments and to bring out what particularly made them horrific. However, there were some answers which showed the depth of response which this text had evoked in some candidates, and the few who attempted the empathic task, **Question 18**, usually showed a good understanding of what made Evgenia such a memorable character in the novel.

Questions 19-21

Travels With My Aunt continued to produce committed and interesting responses. The passage-based task was the most frequently attempted and the clear differences between the two letters seemed to encourage a greater than usual engagement with the details of the language, sometimes with impressive results. Most candidates managed at least to make a convincing argument as to why only one of the letters was likely to bring positive action from Henry. Few did **Question 20.** The obvious choice was Wordsworth and those who chose him had little difficulty in making a case. With other characters some candidates rather struggled to be convincing. However, the empathic task, **Question 21**, was generally tackled well. The great majority managed to give Henry appropriate thoughts, though only a minority really produced Henry's voice. Most seemed to think that his mode of address, as with his circumstances, would have significantly changed, when the tone at the end of the novel suggests otherwise.

Questions 22-24

There was far too little work on *The Getting of Wisdom* to make general comment appropriate.

Questions 25-27

The Bonesetter's Daughter was very much a minority text, some examiners seeing no work at all on it. Candidates mainly attempted the passage-based task and usually did so with competence. However, there was a considerable tendency to expand upon the significance and to ignore the drama of the passage. **Question 26** was rarely attempted but there some quite apt assumptions of Ruth. Here, though, examiners noted that some candidates had a very hazy idea of the precise context of the moment referred to in the question.

Questions 28-30

Again the passage- task was the most popular and elicited a wide range of responses. Some examiners noted a pleasing grasp of the context which made the reactions and actions of the characters so surprising, as well as an attention to the detail of the extract. Generally, though, the poignancy of the passage received less attention than did its surprise and some examiners found a good deal of misreading, notably that Greasy Hand had cut off a finger joint and that there was now love between her and Horse. In **Question 29** candidates found the O'Connor story easier to deal with. Though there were considerable exceptions to this in some Centres, the Rhys story tended to produce narrative responses which simply did not tackle the issue of bewilderment and its vivid presentation. Conversely, the majority of those who wrote on the other story were able to convey at least some understanding of the boy's lack of understanding as to what is going on in his family. The same wide variety of success attended **Question 30**. Though some showed an impressive grasp of Lellie's cold calculating alien voice, others totally failed to convey her satisfaction with the revenge she is now taking, seeming to think that she was still essentially servile and acting out of fright.

DRAMA

Questions 31-33

Absent Friends has proved quite a popular text with Centres, and it was clear from examiners' reports that the quality of work on it has improved. Indeed, some examiners wrote most enthusiastically about the way candidates now seemed to react to the drama's comic, even acid ironies. Most who tackled the passage-based task seemed to have at least some concept of how, as one put it, Colin makes one squirm. There were some who still thought far too well of him and some who thought they were expected to find out how *he* was amused. **Question 32** was not very often attempted but there were some answers which recognised Diana's wretched position. However, very few picked up how even she is not exempt from the playwright's sardonic wit. The greatest number of successful answers, though, were to the empathic task. Many examiners spoke admiringly of the way candidates relished Evelyn's bitter sarcasm and wry humour. By contrast, a few candidates had so little understood the play as to have her speaking words of admiration for Colin and words of love and sympathy for her 'friends'.

Questions 34-36

These plays were offered only by a minority of Centres but most examiners who saw work thought it to be at least competent. Few attempted **Question 35**; *Cuba* proved easier to deal with than *Dog House*. There were some thoughtful responses to the extract with a good understanding of the touching features of the drama, though some candidates simply proceeded through the extract without any real attention to its dramatic features.   Also, there was sometimes a tendency to ignore Jimmy's contribution to the drama at this point. The examiners' remarks on responses to the empathic task were largely positive, noting that most candidates clearly understood and conveyed Miss Arthur's distraught and bitter state of mind.

Questions 37-39

There was some encouraging work on this very popular text. It was widely noted how most candidates who attempted the passage-based question did so strictly on the terms of the task. They really did attempt to engage with the scenes as part of an unfolding drama rather than simply running through the incidents. There was some very insightful comment on the way these scenes would excite and intrigue an audience. The weakness of a number of answers was that they tended to weight the answer too much to one or other of the scenes, most commonly by reducing the witches to an unimportant introduction to the real drama. Examiners also spoke very positively about much of the work on **Question 38**. Of course, this is perhaps the central study area of the play but what was impressive was the ability of many candidates to grasp the range of response which the drama offers and to develop a thoughtful argument concerning the drama's possibilities. Of course, there were still a minority who told the story or who progressed in this instance hardly beyond Duncan's murder to support their point of view. The empathic task did not trigger quite such good work as did the other two questions. The majority managed to give appropriate thoughts to Macduff, but only a few created a suitable voice which conveyed the passion of the man. One examiner wondered whether this was an example of the way study can tend to focus on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to the exclusion of the context in which they operate. There was certainly evidence of uncertainty about basic detail. Quite a few candidates seemed to think that Macduff at this juncture knew that his family had been murdered.

Questions 40-42

Twelfth Night was a very popular choice, producing a wider range of responses. A significant number of candidates did not deal fully with the humour clearly demonstrated in the extract for **Question 40.** While there were some very competent answers to **Question 41**, by no means all candidates showed evidence of an ability to see the more heroic qualities of Viola. Some merely described the two characters. Others concentrated on Viola, scarcely mentioning Olivia. Fewer candidates attempted **Question 42**. However, there was evidence of knowledge of the play as well as enjoyment of it, and it was clear that most of the candidates had appreciated Shakespeare's creation of the rumbustious Sir Toby.

Questions 43-45

Examiners found quite a lot of competent work on *The Devil's Disciple*, though not very much which was outstanding. Quite often the extract was dealt with efficiently, but usually without candidates managing to probe fully the paternal nature of Anderson's relationship with his wife. Few, for instance, drew comparisons between the Judith of the opening Act and her demeanour here, and some examiners noted a lack of supporting detail from the extract. In **Question 41** answers described Anderson's character often quite well, failing though to go very far down the road towards focussing on his dramatic impact, as the task required. The empathic task was attempted with some success. Quite a few certainly captured Essie's naïve and innocent enthusiasm. A few gave her much too much knowledge, some of it wrong. In one instance she was depicted as watching Richard being carried to his execution.

Questions 46-48

Examiners quite often enthused over the work they had read on this popular text. In all the tasks they came across some outstanding responses and rarely were the answers less than competent. The extract question produced some excellent answers but also the greatest number which were rather limited.   This was because some candidates did not focus their answer sufficiently on the extract, preferring to move quickly outside the passage.   Some centred their answer mainly on the attitudes of Stella and Stanley to one another rather than towards Blanche, which in this passage was somewhat limiting.   There was much

vigorous argument with detailed support concerning Blanche's responsibility for her own fate. The general opinion seemed to be that she got all she deserved, though some, perhaps more compassionate and perhaps more insightful, did at least offer a rather different judgement. In **Question 45** examiners met many dramatic assumptions of Stanley. The content of his thoughts was usually apt, spouting detestation of Blanche and everything she stood for, and his arrogant voice was often successfully created. A few, however, gave him too much conscience and regret.