

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 2010/01

Paper 1

General comments

As last year, a core of texts proved overwhelmingly popular. In the Drama section, these were *The Crucible*, *Macbeth* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In the Poetry section *Songs of Ourselves* featured much more often than the Keats selection. In the Prose many offered *Lord of the Flies* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. However, particularly in the Prose, other texts had significant take up and some Examiners noted fresh responses to texts which perhaps did not have a multitude of study aids to 'assist' the candidate. It is worth reiterating a point made in previous reports that central to the philosophy behind this syllabus is the desire that candidates be given the confidence to respond directly and personally to their reading. Of course, teaching guidance is always crucial, but the good teacher knows also how to encourage individual thought and judgement. Nurturing that also means that when such candidates become examination candidates, they read questions precisely, address them directly to the best of their abilities, and confidently argue their points, instead of offloading carelessly gleaned unassimilated secondary material which all too often does not directly impinge on the task set. The contrast can be quite startling in responses to some tasks. **Question 14** was a marked example of one such differentiator: Examiners read some splendid responses to the ways in which Shakespeare makes Macbeth's brutality as King so terrifying, while other answers did no more than regurgitate 'prepared' material charting Macbeth's journey towards tragic death.

That said, it is pleasing to note that the syllabus continues to attract teachers and candidates who do wish to make the reading of literature more than just another academic hoop through which young people are expected to jump. Examiners remarked on the freshness of the approach of so many of the candidates. In many Centres, there was clearly shown detailed knowledge of the texts and the precise wording of the question was attended to. Examiners were particularly pleased to find increased evidence of a concern with stagecraft in the Drama section, rather than plays being approached as novels with only dialogue. There was some impressive insight shown by 16-year olds who were able to maintain over pages sharply developed arguments. It is now commonplace to find candidates paying close attention to the detail of an extract in the passage-based questions.

There were no instances where any significant numbers of candidates struggled to understand what was required. Every year there are some candidates who, as in **Question 22**, take the word *moving* in its most literal meaning. Perhaps Centres might go out their way to convey the emotional meaning of this word. Otherwise, where any problems with tasks occurred it was almost always because of the cursory reading of the question wording.

A minority of candidates had clearly limited knowledge of the text, particularly when required by the question to range outside the one or two obvious central issues or main characters of that text. Close reading of the question was obviously for some a skill beyond them. Some candidates penalised themselves by answering on one short story or poem when they were required to answer on two, and others answered on two poems when they were asked to concentrate on one. Quite often a key adjective or adverb was not sufficiently noted. Hence, in **Question 8** *vivid* would be ignored as would *terrifying* in **Question 14** and *vividly* in **Question 23**. One could refer to others but the point is that these words are the ones which signal a demand for engagement with the linguistic detail of the text and the authorial achievement without which a high mark is unlikely to be secured. The candidate is being asked to do more than paraphrase and decode.

A failure to do more than that can be particularly damaging in addressing the poetry tasks and is one of the reasons why candidates in a number of Centres might tend to perform less well in that section than when answering on drama and prose. It is sometimes noticeable that, even where candidates have obviously been encouraged to think about the various forms of literary language, there can be a failure to engage with its effect. Every year it seems Examiners come across work from candidates who are able to identify figures of speech but cannot really show *how* these figures of speech communicate so powerfully to a reader.

Furthermore, it seemed to be rather more apparent this year that some candidates are being encouraged to learn a number of terms fairly esoteric for IGCSE level, the listing of which might be designed to impress the Examiner. Certainly knowledge of literary terminology can be useful – but it will not be rewarded for its own sake on this syllabus. Such knowledge *per se* does not encourage personal engagement and insight. For example, in **Question 13** Examiners were sometimes informed that the early terse, fractured dialogue of the extract was an example of *stichomythia*. But knowledge of the term which might be applied to this passage does not enable a candidate to penetrate to the way the dramatist wonderfully creates in a few swift strokes the atmosphere of the moment and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's states of mind. Indeed, at times the self-conscious parade of a term can discourage candidates from further exploration: they think they have said the important thing, when actually they have not begun to do so.

With regard to the empathic tasks, two things are worth reiterating. Reward can be given to evident understanding of situation and the thoughts which would be going through the mind of the speaker. However, for high reward this may be a tricky task for those who are struggling with English since at this level, so much being dependent on the establishment of a tone of voice which shows how much the candidate's imagination has enabled entry into the being of the character. A further consequence of this is that long narrative answers are not the approach needed. Candidates should take their time to pick their words.

There was a clear increase in the number of very long scripts this session. Some of these were impressive indeed, but in others time spent on organising thoughts would probably have been time well spent. Of course, in examination conditions it is understandable that candidates might want to get as much down on paper as possible so as not to 'waste' a moment – but some moments pondering a task are rarely moments wasted. What is a waste is the way some candidates wrote a very general (and sometimes lengthy) introduction to each answer. These rarely contained material which demanded reward, and simply cut down the time candidates had to write to the point. That said, few seemed to run out of time at the end of the examination, which of itself underlines the way time is given to allow thought.

There were relatively few infringements of the rubric relating to section/question-type coverage. An occasional problem occurring in Paper 4 was that candidates missed the question prefacing the extract and used the extract to answer the second question on the text. This was most common in relation to *Macbeth* where the extract was relevant to **Question 14** to a limited degree. Examiners were sympathetic to the slip, given examination conditions, but candidates penalised themselves by only addressing a very restricted amount of material.

A Small Family Business

There was much invigorating work on this text. Gone seem to be the days when candidates could write on an Ayckbourn play without recognising that it was in any way comic. Pleasingly, in **Question 1** many entered into the hilarity of the public embarrassment of Jack and Poppy and showed a keen awareness of how the stage picture contributed to the audience's enjoyment. The empathic task drew from several candidates probably the best empathic assumptions on the whole Paper, though a number made Jack far too contrite, missing the way his forthright bluster consistently makes out black to be white. **Question 2** was the least popular and, though often competently done, did sometimes present problems. The word *decent* was not always understood, and some found difficulty in choosing appropriate subject matter. For instance, whilst Poppy and Samantha are in a way relevant to the task, to argue that they are high up the scale of criminality in the play is highly questionable.

A Raisin in the Sun

Some Examiners reported extremely positively on the work seen on this text, but others found the standard more variable. The key in **Question 4**, the most popular question on this text, resided in the phrase *powerfully dramatic*. Candidates at some Centres responded strongly to the way Hansberry orchestrates the drama of this moment, looking closely at the stage action and dialogue and the way it creates great tension. At the other end of the scale, other candidates looked only cursorily at the extract and spent much time setting out the context of the episode. There were some well argued answers to **Question 5** but Examiners felt there were too many who tended to simplify the choice and ignored the question marks which hang over Asagai. In **Question 6** most managed to create appropriate thoughts for Ruth, and some really did penetrate to the poignancy of character and situation. Some, though, found it difficult to find an apt voice for her.

The Crucible

There was a quantity of good work on this popular text. The extract in **Question 7** was quite testing in the way Miller charts the currents that reveal the gap between the pair. Most saw some reason to sympathise with both, with the majority favouring Elizabeth. It was noticeable how many ignored the final telling line as a comment on the Puritan way of seeing the world. Also, there were quite a few who did not explore the extract in detail, preferring to expand on the context, and some who did not even understand that context, thinking that the main concern here was what was happening in Salem. A wide range of responses was seen in answers to **Question 8**. There were some splendid answers which recognised the requirement to make close contact with the play's power. Others did little more than describe relevant events in the play, leaving the drama to speak for itself. In the main, the assumptions of Abigail were at least credible and some caught her malice and vindictiveness very well indeed. Others, though, displayed a very hazy knowledge of the circumstances of the flight and even created a young woman eaten up with guilt and highly contrite about what she had done.

As You Like It

There was comparatively little work on this text. Examiners commented positively on what was seen. The extract task **Question 10** was by far the most popular and most answers looked at the detail of the passage at least adequately. A pleasing number commented on such things as the importance of the forms of address throughout and responded to its surprising dramatic power at the beginning of a comedy. Likewise the few who attempted **Question 11** avoided writing a character sketch of Rosalind and answered the question with refreshing directness. Duke Senior clearly did not much encourage candidates' imagination but there were some competent assumptions.

Macbeth

In such a popular choice of text, one would expect a wide range of response, and so it proved. There was much truly outstanding work but also some which showed that there had been the most superficial of study, heavily dependent on study aids. The latter, of course, were often found out when close textual knowledge was required. The key to a successful answer to the most frequently attempted task, **Question 13**, was to note the requirement to show what makes this scene so memorably horrific. Quite a few did that very well indeed, engaging totally with the wonderful dramatic detail and language, picking out, for instance, the chilling contrast between husband and wife and the manifold dreadful ironies of the scene. There was a tendency, however, to spend too much time setting the context both prior and post, and a proportion simply described what was happening with the occasional assertion that it was truly horrific. Answers to **Question 14** sharply differentiated between candidates. There were those who read the question, saw that it involved mining material from the second half of the play and responding in detail to dramatic moments which conveyed tellingly the brutal world that Scotland had become, details which did not always directly involve Macbeth. Others wasted much time charting Macbeth's personality from the beginning, and often failed when they reached relevant moments in the play to do other than simply narrate events in the briefest of comments. For **Question 15** there were many confident assumptions of Lady Macbeth which captured her mix of emotions as she reflects on the disaster which was the Banquet. Here again, though, there was evidence that rather too many candidates did not know the play in sufficient detail. It was common to find her apparently with the certain knowledge that Banquo had been murdered, even down to the detail of it. (See comment earlier re misreading of questions.)

Twelfth Night

There seemed to be rather less take-up of this text this year, perhaps because the text is in its final sessions. Examiners reported that in **Question 16** well-prepared candidates recognised that Malvolio's treatment here was bordering on cruelty. They also saw the grandiose nature of the writing and recognised the humour therein but tended to feel sympathy for Malvolio. Only a few simply paraphrased parts of the extract without addressing the requirements of the question. For **Question 17** most chose the hilariously-staged duel between Viola and Sir Andrew. The best were able to bring out the humour of the occasion brought on by two very reluctant participants and the clever dialogue given them by Shakespeare. The box-tree scene and the appearance of the cross-gartered Malvolio before Olivia also found favour. It was pleasing to note how Shakespeare's humorous witticisms appealed to 21st Century youngsters. In **Question 18** only a small number were able to do full justice to the voice of Viola with her vivacity, her charm, her courage and her resourcefulness. Others scored reasonably well as they saw some of her many attractions. Only a few created an overly gushing bride-to-be 'madly in love' with Orsino!

A Streetcar Named Desire

The majority of candidates choosing this text did the passage-based **Question 19**. There were many examples of insightful sympathy with Blanche's plight balanced by a number of fairly stern comments on her all too frequent self-delusion. Examiners noted how detailed and penetrating some candidates were in engaging with the extract. Conversely, there were clearly rather too many who declined to look at the extract in any real detail, falling back instead on prepared statements on Blanche's character. In such answers, Mitch's role at this point in the play in affecting our view of Blanche hardly figured at all. There were some subtle and thoughtful answers to **Question 20** which embraced the mix, even contradictions, of Stella's character, paying precise attention to the adjectives of the description and mostly expressing sympathy with the character. Some had difficulty with the meaning of *naïve*, though, and others again offered prepared material which did not address the task directly. The empathic task **Question 21** was often well done. A number relished assuming Stanley's individual voice, sometimes going over the top and making him too simply Blanche's 'animal'.

Songs of Ourselves

There was some very good work on *Farmhand* which explored the detail of the poem's language and put together a deeply sympathetic portrait. Here it was noticeable how well some candidates managed to show precisely *how* the poet's words achieved such a sympathetic picture of this man. Weaker answers did little more than decode or paraphrase, just nodding in the direction of the words used, at times taking *moving* in its literal sense and signally misreading lines, making for example some odd claims for the role of the tractor in his life and thinking that sandy hair suggested that the fellow was dirty or worked in a desert. There were sharp variations in the answers to **Question 23**. The Morris poem was quite often tackled well, with candidates capturing the various perspectives which the poem offers on a child's reaction to punishment. However, sometimes those perspectives were not explored in the detail of the language and were confused. Confusion was rather more widespread in the Nicholson. Some understood the central point of how the child represents humanity's inability to relish the present and, for instance, made the link between the child and the vibrant images of Spring. However, others were reduced to commenting on isolated pieces of description without showing any real grasp of the developing argument of the poem through to the images of death. Some attempted to write on both poems. Conversely in **Question 24** there were some who only answered on one poem and there was considerable uncertainty in a number of answers how to approach a task which deliberately did not wish the candidate to have to explore in the time available two poems in detail. Some simply decoded each poem with the occasional general comment on a piece of description without any real probing of the words and their effect. At the other end of the scale, there were answers which looked at pieces of description without any sense of a context to give meaning to their observations of how the words were working. A few managed to achieve a balance, bringing out how lines and phrases made memorable the context in which they were found.

Keats

Some Examiners wrote enthusiastically about responses seen to **Question 25** in particular, from candidates who showed a fine grasp of the paradoxes involved in Keats's depiction of the figures on the Urn. However, these poems presented a stiff challenge for other candidates. Many simply did not begin to grasp the teasing arguments of the poems and what made matters worse was the frequent failure even to begin to engage with the texture of the poet's words which hold the key to that meaning. Far too often the poems were merely given a loose explanation or paraphrase.

Things Fall Apart

This was quite a popular text and many answers were written with sympathy and insight. Most attempted the passage-based task and responded with understanding to the influence the spirit world had and were often deeply engaged with Okonkwo's fate. The part of the question which required the candidate to explore Achebe's writing, though, was less well attended to. **Question 29** attracted few answers. Again, though, Examiners found considerable grasp of the customs of this society, even if some ignored the required focus on the family. In the empathic task – **Question 30** – there were some impressive assumptions of Okonkwo, capturing his fear of being seen to be weak, despite his evident affection for the slain boy. How much he would admit that affection is a matter for conjecture, of course, and the work was marked accordingly. What was not open to conjecture was the inappropriateness of a few assumptions which made him a figure of guilt and remorse.

Pride and Prejudice

Though only offered by a minority of Centres, those Examiners fortunate to come across work on this text reacted with enthusiasm. They noted the wide ranging knowledge displayed by candidates in answers to **Question 32**, coupled in general with the avoidance of a character sketch. Candidates really did engage with the effect which Austen's creation had upon them. Likewise in the empathic task – **Question 33** – time and again Lydia came flightily to life. There was also much insightful probing of the detail of the extract in **Question 31**. Here, though, occasionally there was a sense of character sketches being mined rather than the material in this extract. Also judgment on Elizabeth was not always as sharp as on Darcy. Not too many saw that she is actually very much pleased with herself to have received a proposal from Darcy and that in Austen's writing her convincing herself that she is even more pleased to have rejected him simply does not ring true.

The God Boy

There was limited take up of this text, but the response to it showed just how this novel can engage young readers. There was evident identification from candidates with Jimmy's predicament as illustrated in the extract. This was very much the most frequently attempted task but it was encouraging to read positive Examiner comment on those who did **Question 35**. Clearly the laughter in the novel had made as large an impact as the pervading tragedy. There were very few answers to **Question 36**, the empathic task. Perhaps the level of speculation demanded tended to deter. However, again, Examiners were very positive in their verdict on the responses seen.

The Siege

This was another minority choice but Examiners thought that Centres who chose it did well in the main, showing considerable engagement with the novel. Answers to **Question 37**, the passage-based task, usually showed at the very least knowledge of the uneasiness and trepidation felt by both women and the underlying reason for that. A number probed the many currents of the passage well. However, quite a few did not quite manage to balance the various constituents of the passage, either skating over the journey to the *dacha* with its prescient descriptions of setting and Anna's state of mind, or spending most of the answer on this and failing to consider the meeting itself. One Centre relished the chance to write on Evgenia, often showing vividly why they found her such a striking character. There were, however, only a few attempts at **Question 39**. Anna's voice proved somewhat elusive.

Lord of the Flies

This extremely popular text produced a wide variety of performance, especially in the responses to the end of the novel in **Question 40**. Many candidates showed just how well they were able to engage with Golding's writing. Such candidates saw the dramatic change of perspectives brought by the sudden arrival of the officer, they relished the ironies of his failure to understand what had happened on the island, and they communicated powerfully the full poignancy of Ralph's tears. Conversely there was work which failed to look at the passage in any detail and responded little to its drama; some candidates totally misread its implications. Quite a few amazingly seemed to find this ending optimistic, suggesting that the arrival of the officer put all things right. They appeared to make nothing of the significance of the burning island, the presence of the warship and Ralph's weeping for the loss of innocence. A similar contrast of achievement was found in responses to **Question 41**. This should have been a very straightforward task and in terms of choice of passage so it proved. Except for a few who meandered through a number of moments in the novel, the choice of incident was not a problem. The difficulties lay in the degree to which a candidate was prepared to probe the detail of the language to bring out why the chosen incident proves so frightening to the reader. Rather too many answers did little more than simply describe in general terms what went on. There was greater consistency of achievement in **Question 42**. Most managed to find some convincing material to put into Jack's mouth and quite a few captured very well in his voice his arrogance and disdain for most of those around him. Some, however, gave him a totally unlikely inner uncertainty about his capacity to cope with the Beast and the other problems of the island.

Far From the Madding Crowd

This was not a popular text and in contrast with the others on the set texts list generally the work Examiners saw on it was rather moderate. Some clearly had difficulty in responding to Hardy's prose in the extract and, whilst most grasped the tension in the episode, not very many were good at charting the way it is intensified as we approach the moment of confirmation. A number of candidates showed a hazy grasp of the context, missing the crucial point here that the reader knows what Bathsheba will find when she opens the coffin.

There were some nicely balanced and thoughtful responses to **Question 44** showing a good grasp of the contradictions which lie at the Centre of Boldwood's character. Some struggled, though, with the positive perspectives, one or two thinking it was quite decent of him to shoot Troy. Not many attempted the empathic task **Question 42**, and those that did sometimes struggled to capture Troy's self-centred personality, making remorse too central to his response.

To Kill a Mockingbird

This was a very popular text and the majority of Examiners reported good work on it. Most candidates, though by no means all, recognised that Miss Maude is a character the reader is expected to approve of. It was surprising how some candidates thought she was being created as a malicious old gossip, particularly given Scout's view of her. All the same, many probed the detail of the extract at least satisfactorily and sometimes with considerable insight. Weaker candidates at times struggled with detail in the passage, particularly in regard to such things as foot-washing Baptists. **Question 47** was a relatively straightforward task and there were few weak answers to it. The great majority had a clear understanding of Calpurnia's maternal role in Atticus's household and referred to pertinent detail to show that. However, the role Atticus plays in all this was not always sufficiently delineated. There were some simple character sketches, and they did not raise the key moments in the novel such as when Atticus firmly resists Aunt Alexandra's attempt to get rid of her. Most of the answers to **Question 48** had Atticus having highly relevant thoughts about the trial with some linking those thoughts back to the incidents of the previous evening and the vulnerability of his children. An encouraging number also captured his dry low-key delivery. However, a common failing was to give him hopes of success in the trial he simply does not have.

Into the Wind: Contemporary Stories in English

There were wide variations of performance to this collection of stories. Some Examiners noted with approval how delicately candidates of some Centres responded to the situation in the Lessing extract in **Question 49**, no doubt identifying strongly with the tensions between the generations depicted here. They also picked up the way the daughter humours her father almost like a child. However, there was also work which showed a very uncertain grasp of the detail and tone of the extract. Some candidates thought that Lucy was the granddaughter's name, and there was much simplistic reading, with some reducing the relationship between Alice and her grandfather to one of hatred and loathing. **Question 50** in some instances was dealt with well, candidates bringing out the humour of the episodes they had picked. Some did little more than declare their chosen moments to be funny. Others occasionally made bizarre choices; one really has to scratch around to find humour in *The Sniper*. In addition a few offered only one short story. The empathic task, **Question 51**, was far less popular, but those who chose it often captured man's strong laconic nature. However, a few completely missed his character, so misreading the story as to have him hastening home to Boston to tell everyone about his amazing experiences.