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LITERATURE (ENGLISH)

Papers 0486/01 and 0486/04

Paper 1 and Paper 4

General comments

The following report covers the work presented in both the open and closed book options.

This year, unlike last year, it was noted that each text was attempted by some candidates. Of course, some were significantly more popular than others. In the **Poetry** section, *Touched with Fire* featured much more often than *Death of a Naturalist*, which sadly had very little take up. In the **Prose**, with the exception of *The Woodlanders* which only a few Centres offered, there appeared to be a very even distribution. Such a distribution featured in the **Drama** section as well, though here *Romeo and Juliet* was encountered more widely than the other plays.

Generally, standards have been maintained and a number of Centres produced work of which they should be proud. Of course, there was a good deal about which the Examiners were critical and inevitably, if it is to be of help for the future, this report must concentrate upon those failings in the hope that standards can be improved further.

Candidates performed least well on **Questions 6, 15, 18, 21, 26, 30 and 41**, though it was not easy to see any common denominator which made such tasks special. What perhaps they had in common, was that the question demanded an approach from a particular angle and/or particularly close attention to detail and language. Questions which require an investigation of the role and literary impact of a character rather than a character sketch remain a problem for a number of candidates. Indeed, it also remains true to say that some candidates, and indeed some Centres, seem to struggle with any task which demands a detailed knowledge of the text studied. These candidates seem to go into the examination thinking that a few basic generalities about each text will suffice and hence simply are unequipped to deal with questions which demand some degree of precise knowledge. As a result, either they swiftly run out of ideas and supporting detail or fail to engage with the question at all.

Some candidates wasted time by writing general introductions which did no more than state the obvious and at times simply repeated the question in various guises. Clearly these candidates had been told that they should always begin an essay with an introduction. This may be admirable policy for general essay writing but in a literature examination it is too often translated into writing which contained nothing to reward, the real answer to the question beginning some way down the first page. It should be emphasised to candidates that it is in their own interests to address the question from the outset with an argument of substance. That way reward can be given for everything that they write.

In the majority of all Centres, even the weakest showed some knowledge of the text and tried to answer the question directly, whilst the better candidates exhibited a capacity to conduct a lively argument and had a number of ideas which they could support by reference to relevant detail in the text. The best could go beyond that and showed how deeply they had become immersed in the literature they had read, how well informed they had become about it, how acutely they could analyse it and how well they could respond to its language. In a number of Centres candidates who came into this category were pleasingly quite numerous.

However, as usual, it has to be said there were also quite a few candidates, and indeed some whole Centres, where a reasonable supposition was that serious study rather than ability was what was in short supply. Once again, it needs to be emphasised that the questions are framed to encourage candidates to write thoughtfully and individually about the texts as well as to help Examiners to separate insightful candidates from those who can do no more than parrot little understood generalities. That is one reason why answering one extract question is mandatory, since in such tasks the candidate is required to engage directly with the words on the page. On the evidence of answers to such tasks, a significant minority still seem unable, or unwilling, to do so.

However, this year candidates in this category often indicated their tenuous hold on the text more dramatically by their responses to the empathic questions. Here the range of success with which candidates assumed the various characters was not to be fully explained by simple variation in candidate ability or possible degrees of difficulty in the tasks. It was recognised that the Nurse at the end of *Romeo and Juliet* might present fewer problems for a candidate than Irma at the end of *Hanging Rock* and Examiners were asked to be alert to this. However, that said, there was occasionally such a gulf in achievement between the two tasks that it was reasonable to assume that other factors were at work. So completely wrong were a few of the portraits of Irma that it became plain that these candidates had simply taken little notice of Lindsay's portrayal of her in the novel. How otherwise to explain portraits which made her into a neurotic, traumatised and guilt ridden girl anxiously awaiting the arrival of her parents? Another empathic task neatly illustrated this dichotomy of understanding. There were some wonderful assumptions of Anita in *A Small Family Business* and yet one also occasionally met Anitas who agreed with everything that Jack said and promised to be good girls from then on.

Comments on specific questions

Poetry

Questions 1 – 3

Seamus Heaney: *Death of a Naturalist*

As has been said above, few Centres seemed to choose this anthology and the work from those who did was undistinguished. Most of the responses for all the tasks were based upon paraphrase with little evident attempt to engage with the poetic language, even though all the tasks required such engagement. However, there were a number of candidates able to relate to Heaney's descriptions of countryside life.

Questions 4 – 6

Touched With Fire: 'My Blue Heaven'

The starred task resulted in a wide spectrum of work. There were some very detailed responses with a keen reaction to the poet's ironic turn of phrase. However, others were content to deliver 'the message' and often were very uncertain when it came to the point of some of the detail. This was particularly true of the poem's ending which was quite often misunderstood. Some did not even know what the factory was producing.

Questions 5 and 6 were occasionally done well; the former in particular elicited responses which focused well on such things as the moment of breathless excitement in the Keats. Such answers were balanced by those which paid little attention to the specific requirements of the task and simply wrote, often rather poorly, about the chosen poem. There was also some misunderstanding of specific detail in 'The Lesson'.

Question 6 at times seemed to attract the weakest candidates who appeared to be writing with relief about the one poem they knew anything about. Even at that level it was noticeable how little grasp some had of basic meaning; 'The Dam' suffered particularly in this respect. The answers which really tackled the conversational language of any of the poems were not very numerous. It would appear that the limiting of the choice of poems, whilst certainly stopping candidates from trying to write upon poems totally unsuitable to the task, has not had the effect of driving home to some candidates that it is a dangerous course to enter the examination with only one or two poems known to any degree. In too many instances it was manifest that both **Questions 5 and 6** had been chosen because a prepared poem was in the designated list rather than because the candidate felt able to address the task set.

Prose

Questions 7 – 9

Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*

The work on this text was largely adequate with some of it being a good deal better than that. In the starred question, most had some idea about the change in Jane and some showed a splendid ability to handle not only the obvious surface things but also the sub text. Quite a number, though, did not fully grasp the steel that was in Jane's adult personality. Others concentrated on Mrs. Reed's thoughts, almost entirely ignoring Jane. Surprisingly few tackled **Question 8**. There was occasional probing argument on view but also a tendency for candidates to become simplistically moral in judgement. Those who tackled the empathic task usually found relevant content and there were some quite outstanding assumptions of Rivers' missionary zeal in his voice.

Questions 10 – 12

Thomas Hardy: *The Woodlanders*

As stated above, there was not much work on this novel. What there was appeared to be competent, sometimes much more than that, with **Question 11** being the most popular. Here candidates were often able to offer quite a probing and balanced assessment of the character. The assumption of Mrs. Charmond was often the most successful answer on the script. The starred question on the other hand too often suffered from a lack of detailed response to the passage.

Questions 13 – 15

Doris Lessing: *The Grass is Singing*

There was a wide range of achievement on this novel. In some Centres, the starred question was well answered, with candidates able to respond to the wealth of detail in the passage. Others met answers which rarely addressed anything in detail and had only the haziest understanding of the passage. It was not uncommon for the latter to fail even to grasp whom Mary was expecting. Those who wrote about Slatter often did so thoughtfully, though again in some places there was plainly little knowledge of the novel. One candidate seemed to think he was Mary's husband. The range of performance was at its widest in **Question 15**. Perhaps this was because it was chosen by some weak candidates who had little detailed grasp of the novel. Certainly the main complaint here was the lack of detail in the answers, the lack of any understanding of the importance of the setting in this novel, and even at times the apparent failure to understand the term 'landscape' itself. That said, there were also some insightful responses.

Questions 16 – 18

Joan Lindsay: *Picnic at Hanging Rock*

There were some really probing thoughts about Mrs. Appleyard in the extract and much insightful comment on detail. Quite a few were able to feel some qualified sympathy for the woman here. However, others, both here and in **Question 17**, could only deal in stereotypes and learnt character sketches. In the latter task, for instance, such candidates could not bring the role of Sara Waybourne into any sort of focus and could not explore the way Lindsay gives an irritating as well as a profoundly sympathetic dimension to Sara's personality. However, there were a number of richly eloquent answers here which revealed in detail how the character acted as a catalyst for all that was worst in the headmistress and few were unable to communicate something relevant. As already stated, an assumption of Irma demanded close knowledge of the novel. A number triumphantly demonstrated this; others failed completely to do so.

Questions 19 – 21

Mary Shelley: *Frankenstein*

This was a popular text and good work far outweighed the mediocre. This was particularly so in **Question 20** where Examiners noted quite a number of answers which argued impressively, which juxtaposed telling detail to illustrate the differences of outlook between the creator and the created, and which finished with some convincing judgements. The extract task was usually dealt with competently, with many candidates picking their way through the letter in some detail. However, what was said was usually fairly obvious and not that many probed beyond the sweetness and light of the letter to its anxiety and its unconscious ironies. The weakest answers came to **Question 21**. On the face of it, it should not have been too demanding for candidates to select and then expand on two moments in the book where the description of landscape contributes to the impact of the event. Some did so very well but more usually the candidates revealed their lack of confidence when it came to dealing with the detail of literary language, often doing no more than barely nodding in the direction of the description. A few, as was the case in the *Lessing*, seemed to have no understanding of what might constitute 'landscape'.

Questions 22 – 24

Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club*

This was another text which was offered by a large number of Centres. Responses to the questions were usually at least adequate. However, though most candidates had some sensible things to say about the extract task, rather too many failed to capitalise on their general grasp of the passage by probing Tan's writing and focussing upon what made it memorable for them. There was some response to the sadness of Yin-ying's character but in some answers the supporting detail tended to be rather limited and some other candidates thought that they were answering the question by simply narrating her life. This lack of focus was also to be found in answers to **Question 24**. Not surprisingly, most candidates found something to say that was sensible about this central issue in the novel but it was disappointing how few could range beyond the obvious to investigate the numerous possible paradoxes on this subject and to find support for their ideas from Tan's writing in various parts of the novel. There were those who showed an impressive grasp, ranging widely through the novel to support their ideas but, in general, engagement with Tan's writing seemed for some reason to be largely absent throughout all three questions.

Questions 25 – 27

Paul Theroux: *The Mosquito Coast*

The starred question was the most popular and there were some answers which really revelled in the horrors and ironies arising from Theroux's writing. Most were better at responding to the former than at grasping the latter. Success in **Question 26** seemed to depend very much on the preparation. A minority showed a keen awareness of how Charlie's maturation during the novel was key to its perspectives. Others simply offered a character sketch and some did not even seem to grasp that his personality and attitudes changed at all through the novel. It was surprising that **Question 27** was the least popular since it offered the candidate such a wide choice. However, to judge from the answers, few felt confident enough to engage directly with Theroux's writing. Most of the responses simply described the moments as dramatic events in themselves and left it at that without any detailed exploration.

Questions 28 – 30

Richard Wright: *Black Boy*

The starred question was the most popular and many had something of sense to say about Richard's feelings. However, a close attention to the words was the exception rather than the rule. This lack of sharp focus was evident also in **Question 29**; with a lack of exploration of family life in detail and the effect of it on Richard. This lack of precision was even more evident in the empathic task where, more often than not, general comments about racism and such were put into Richard's mouth without any apparent attempt at making them particular to his character and his experiences in the book.

Drama

Questions 31 – 33

Alan Ayckbourn: *A Small Family Business*

It was gratifying to find this text growing into a popular choice. Much of the work on it was at least adequate, though in two questions there was a rather sad unwillingness to enter into the fun. This was most noticeable in the starred question. Most were able to chart Jack's gradual collapse but too often there was no response to the hilarity of it all. The reasons for feeling sympathetic to Poppy were quite often well set out but more could usually have been made of her more ridiculous possibilities as a character. However, just as Examiners began to despair of candidates showing any awareness of the comic power of the play, they would come upon an astounding assumption of Anita, there in all her cutting cynicism. As has already been said, there were also some responses which simply displayed the candidates' ignorance but overall this was probably the most successful empathic task on this year's Paper.

Questions 34 – 36

Athol Fugard: *'Master Harold' ... and the boys*

The comment on the work on this play was largely positive, though again the variations of standards between Centres could be considerable. The extract question seems to have been the least well done with a common complaint being, as so often, a lack of detailed engagement with the text. On **Question 35** there were some good answers, though reactions to the father received much greater attention than those to the mother. There was some very interesting work on **Question 36** which used the task to broaden out into the wider issues of the play.

Question 37 – 39

Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*

There was much good work on this popular play. The extract question differentiated well between those who understood why this was a crucial conversation for the couple and hence were able to probe the subtext, and those who were only able to take the words at their face value. The latter failed to understand Catherine's motives and did not grasp that there is a real doubt about Rodolpho's intentions. Quite a few did find it possible to like Eddie, though in the process there was the tendency to underplay his terrible obsessiveness. Most could say something sensible about Marco but far fewer were able to fix his dramatic contribution to the play.

Questions 40 – 42

William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*

There was a wide range in the quality of answers of the many candidates offering this play. The response to the extract suggested worryingly that many were unable or unprepared to engage with Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. There were some good answers which showed how penetrating candidates could be about poetry but these were outweighed by many who did little more than describe events and then declare them to be self-evidently tragic. Some seemed unaware that Juliet was not dead and others gave up the struggle to write about something particular and moved out into the rest of the play. There were some telling answers to **Question 41** but equally a number which could not get to grips with what made Juliet 'dramatically compelling' and simply offered a character sketch. Perhaps the occasional astounding empathic answers found on other texts were not evident here in **Question 42**; a consistently convincing voice proved difficult for most. However, the level of achievement was probably higher overall, there being few who offered something which was not recognisable as the Nurse in content and to some degree in tone. Lastly, while it may be a good idea to take candidates to the cinema, please note that the text to be studied is the play and does not contain characters answering to the names of Mr. and Mrs. Capulet.

Questions 43 – 45

William Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew*

Most had a basic understanding of what Petruchio was up to in the extract, but all too often that was where it ended. A precise grasp of his purposes and of the way the scene offers some surprising insights into his personality was more difficult to find. Sadly many seemed to have a completely one-dimensional view of him. There were also some surprising views of Baptista. It is, of course, possible to feel some sympathy for him but some answers seemed to suggest that Shakespeare intends us to find him a model father. Part of the problem may have lain with such candidates' very partial knowledge of the play and hence lack of any real understanding of the implications of particular moments in the dialogue. It was noticeable how good the answers could be on this task when the candidate answered from such a base. The empathic task was not very popular, perhaps because it required again just such a base. However, where that detailed knowledge was in evidence, the results were good, capturing rather well Grumio's knowing and wary personality.

Questions 46 – 48

Oscar Wilde: *An Ideal Husband*

To judge from answers on **Questions 46** and **47** more work could be done on the dramatic aspects of the play. Rather too many were content simply to describe the end of the scene rather than to look at how Wilde screws up the melodramatic tension, whilst correspondingly Lord Goring was delineated with approval without any particular attempt being made to respond to his dramatic impact and importance in the play. However, in both instances there were a number who were well enough prepared to engage with the drama and the pleasure the play had given to candidates was confirmed by some memorably nasty assumptions of Mrs. Cheveley.

Paper 0486/02

Coursework

General comments

As usual, all Centres will receive a brief individual report about their coursework, so this general report aims at commenting on overall features of the work presented and of the way the component was administered.

For the most part, the work seen and the way it was assessed was very pleasing. Most Centres now supply the Moderator as a matter of course with the information needed on the Candidate Record Card, particularly in the important Teacher Comment Section. Here it is now usual for the Moderator to be able to see precisely how the Centre has used the Assessment Criteria to arrive at the mark awarded. It is once again worth making the point that the more information Centres can give the Moderators, the more likely it is that they will be able to see why the mark has been awarded and the greater the possibility there is that they will concur.

Quite often, and where appropriate, copies of the texts being written upon were included with all the other documentation, which is welcomed.

There are principally two problems highlighted in Centre reports, this year as last. One requires action in one or two Centres, the other is more in the way of suggestions which might help candidates in a number of Centres to do rather better than at present.

The first is a simple issue of gross grade inflation in some rare cases. Centres must pay close attention to the assessment criteria. It would appear that a very few are not doing this. They are in some cases seemingly encouraging candidates to believe that their work is worthy of the highest grades when, because of the work's lack of detailed engagement with the text and in particular its language, there can be no possibility of such reward. They are then translating those aspirations into marks which are significantly out of line with the standards arrived at by the majority of Centres. Slight adjustments are quite commonly made by the External Moderator to ensure common justice, but in these instances a more significant scaling downwards has to be put into operation. This problem needs to be addressed urgently by the Centres in question.

A more general problem concerns the setting of tasks. This year, as last, there was doubt in some instances about their adequacy as stimuli for the candidates. It was quite common to find questions which did little to encourage the candidates to engage with the pleasures and excitement to be gained from reading literature. At the very least, it is a syllabus requirement that candidates show that they are able to respond to the detail of literary language and yet some tasks asked little more of the candidates than to narrate the events of the text or to paraphrase.

Tasks involving comparing and contrasting were a rather common feature of the tasks set. It cannot be emphasised too strongly that this is *not* a syllabus requirement. The reason why it is not, was only too apparent in much of the work seen under this umbrella. Few candidates of this age can do more than make the most simple comparisons which concentrate upon the content of the texts under review, diverting them from exploring the particular *literary* features of each of the texts being compared and thus from fulfilling the more advanced aspects of the assessment criteria. This is particularly damaging in respect to poetry.

The effect of the above is difficult to assess. Maybe the limitations of some of the tasks denied some candidates the possibility of achieving their full potential in the folder. Maybe they would have done no better had the tasks been more stimulating. Be that as it may, it can be stated with certainty that time and thought given to task setting will at least give the clear opportunity to the candidates to show their capabilities to the full. To judge from the way the overwhelming majority of Centres presented and assessed their folders, that is the aim of us all.

Paper 0486/03

Paper 3 - Alternative to Coursework

Almost all candidates found Theodore Roethke's poem accessible and seemed to enjoy writing about it. There were few problems in understanding the basic narrative line and, very pleasingly, most candidates answered the first question directly, identifying clearly and purposefully the poet's feelings about the mouse. Only a minority centred on the mouse's feelings, leaving the Examiner to detect whether inferences about the poet's feelings could be made from their discourse.

Centres might be reassured that a wide variety of interpretations were accepted. What Examiners try to assess on an Unseen Paper is the quality of the candidate's engagement with the text. Candidates who came to the poem with the preconception that mice were vermin, or that such human interference in the natural processes was slightly ridiculous were treated as respectfully as those who were animal-lovers and touched by the poet's caring character. It was only when the candidate's views were so intense that they blinded her or him to the actual words of the poem that their answers suffered. There were a minority of candidates who expounded their views on ecological issues, for example, rather than centring their comments on the text while, on the other hand, there were those who interpreted the mouse's reactions to the poet with such an anthropocentric sentimentality as to suggest that the animal had formed a bond with the poet. In both of these cases, the candidates were so excited by their own ways of thinking that they lost touch with the poem.

To a lesser extent but more frequently, this was also true of candidates who became obsessed with *one* train of thought and developed it to the exclusion of everything else that was in the poem. One example of this was the conclusion that the poem was an extended metaphor for parental love. Of course, there were elements in the poem which supported this interpretation and many of the candidates who took this line achieved a good result, but the very highest grades tended to elude them because so many features of the poem had to be excluded to maintain such a monothematic interpretation.

The second part, which directed the candidates to explore the words of the poem, discriminated clearly between those who were merely comfortable with the surface narrative and those who saw more subtle shades of meaning. Response to individual words was often very good. Many candidates explored the connotations of the word "cradled", for example, perceived the subtlety of the use of the possessive adjective "my", and the masculine form of the personal pronoun "he". On the whole, however, they were not so successful with groups of words, particularly with the similes of the first stanza. The very best candidates were able to infer the poet's feelings from the words he uses to describe the mouse, the mixture of humour and delight in the delicacy of its features and movements, which are betrayed by his choice of simile and metaphor. Once again, it must be said that there were a great number of candidates who seemed to think that, having identified figures of speech, their job had been completed, without showing what they added to the poem. Many more appended an elementary, all-purpose explanation like "It helps me to understand what the mouse is like." The best commentaries treated each simile or metaphor as unique.

At this point, it might be helpful to pause and look in some detail at the different ways candidate tackled the very telling lines 17 to 19 of the poem. Many candidates took things at face value, that is suggesting that the mouse had now established complete confidence in the poet and that, therefore, the poet and the mouse were both happy. Others were rewarded for noting the rhetorical question and the repetition of the word "tremble" but, having made their identification, were unable to draw conclusions as to why the poet had expressed himself in this way. A minority explored the words more thoroughly and sensitively. They came to varying conclusions, and most of these were acceptable. It was the fact that they could see the need to explore that was rewarded first and after that, the extent and depth of the exploration: of the tentative effect induced by the words, "imagine" and "seem", for example, or his yearning to receive a positive answer to his question, or of the wistfulness of the answer as a conclusion to the first part of the poem.

In the end, it is often a close attention to detail which distinguishes the very good answer from the good answer. In the case of this poem, it was also the ability to deal with the last part of the poem with as much care as the first. The majority of the candidates did not even mention the broadening of the poet's concerns to other creatures, including the human. There were very few who explored the resonance of the words describing the predators' threat. Yet, this part of the poem is immensely significant. This was the most disappointing aspect of candidates' work in an otherwise encouraging body of scripts.

The Examiners remain concerned about the misuse of some candidates' time in the examination. Adequate time to read and deliberate over a hitherto unseen piece of literature is essential before the candidate ever puts pen to paper as are a few more minutes to consider the demands of different parts of the question and determine a structure to deal with them, with perhaps a *brief* draft plan to refer to. However, many candidates wasted time writing out over-detailed preparatory notes or, in some cases, a complete rough version of their answer which was copied out word for word later. Also, while a brief conclusion is often aesthetically pleasing, many candidates used it redundantly to repeat all the points that they had expounded perfectly clearly in the earlier part of their essays. Some unnecessarily counted words. In all of these cases, candidates' time would have been better spent in developing their ideas in more detail with ever closer exploration of the poet's use of words.