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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 IN ENGLISH

GCE Ordinary Level

Paper 2010/01
Paper 1

General comments

It is very pleasing to report that candidates responded well to the first November session of the revised syllabus. The major changes were the reduction of the number of questions from five to four, the lack of division of marks in the passage-based questions, and the introduction of the empathic response tasks. All of these changes seem to have benefited candidates. There was little evidence that they ran out of time or mishandled the time allowance and Examiners reported fewer rubric errors. On the whole, they handled the one-part passage-based questions confidently, though some still failed to explore the passages closely; and they embraced the empathic tasks with enthusiasm. The texts seemed to have been enjoyed and there were some extremely sensitive responses, which showed clear analytical understanding as well as an engagement with the subject matter.

Work was offered on all texts, though one or two were extremely popular and some had been studied by only a handful of candidates. Particularly popular were *Animal Farm, The Village by the Sea, Twelfth Night* and *Romeo and Juliet.* It was good to see work on the poetry (largely on *Touched with Fire*) though, as on the old paper, this was a minority choice.

Many Examiners spoke of the lively engagement with the texts shown in many Centres, which speaks so well of the enthusiastic teaching the candidates had received. All the questions on this syllabus are designed to encourage candidates to think in the exam room rather than to regurgitate semi-prepared essays and the nature of the writing in many scripts showed that many were fully alive to the challenges posed. Indeed, Examiners remarked on the freshness of the writing in so many Centres. Most candidates attempted to directly address the question rather than to merely try to adapt pre-prepared material though in general marks are more often lost by not reading the question with sufficient care than for any other reason, the outcome being that some candidates do not receive the reward their knowledge of the book might warrant. The best answers showed a pleasing insight into the issues raised by the task and the text. In addition, there was evidence that the weakest aspect of candidates' work in the past – the lack of engagement with the detail of literary language and the ways in which writers achieve their effects – was being tackled. The work on poetry remains perhaps the most problematic area. Nevertheless, even here there was evidence of a desire to write about the linguistic detail of a poem instead of being content simply to paraphrase the poem's content.

A personal engagement with detail was also often the discriminator in work on the passage-based questions. Though the new form of the questions did not appear to cause any difficulties, many candidates did not probe the extract in detail but used it simply as the peg upon which to hang their general views of the text. The questions do not generally specifically ask for external reference and it is possible – even sometimes desirable – for candidates to make no reference to other parts of the text, but it is a mistake for them to think that they can be tackled as 'Unseens'. The best answers clearly show an awareness of, or are informed by, knowledge of the text as a whole.

The empathic tasks were received with enthusiasm and some candidates chose to answer as many as three of them. It was true that some candidates performed very much better on these tasks than in their other answers, but the converse was also true. It might be worth reminding candidates that this kind of task is every bit as demanding of detailed knowledge of the text as the tasks with a more traditional discursive approach. Also, whilst it is extremely pleasing to note that Centres are now beginning to recognise this kind of task as providing a stimulus which lifts the performance of the candidate, a note of caution should be sounded for those whose English is poor. Examiners are instructed to ignore the candidate's linguistic skills in assessment, provided, of course, meaning is communicated. However, empathic tasks do require a convincing assumption of a literary character's voice and the highest grades can only be awarded to those who achieve this.

In this paper those questions that directed candidates to a consideration of irony tended to be very clear discriminators. In literature in English work, irony – and humour – may present some difficulties to candidates whose first language is not English. However, it also has to be said that Examiners came across much work which showed that it is quite possible for such candidates to be very much aware of how irony works; indeed, it is difficult to conceive of any study of, for example, *Animal Farm*, not engaging with it. Perhaps weak responses have more to do with superficial study, therefore, rather than with any intrinsic difficulties candidates might have in responding to irony.

Still, to return to the beginning, it needs to be stressed once again that most of the work on this syllabus reflects great credit upon the efforts of both candidates and teachers. There follow more detailed comments upon the candidates' responses to individual questions.

Comments on specific questions

Poetry

There were relatively few answers to the poetry questions and most of those were on *Touched with Fire*, so it is difficult to comment on individual questions on the other two texts. In general terms there seemed to be a real attempt to engage with the language and form of the poems though weaker answers still relied on paraphrase or summary of content.

Jack Hydes, ed: *Touched With Fire: from Section E*

Question 7

Examiners were very enthusiastic about the work they saw, commenting on the way many candidates traced the development of the poem and engaged with the detail of the wordplay. Other Examiners, however, found candidates very limited in the range of details from the poem that they selected, sometimes noting that they hardly ventured beyond comments upon 'mellow fruitfulness'.

Question 8

This tended to be chosen by candidates who had something of interest to say about the poems chosen, though inevitably there were those who ignored the question and just plodded through the poem. There was some interesting work on the implications of *Snake. Dover Beach* and *Horses* seemed to pose a greater challenge but even here there was occasionally impressive work.

Question 9

This illustrated the difficulties some candidates have with irony but that is not to say that all was wide of the target. Each poem brought forth a body of work which showed awareness of the central meanings of the poems and the way the poet's irony created them.

Prose

Barnes & Egford, ed: *Twentieth Century Short Stories*

Question 10

This is a perennially popular text and the strongest answers here showed a real sense of engagement with the silliness of the episode. The two sisters are still terrified by the non-existent presence of their dead father and this even infects the clergyman; almost every candidate referred to his leaping out of the Colonel's chair. It was a little disappointing that there was not more commentary on the actual words of the passage, for example on the characterisation of the unctuous Mr Farolles and the way in which he speaks, but generally there was a clear sense of enjoyment even if some candidates had difficulty in analysing the reasons for it.

Question 11

The greatest number of good answers on this selection came in response to this question. Perhaps this was hardly surprising since it was the obvious question on *The Secret Sharer*. However, it was encouraging to read so much probing of the complexities of the story.

Question 12

There were some very good portrayals of Trevor, showing knowledge of the story and understanding of the coldness of his character and quite a number really caught his voice, integrating details from the text convincingly. There was a tendency, however, for some candidates to make him too self-aware, analysing his own motives and showing him as overly conscious of the effect on him of his parents coming down in the world.

Charlotte Brontë: *Jane Eyre*

Question 13

This was not a particularly popular text but some Examiners were pleased by the work that they saw. The extract question, the least popular, seemed to pose the greatest problems for some, possibly because of its quite complex currents, though there was clear understanding of Jane's jealousy and of her devotion to Rochester. Better answers made an attempt to consider the language.

Question 14

There were some very good answers on Mrs Reed. Quite a few did their best to find something to say in her favour but not surprisingly all found it difficult to find much to like about her.

Question 15

The empathic task was often well done and some created a voice very much like Jane's with a clear grasp of why she would have been deeply unhappy with St John Rivers and of the contrast between the 'business arrangement' nature of his marriage proposal and the passion of Rochester's. Weaker answers tended to miss this aspect of the task.

Anita Desai: *The Village by the Sea*

Question 16

This was one of the most popular texts offered and candidates had clearly enjoyed it and related to it. Overall, however, whilst there was some very good work and little that was really weak, most of it was competent rather than outstanding. The best answers to this question showed a clear awareness of the undercurrents of the passage and made some reference to the generally unsettled feelings of the villagers, and their defensiveness when criticised by this arrogant outsider. Weaker answers tended to narrate and paraphrase rather than probe Desai's words and their effect. The stranger's sarcasm, for instance, was only occasionally caught.

Question 17

Candidates obviously knew the material for this question well and were able to write reasonably competent answers but few of them showed much insight or made an attempt to evaluate. Weaker answer tended to have a paragraph on each of the characters and what they do, for example describing Hari's flight, but not exploring the effect of it on his sisters.

Question 18

The empathic task saw candidates usually understanding the likely responses of Mr Panwallah and quite often capturing the voice in which he might have couched them, again using details from the text to give a flavour of the character. There was some over-doing of the phrase 'Oh my boy' in weaker answers, however.

Doris Lessing: *The Grass is Singing*

Question 19

This was not a particularly popular text and this was the least popular question. Only a few candidates were able to bring out what was peculiarly disturbing about Mary's liaison with Moses, about the latter's menace and about Tony's reaction to it all.

Question 20

This was generally answered in competent fashion. However, it would appear that, whilst most could find adequate reasons for the failures of Dick's ventures, only some could dig deep into his personality and the social pressures upon him.

Question 21

Few attempted the empathic question and even fewer seemed to grasp Moses' character, quite often making him consumed with remorse or alternatively some crusader against white racism and oppression rather than a man concerned about honour and revenge.

Dalene Matthee: *Fiela's Child*

Question 22

This was a fairly popular text and, as when it has been set in previous years, it was obviously enjoyed by the candidates who had studied it. Examiners were generally complimentary. They noted that in the extract question, whilst the answers were usually at least competent, candidates tended to focus upon the relationship between Lukas and Nina at the expense of the hints about the former's strange affinity with the sea.

Question 23

This was the most frequently attempted task and, not surprisingly, often brought forth impressively knowledgeable and engaged writing.

Question 24

Equally good seem to have been the assumptions of Barta. Some of these were particularly impressive.

George Orwell: *Animal Farm*

Question 25

In this, the most popular of the prose texts, it was not surprising to note that all Examiners found a full range of work. For the most part Examiners were spared page upon page of writing on the Russian Revolution, though there were still pockets of that where candidates still refused to engage with the fable as literature and with Orwell as a writer. The quality of the work on this question tended to hinge on the candidate's capacity to probe the ironies of the passage. Many tended to use the passage simply as a starting point for narration of events in the book, focusing on later events in the fable at the expense of showing in detail how the moments in the passage prefigured those events. Only the best answers conveyed the tone of the passage and noticed significant detail such as the way in which Snowball persuades the birds that the motto 'Four legs good, two legs bad' does not apply to them, blinding them with science in the process.

Question 26

Most candidates could make some sensible comments about what made Napoleon undesirable but, of course, *hateful* required rather closer contact with the text than most seemed willing to make. Candidates often wrote a history of Napoleon's doings without really bringing out how Orwell's writing made him *hateful*.

Question 27

The empathic task did at times sharply differentiate between candidates. This was sometimes done superbly, not surprisingly since over the years candidates have shown how much Boxer affects them. However, just how dramatically revealing of a candidate's real knowledge of a text an empathic task can be was shown by the rather disturbing number of candidates who painted Boxer as a disenchanted animal who had finally seen the truth of the revolution. Little reward could be given to such a basic misunderstanding of Orwell's purpose.

Amy Tan: *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

Question 28

This was not a particularly popular text, but those Centres that offered it seemed to have selected wisely for their candidates, as there was clear evidence of enjoyment in their answers. There was clear response to the pathos of LuLing's illness and its effect on Ruth in the passage.

Question 29

This was the least popular of the questions and required a good deal of selection and organisation, but those candidates who did attempt it showed a sound understanding of the issues and the conflicts between the Chinese approach to things and the American one.

Question 30

Similarly, here there was often considerable engagement with Ruth and candidates sometimes wrote movingly.

In all three tasks weaker answers had difficulty in breaking free from simple narrative to arrive at insightful analysis.

Paul Theroux: *The Mosquito Coast*

Question 31

This text was offered by a small minority of candidates. There was some quite good work on the extract, though the task demanded close attention to the detail of the writing which it did not always receive.

Question 32

Responses ranged from a minority who thought that Allie gave his children some worthwhile experience (tending at times to ignore the thrust of Theroux's words) to those who thought him an unmitigated disaster as a father. Indeed, the weakness of too many answers from either side of the fence lay in the lack of detailed support for the argument from the text. Hence, the tone of Theroux's writing was rarely co-opted to nail a point.

Question 33

The empathic task was the least popular; perhaps Mr Haddy's thoughts were felt to be somewhat elusive.

Drama

Alan Ayckbourn: *Absent Friends*

It is difficult to report on these questions individually since so few candidates offered this play, which in some ways is a pity since there was occasional evidence that candidates had relished its humour and satire. Some of the few had a very good grasp of just how awful Colin is and just how his egocentric smugness spreads catastrophe around him. Unfortunately, he was catastrophic in another way since some candidates were so unaware of Ayckbourn's satiric purposes as to deem him the hero of the play. Such misreading left little opportunity for an Examiner to give much reward.

Athol Fugard: *'Master Harold'…and the Boys*

Question 37

This play was also very much a minority choice but Examiners expressed general approval of such work as they saw. They noted the way candidates were able to write lucidly about the issues raised by the extract and how many were engaged with the drama of this particular moment. If there was a weakness, it was that some spent too much time writing about the context before engaging with the detail of the passage.

Question 38

Similarly, whilst there was some penetrating work on this task, there was also a lot which had a general grasp of the role played by the parents but failed to move from generalities to specifics.

Question 39

There were some very good assumptions of Willie and also one or two who for reasons only known to themselves chose to write in Sam's voice. They, of course, had to be heavily penalised whether it was done deliberately or was a genuine moment of aberration.

Arthur Miller: *All My Sons*

Question 40

There was a wide range of quality of work on this play. Some Examiners reported that both in the extract question and **Question 41** there was much engagement with the drama. Some candidates really explored in depth the significance of Jim in the passage at this pivotal moment in the play. Conversely it was reported that many candidates used the passage as a coat peg upon which to hang a discursive survey of the play as a whole.

Question 41

Many candidates did no more than narrate the turn of events following Ann's arrival, though better answers explored the importance of Ann's personality and not simply her actions and began to evaluate the extent to which her arrival speeds up the tragic consequences of Joe's actions.

Question 42

Most Examiners thought that the empathic task was not done particularly well, only a few candidates capturing the likely complexity and contradictory nature of Kate's thoughts. Too many were content to have her simply bemoaning her lot.

William Shakespeare: *Romeo and Juliet*

Question 43

The extract question differentiated those who were able to pick their way through the dramatic detail of a passage from those who were only able to comment on the general situation. There were some really good candidates who captured the ebb and flow of the scene very well right down to Tybalt's final growl.

Question 44

There was some equally impressive work here but there was often a strange choice of material. Some candidates contented themselves with exploring only one of the older characters in the light of the task, usually Friar Lawrence, and sometimes did little more than write a character sketch with little of the argument the question encouraged. It remains curious how some candidates have a touching faith in the Friar's wisdom and even that of the Nurse. Be that as it may, here there was at least a viewpoint which could be accepted. This was hardly the case when candidates decided not to make an occasional legitimate comparison with younger characters but simply to write their essay on the wisdom or otherwise of Romeo and Juliet. Some managed to write an answer by hardly looking at any of the older characters in the play.

Question 45

There were a few cavalier candidates in the empathic question who decided they would rather write as Romeo. There were also a greater number who thought that a page of romantic gush was what was required to conjure up Juliet. However, an impressive number managed to present, often very movingly, the girl's bewilderment, fears and doubts as well as her feelings of joy.

William Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night*

Question 46

There seems to have been little very weak work on this play but equally reading Examiners' comments led to the impression that this sparkling comedy often produced responses which were a trifle disappointing. One Examiner described the work as stodgy. Hence, whilst candidates dealt efficiently enough with the misunderstandings of the extract, it was only infrequently that the amusement was conveyed.

Question 47

Candidates usually had a good knowledge of Viola's characteristics but seemed unwilling or unable to go the next step and engage with her fascination as a dramatic personality. Weaker answers of course simply wrote out their character sketch of Viola.

Question 48

There were some very lively impersonations of Sir Toby. It was just a pity that some of that life did not seem to permeate the work on the other tasks.

Oscar Wilde: *An Ideal Husband*

Question 49

There were very few responses to these questions but candidates who attempted this one seemed able to delineate the issues raised by the extract with some clarity and thought.

Question 50

This question was not quite so straightforward since it required at best some interpretation of what lies behind the wit. However, some did that well and produced a well-researched argument. At the other end of the scale there were answers whose range was very limited.

Question 51

Some struggled to create a voice for Lord Goring but reasonable reward was usually possible if the thoughts given to him were convincing.