

CONTENTS

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH	2
Papers 0486/01 and 0486/04 Paper 1 (Open Books) and Paper 4 (Closed Books)	2
Paper 0486/02 Coursework.....	7
Paper 0486/03 Alternative to Coursework.....	7

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Papers 0486/01 and 0486/04

Paper 1 (Open Books) and Paper 4 (Closed Books)

General comments

Examiners reported that the quality of many answers was extremely high. Many candidates had evidently been very well prepared for the examination; they expressed their ideas clearly and were generally comfortable in selecting and using quotations in the discursive questions. Weaker candidates still tend to be less at ease when required to 'think on their feet' and not merely to regurgitate prepared material though they have accepted, and indeed embraced, the empathic tasks with real enthusiasm. They often gain significantly higher marks for these questions than for some of the more conventional ones, probably since they are able to give their imaginations freer rein and they are less constrained by what they think to be the correct approaches. Some candidates still do not read the questions carefully enough and think that telling the Examiner everything they know will substitute for answering the question set, though many produced very fresh and original responses, focused entirely on the terms of the questions. In general, the texts were known in detail and there was evidence of real enjoyment, which obviously communicated itself to Examiners.

Comments on specific questions

Poetry

Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Selected Poems*

This text was not such a popular choice as *Touched with Fire* but those candidates who had studied it had clearly derived a good deal of enjoyment from it, possibly because of the strength of the narrative in the poems and the exotic and romantic settings.

Question 1

Of all the questions this was the one that suffered most from candidates not focusing on the extract sufficiently closely and substituting close reading and analysis of imagery for generalised, 'learned' background about the Romantic Movement and Coleridge's family life. What was required was exploration of the way in which the words and images create a specific atmosphere. Biographical detail about Coleridge and his son had very little relevance here.

Question 2

This question was generally answered more relevantly, perhaps because the atmosphere is more unusual and extreme. Candidates generally realised what was required and selected sinister details about Geraldine and the surroundings of the castle to support their answers.

Question 3

Candidates usually selected appropriate 'moments' though there was the usual variation in interpretation of what constitutes a 'moment'. Weaker candidates operated on the principle that the longer the passage they chose, the less detail they needed to go into, whereas successful answers demonstrated just how much can be extracted from only a few lines of the poem. The favourite choices were the appearance of the Ghost Ship and the moment when the sailors' souls depart their bodies. Most candidates were able to quote very accurately from the poem.

from *Poems Deep and Dangerous* ed. Jo Phillips

Question 4

Though the poem was printed on the question paper, there was surprisingly little detail in many answers. The focus was on language but candidates tended to expatiate on Lawrence's philosophy about man and nature in general terms.

Question 5

Insufficient answers were seen to warrant general comment.

Question 6

Insufficient answers were seen to warrant general comment.

Touched with Fire ed. Jack Hydes: from Section E

Question 7

This was by far the most popular of all poetry questions. Clearly the poem had been studied in some detail and candidates had no difficulty in understanding it. The level of response was generally pleasing: although there was the odd candidate who interpreted 'moving' in the physical sense, most answers gave a strong personal response to the pathos of the situation. There was, however, a certain sameness to the answers. There are obviously notes available on the poem and the same interpretations, insufficiently digested in weaker answers, tended to recur: for example, the 'poppy bruise' was often connected with the death of soldiers in the World War I, but the link was not sufficiently explained. The best answers did not merely trawl through the poem, explaining the situation and sympathising with the boy and his parents, but showed a close engagement with the language and imagery of the poem, particularly with the devastating last line.

Question 8

Prayer Before Birth elicited some interesting responses, which certainly did not suffer from the over-preparedness of many responses to other poetry questions. Though many of the answers were less polished, there was often more of a sense of a real attempt to get to grips with the ideas of the poem. *One Flesh* was a less popular choice but often produced sensitive responses, though there was a tendency for candidates to forget that the question was asking them to comment on a dark view of the world.

Question 9

Insufficient answers were seen to warrant general comment.

Prose

Twentieth Century Short Stories, ed. Douglas R. Barnes & R.F. Egford

Question 10

There were two aspects to this question. The first related to the significance of the passage in the context of the whole story and candidates who failed to see that this is what the story has been building to and that it is a crucial turning point in Elizabeth's journey towards self-discovery, failed to really engage with the story. The second aspect required exploration of the ways in which the writing makes it so sad and moving. (Incidentally, it is always somewhat disarming when candidates refer to the main character as 'Liz', when she is never called this.) There was not much evidence of lack of knowledge but weaker answers often laid all the blame for the failed relationship at the door of one or other of the couple, without really involving themselves with Elizabeth's thought processes. A few seemed to think that if they concentrated on the references to chrysanthemums, this would be addressing the question. They were wrong. As was to be expected, the best answers not only saw the passage in context, but showed a sensitive engagement with Elizabeth and with her sense of guilt and regret.

Question 11

This was a less popular question, and answers were generally not so successful. Most of the candidates who attempted it seemed to think that merely giving a summary or re-telling their chosen story would suffice and their answers therefore lacked relevance.

Question 12

There were some excellent Mr Thomases, showing detailed knowledge of the story and creating a convincing voice. Some of the less convincing seemed to think that he and Wren were contemporaries or that he had built the house himself, but generally there were some interesting and appropriate answers, though there were one or two general diatribes about the state of the world and the indiscipline of youth.

Anita Desai: *The Village by the Sea*

Question 13

This was a very popular text and the three questions were given almost equal attention. There was a tendency, as ever, for weaker answers merely to paraphrase, or re-tell the passage, but there were also some real attempts to engage with the detail and colour of the description. The best answers had no difficulty in pointing out Hari's new determination and independence.

Question 14

There were many strong responses to the unpleasantness of the father and the best were supported by telling detail such as Hari's wish that he would be bitten by a snake. Some candidates were able to find some sympathy for him when he apparently reforms at the end of the novel, but others found this unconvincing and a device for tying up loose ends.

Question 15

Candidates entered into the role of Hari with some enthusiasm. It was not quite such an easy task as might have at first appeared in that the voice is not particularly distinctive, but the novel was generally so well known and the character understood that the portrayals were convincing. Some candidates adopted a more retrospective approach than was called for, though comments on the influence of Mr Panwallah were very relevant.

Charles Dickens: *Great Expectations*

Question 16

This passage elicited some sensitive and balanced responses to Pip. Sympathy abounded for the loss of his expectations, including Estella, and the way in which he has been manipulated by Miss Havisham, but this was frequently offset by contempt at his treatment of Joe and Biddy and at his feeling that he could not go and make amends when it is certain that they would have forgiven him. There was also contempt at his snobbish and unfeeling treatment of Magwitch. The best answers explored the way in which Dickens uses pathetic fallacy here.

Question 17

Some answers focused on the physical descriptions of Miss Havisham, some on the way in which her betrayal by Compeyson leads to her spite against all men and particularly the way in which she manipulates Pip. Either approach was valid and created strong responses. It was pleasing to note the amount of accurate textual detail that most candidates were able to recall and adduce here.

Question 18

Though a few candidates wrote in a very flat manner and attributed more self-analysis to Joe than was appropriate, most engaged with the character and were able to incorporate many of his figures of speech into their writing, thus creating very convincing portraits.

Graham Greene: *Travels with my Aunt*

Too few candidates answered questions on this text to warrant general comment.

Dalene Matthee: *Fiela's Child*

Question 22

The passage did not appear to present any problems for candidates and they were generally able to enter into Fiela's feelings. As ever, a few seemed to think that a simple re-telling would suffice.

Question 23

This was not a popular option and candidates had difficulty in selecting two episodes and giving them equal value.

Question 24

There were a number of misreadings of the question. It clearly directs candidates to the latter part of the novel, but some thought it was referring to the episode referred to in the extract-based question and it was therefore difficult for them to achieve a reasonable mark.

Henry Handel Richardson: *The Getting of Wisdom*

Too few candidates answered questions on this text to warrant general comment.

Amy Tan: *The Bonesetter's Daughter*

Question 28

There were some very sound and thorough answers to this question since it addressed a topic which had no doubt been discussed in class. Answers were differentiated by the extent to which they were able to cross reference details from the passage with incidents from earlier in the novel.

Question 29

Insufficient answers were seen to warrant general comment.

Question 30

This was by far the most successful of the questions on this text, with some really perceptive recreations of what Precious Auntie would be feeling.

Drama

Alan Ayckbourn: *Absent Friends*

Question 31

Most candidates were able to deal with the insincerity presented here. Some of the better answers went on to discuss how the writing explores the nature of friendship.

Question 32

This produced some balanced and thorough responses. Evelyn seemed to strike a chord with a lot of candidates and they communicated a strong sense of enjoyment in the character. The best answers often made the point that her lack of hypocrisy makes a refreshing change in the context of the play.

Question 33

This was another empathic question that prompted highly successful answers. Most candidates were able to assume a convincing voice and the best answers contained references to details ranging from across the whole text.

Liz Lochhead/Gina Moxley: *Cuba and Doghouse*

Insufficient answers were seen to warrant general comment, but there was some evidence that those who had chosen these plays responded with some enthusiasm to them.

Arthur Miller: *All My Sons*

Question 37

Although the question specifically directed candidates to the extract, many used their knowledge of the rest of the play to explain Kate's feelings *at this point*. Though hindsight was sometimes used effectively, some candidates ignored the fact that at this point the audience does not know that Kate is covering up for Joe and that impressions of Kate here are not necessarily the same as later on in the play. Modern 'psychobabble' was evident in many answers; the phrase 'in denial' came up time and time again.

Question 38

There were many good, detailed and balanced responses to Joe. The question was straightforward and the material was obviously well known. Answers were discriminated by the depth of personal response and evaluation.

Question 39

George is not the most central of characters, but it was good to see the extent to which he was understood and sympathised with. There were some very convincing recreations.

William Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night*

Question 40

This was a popular question and handled very well by some candidates who were able to make a variety of inferences from fairly limited evidence. Weaker answers tended to interpret the second part of the question as an invitation to go on to the Malvolio plot, but this was only incidentally of relevance.

Question 41

There were many very good answers to this question though some interpreted 'likeable' as being likeable to the other characters in the play rather than to the audience. There were some thorough comparisons of the two characters, of their self-indulgence, vanity and shallowness, and generally Olivia was thought to be the most likeable because of the care and concern she exhibits for her 'staff' and the way in which she is prepared to accept humiliation and rejection.

Question 42

There were some absolutely excellent Malvolios. Some candidates attempted to recreate Shakespearian English with some success. Others caught exactly his pride and self-deception and also his puzzlement at Olivia's reaction to the yellow stockings etc. Some candidates depicted him in the dark room, which was perhaps going too far forward into the plot, but they were not penalised so long as they addressed the actual incident referred to. It was difficult, however, to credit those who presented him as guessing that Sir Toby and the others had tricked him, and swearing vengeance.

George Bernard Shaw: *The Devil's Disciple*

Question 43

This play seemed to have been much enjoyed and there were some thorough and engaged responses to the extract.

Question 44

Although most candidates found Mrs Dudgeon a very sour and unsympathetic character, they were generally able to find something to say in her defence and this was usually coloured by what they perceived as Shaw's disgust at the lack of rights women had in that period.

Question 45

There were some vivid and appropriate recreations of Anderson, though many focused entirely on his desire to save Richard and did not deal with his assumption of the role of soldier and revolutionary. Comments on his relationship with Judith were also rather scarce.

Paper 0486/02 Coursework
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General comments

As usual, every Centre will receive its own report on coursework from an External Moderator. When one reads through these reports, it is quite clear that many of the comments made in past years have been read and attended to, and there is not very much which needs reporting this year with a view to action next year.

Perhaps one of the most gratifying features was the number of occasions upon which Moderators have thanked the Centre for the care taken over the administration. For instance, it is now quite unusual for the Moderator to find nothing, or nothing of substance, in the space given over on the Candidate Record Card for commentary on the characteristics of the folder. Unfortunately, there are still some Centres who seem to think that one or two lines will do justice to a candidate's work and some who expand upon candidates' qualities as students rather than providing an assessment of their work. However, these are now well in the minority.

Newer Centres in particular are reminded that tasks for this coursework portfolio need *focus* and that is not achieved by simply asking candidates to write generally on a text. There are still Centres where the title of a piece of work is simply the title of the text. The most common failing is still the setting of tasks which do not stimulate the candidate to engage with the effectiveness of the literary language of a text. It may well be that thematic and character issues will be more central in some texts than others but in general IGCSE assessment criteria make it clear that it will be difficult for high reward to be given to work that shows no evidence of engagement with language. If the task does not make clear this requirement, then the candidate can hardly be blamed for failing to provide evidence of such engagement.

The failure to provide such evidence is most damaging in writing on poetry. Here the particular features and the effectiveness of the words of a poem are at the very centre of any poetic study and tasks which merely encourage paraphrase of 'content' are severely limiting. This can sometimes be a risk in tasks that make candidates compare poems.

Paper 0486/03 Alternative to Coursework

General comments

The Examiners were delighted that most of the candidates responded to the challenge with considerable enthusiasm, insight and genuine warmth. The subject-matter appealed to male and female alike and to candidates of diverse social and cultural backgrounds. All Examiners were impressed by the originality of many of the responses of the stronger candidates and commented that almost all of the weaker candidates had something useful to say about the mother's feelings. Particularly, they enjoyed the variety of response, a sure sign that candidates had learnt to feel confident in their own judgements and had developed an enjoyment in reading poetry as a creative activity.

The complexity of the mother's feelings is apparent from the very beginning of the poem. Almost immediately, candidates revealed how closely they were able to read the words. Most candidates noted the smallness and fragility of the baby and the mother's anxious perusal of the crib. Stronger candidates explored the use of the word, 'scan', in conjunction with the mention of the duration of 'a half-second', noting the contradiction in terms and showing how this accentuated the mother's anxiety, concluding as one candidate did that 'her mother instincts are sharp and alert'. Similarly, stronger candidates commented on the oxymoron, 'gently flung' (without necessarily using this term). These were candidates who felt able to *explore* meaning and this readiness led to more complex interpretations of the poem and greater sensitivity to the uncertain nature of the mother's feelings. The imagery of the first four lines led very many candidates to conclude that the baby was viewed as a kind of angel, a gift from God. While the Examiners did not believe this to be an accurate inference, it was accepted as a reasonable attempt to explain a difficult image. Where a number of candidates erred, however, was to pursue this image relentlessly, ignoring other less flattering images, and producing a grossly sentimentalised version of the poem as a whole.

This poem demands of its readers the ability to accept and indeed embrace ambivalence. The features alluded to in the previous paragraph differentiated between those who were anxious to define a single meaning in the verse from those who were able to find and accept multiple meanings. It was praiseworthy enough for a candidate to embark on such an exploration but any attempt to go further and reconcile some of these ambivalences usually brought an answer clearly into the highest mark band.

The second part of the question asking *how* the words of the poem helped the candidate share in the experience of being a mother demanded an explicit commentary on the effect of language and image. The better candidates explored the use of language using *brief* quotations, often of two or three words only, and always examined in context. Examiners commented adversely on the use of *long* quotations. Apart from the length of time they take to write out, they do not encourage precision or sharpness of comment on the use of language. Many candidates did use technical terminology with the accuracy, confidence and ease which comes after it has been used habitually and over a long period of time as a descriptive and analytical tool. The minority, however, who still used such terminology obtrusively as an end in itself gained very little reward for so doing.

Many of the candidates identified the quiet intimacy of the poem. They explored the unhurried, steady pace of the description of the mother's handling of the baby. Examiners recognised the significance of this recognition. It meant that such candidates were able to let the words of the poem sound in their heads and respond to the rhythms of the piece. It was a very difficult task indeed to analyse *how* this tranquil effect had been achieved, but some exceptional candidates achieved this magnificently, exploring the syntax, the versification, the sounds of words like 'slide' and 'slip'. Some even explored the tension between the overall tone of the poem and the disturbing, alienating quality of some of the imagery. This level of commentary is to be found only at the very highest end of the range of what can be expected at IGCSE and is more akin to expectations at AS or A Level. However, it is very welcome when it does appear.

While there has clearly been a significant improvement in the way Centres tackle this Unseen work in the last few years, this report will conclude by noting some of the avoidable causes of failure which still mar work of candidates from time to time. Some tended to paraphrase or explain the poem, line by line, rather than answer the question(s) directly. This is probably *still* the most common reason for candidates underachieving, although most Centres have successfully steered their candidates away from this approach. There was still a tendency for some candidates to follow a preformed agenda whether it was appropriate to the poem or not. Such candidates wasted time by making such banal statements as, 'There is little repetition in this poem' or 'I can find no alliteration in this poem'. A cause of underachievement, this year, was due to candidates wandering away from the text to write generally about how mothers ought to bring up their children. Closely related to this was the assumption that all poetry ought to have a 'message', usually a moral point. One candidate, by contrast, saw the poem as 'a sort of diary' and the Examiners felt that this was much nearer the mark.

Finally, a significant cause of underachievement was repetitiveness, due to poor organisation of answers. In the case of this examination, Examiners found that those who followed the structure suggested by the bullet-points in the question wrote well organised answers. On the subject of organisation, one Examiner commented: 'Some candidates felt it was necessary to 'translate' the poem before beginning to interpret it; this was unfortunate. Some responses rambled and took quite some time to accumulate higher marks; others included very lengthy plans and first drafts. Best practice seemed to be a brief outline plan, before using the question and bullet points to begin shaping an essay. It was important to leave enough time for a final summative comment: it was at this moment that candidates often best demonstrated their ability to reflect on their reading and interpret their reactions.' While it is up to the Centres and their candidates to develop their own methods of planning their answers, such advice might prove valuable and certainly it should be borne in mind that, as few candidates had trouble completing their work, they should have the confidence to devote a significant time to reflection on the poem and the task(s) and how they are going to organise their response before embarking on their essay.

Many candidates related the poem to their own family life. Examiners enjoyed endearing little asides about how the poem was special to particular candidates because they had just been given a new sister or brother; for some, it helped them, they said, to appreciate their mothers' care for them when they were infants. Some girls related it to what they hoped would be future experiences. *As long as these were brief observations integrated into their discourses and not at variance with the tone and meaning of the poem itself*, such personal comments were welcome indications that the candidates were reading the poem as something more than an academic exercise to pass an examination. One Examiner commented that candidates had sometimes overused the words, 'genuine' and 'warm' in their summary comments at the end of essays, but that much of the work did indeed show these very attractive qualities.