

LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

Paper 2010/01

Paper 1

There were clear favourites in all three forms: *Macbeth* was the most popular of the drama texts, *Lord of the Flies* the most popular prose text, and in the poetry section *Songs of Ourselves* was overwhelmingly more popular than Coleridge's *Selected Poems*. Of the other texts on offer the most frequently encountered amongst the novels were *Things Fall Apart*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the short story anthology, and amongst the plays *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The wording of the questions seemed to present few problems to candidates, and where that did occur it was the failure to read the question with attention that was usually the cause of the difficulty. There were a number of instances of candidates writing on two texts when the *either/or* injunction was clearly telling them to answer on just one. In such instances Examiners were instructed to mark the answer holistically, but inevitably the work on each text could not reach the standard which might have been attained if the candidate had written as instructed. Elsewhere, the main reason for any difficulties arose from limited knowledge of the detail of the text.

However, in the great majority of scripts, it was plain that candidates had managed to see precisely what the task required and had got on with it. There were riders to this which will be mentioned later, but this was pleasing indeed. Most Examiners commented that they detected a continuing improvement in standards. It is now very unusual to come across work which betrays failure to have engaged with the texts on any level or in the worst case apparently not to have even opened the book.

Rubric infringements were extremely rare.

This was the first November session in which candidates for Paper 1 were required to write on all three forms (drama, poetry, prose). Since some Centres in the past had not opted to take poetry in the written examination, and this form year-in-year-out has generally been the area of weakest response, it was expected that there might at least be a slight dip in performance this year, but it was pleasing that this proved not to be the case. Of course, of all the forms poetry continues to present the greatest of challenges to many candidates but the extent to which that is so seemed to be no more so than in previous years. Examiners continued to make comment upon the quality of quite a lot of the work they encountered which speaks highly of the teaching which is going on in this syllabus. They wrote of much work seen which showed deep engagement with the texts read, a directness in addressing the task, a confident independence of mind shown in argument, an ability to write in an involved and analytical manner about the wonders of literary language and, on top of it all, an enjoyment and enthusiasm for novels, short stories, plays and poetry. There was a significant amount of work at all levels which Examiners found rewarding to read: at *all* levels, it is stressed. Of course, it is highly pleasurable to give a candidate the highest of rewards, but an Examiner may also find pleasure in reading the work of a candidate of apparently limited ability in the subject who may be struggling to come to terms with a text but for whom the reading of it has obviously been worthwhile.

It is once again pleasing to note that in the main candidates continue to pay attention in detail to the extract instead of, as was once the case, using it as a peg on which to write a general essay about the text.

Answers to the 'empathic' questions are now more frequently encountered in many Centres and often with rewarding results.

The shortcomings noted by Examiners were for the most part familiar and often the obverse of the qualities noted above. Examiners read, as they do every year, answers which showed limited knowledge of the text, which did not fully answer the question, which did not engage with a text on the level of language when asked to do so, or which did not recognise the importance of engaging with the detail of the extract in a passage-based task. Further improvement remains possible, particularly in the area of poetry. This session there were a significant minority who simply ignored parts of the questions on the *Songs of Ourselves* questions. This may have something to do with the nature of the poems selected this year for the tasks. By

and large they were a didactic group, which may have tempted some candidates to stray from due consideration their poetic qualities. 'Caged Bird' was a particular victim of this tendency. Some candidates virtually ignored the *poem*, so eager were they to dilate at length on the injustices of the world. The question required an exploration of *the ways in which the words strikingly convey the injustices of the world* and so any candidates who merely asserted at length that the poet was conveying a message about slavery (for example) were not going to receive much reward for their efforts. Likewise, the task on 'Before the Sun' was deliberately trying to deflect the candidate away from conveying what they thought to be the 'message' of the poem and towards Mungoshi's descriptive qualities as a poet. Sadly, often that was to no avail. At times diverse and complex novels such as *Things Fall Apart* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and equally complex plays such as *A Raisin in the Sun* were unfortunately reduced to one-dimensional sermons on colonialism and racism.

Recognition of the importance of moving candidates towards an understanding that good literature does infinitely more than convey simple moral 'messages' (and in so doing providing an appropriate foundation for those planning to pursue further study of the subject at a higher level) is one of the reasons why IGCSE Literature places such emphasis on the language writers use. Once engaged with its power and beauty, the reader will no longer think that reading is a matter of decoding the 'message' of the text. One will not, for instance, think that Malcolm's speech at the end of *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's own final judgment on a man whose torment the dramatist has conveyed in the preceding drama with such power and pity. This approach to literature as a means towards uncovering human existence in all its wonderful complexity might be helped if the investigation of literature as an act of creation at times was made more central to study. It is still too often the case that drama is not approached as something created to be effective in the milieu of the theatre. Answers to **Question 17**, for instance, too often became a character sketch with no attention to the many places in which Stanley is designed to play a particularly dramatic role in the play. In the extract tasks on the novels, it soon became obvious which were the candidates able to engage with a novelist's craft of compelling the reader to enter her or his world.

Examiners also found it quite obvious which candidates had thought widely about a text's complexity and those who had not. There are still too many who know little of a text outside the 'central' characters. In **Question 29**, for example, candidates were given a choice of three 'minor', but at certain moments crucial, characters in *Great Expectations* and some seemed to have very little knowledge of these characters, never mind what their roles in the novel might be.

It needs emphasising again that empathic tasks are not an invitation to personal fantasy and invention. On the contrary, they are designed to test the intensity of the candidate's engagement with the text, both as to the character through the voice and the situation in which the character is placed. The task will have been carefully framed to ensure that there is the material in the play or novel which will make wilful invention unnecessary. While some sort of linguistic ability to adopt a way of speaking appropriate to the character cannot but be an advantage, this does not mean one has to write, for instance, in Shakespearian verse. Truth to Lady Macbeth's personality, for instance, can be transmitted in many ways. But knowledge of her character and her likely state of mind at the beginning of the play is hardly conveyed by giving her material more apt to romantic literature or by having her concerned about such things as her hair appointment and a luncheon date. Empathic tasks are not a means of escape from the rigour of more usual forms of examination answers.

Comments on specific questions

A Raisin in the Sun.

Question 1

The great majority of those who chose this text opted for this task and generally did it well. There were some answers which captured superbly the ironies and sarcasms as the scene develops. That was the main differentiator in reward. Most felt suitably outraged by Lindner but did not really engage with the way the scene develops dramatically. A few completely missed the point and felt that Lindner was really a rather nice man.

Question 2

This was not a popular choice and was seldom done very well. The majority of answers did little more than list some of the character's dreams without making any link to their dramatic effect.

Question 3

Again, this was not very popular. Perhaps candidates found Ruth a slightly shadowy figure. However, some captured nicely what would have been her stunned reaction and the bitterness ensuing. Some with insight suggested amongst other things that she would have characteristically thought of others' disappointed hopes as well, even Walter's.

Cuba and Doghouse.

Question 4

Some candidates showed ability to handle the drama of this extract. Answers ranged from the very insightful to the poor. Some made very little of the adults' predicament.

Question 5

The answers on this were stronger on the father than the mother. However, surprisingly some candidates made little of the man's brutality.

Question 6

This was quite well done, a number capturing accurately Cairncross' bigoted priorities, though only the best captured his pompous, self regarding 'voice'.

As You Like It

This text was rarely offered and when it was virtually everyone did **Question 7**. The majority of answers offered formulaic descriptions of the differences between court and country without paying detailed attention to the extract.

Macbeth

This was a very popular text and the work on it occasionally impressed. However, only a minority managed to engage with the play in any real depth.

Question 10

Most candidates managed to identify the context of this soliloquy and to describe reasonably efficiently what was going through Macbeth's mind. However, only a minority really probed the way the language reveals the turmoil in his mind and hence engaged with its full dramatic impact. Rather too many answers did little more than paraphrase and some struggled to do even that. Some weaker candidates thought that here he made up his mind to do the murder and others even thought that Lady Macbeth had already persuaded him to commit the deed.

Question 11

Again most who attempted this task had some grasp of Banquo's qualities. Most saw him simply as a good man, indeed really the hero of the play. Only a minority seemed prepared to take on the challenge of the question, which, of course, encouraged candidates to ponder the way the play makes plain his growing suspicions of Macbeth's intentions, his own ambitions and his complicit silence once the deed is done.

Question 12

There were some very impressive assumptions of Lady Macbeth's character, which not only captured the very likely feelings of apprehension she would have had about her loved one's fate on the battlefield but also the fierce pride she has in her husband's valour. Quite a few converted this pride very convincingly into her making odious comparisons with the king whom he serves and the ambitions she might have for him. Whether she has already fully formed ideas of his removing the king must be doubtful. Rather too many had so uncertain a knowledge of the chronology of the play that they thought she had already received the letter and some made her a hopelessly romantic and/or anachronistic figure.

Twelfth Night

Question 13

Not all the candidates saw the enjoyment in this extract, but those who did and brought forward textual evidence in support of their views scored well.

Question 14

Many found this rather difficult and some answers merely listed different kinds of love. This approach was acceptable as a beginning but for higher reward an exploration of each was essential. A few noteworthy responses did just this, and were rewarded accordingly.

Question 15

Some candidates had Olivia demanding an immediate divorce and others had her threatening both Sebastian and Viola with dire punishments! By contrast, the best answers were those who reflected the Olivia of the play: she accepts her marriage happily because she sees in Sebastian many of the qualities she has associated with Viola – and, of course, she has the same good looks.

The Devil's Disciple

This was quite a popular text with a full range of response on show. The great majority who opted for it did **Question 16**. Some candidates here showed a keen awareness of the way Shaw develops this scene to a climax, though there was generally a lack of awareness of the humour. Others just described events with greater or lesser accuracy. Some seemed to be quite unaware of any irony, a few even seeming to think that Richard was a true disciple of the Devil.

Question 17

The minority who did this usually had something pertinent to say. However, most had difficulty in ranging beyond a few selected features into a fully developed argument.

Question 18

This was not popular, perhaps because, as proved to be the case with most of those who chose the question, they thought Burgoyne's characteristic voice to be beyond them to adopt. However, usually the content was apt.

A Streetcar Named Desire

This play continues to produce much good work and clearly appeals to students of this age.

Question 19

Very few were unable to say something of value about this moment in the play. Most at least recognised its poignancy to some degree and some conveyed fully the shock of the brutality of Blanche's removal to an asylum, picking out the drama of Stanley's appalling treatment of her even when he is getting his way. Several pointed to how peculiarly terrible this was, given the fact that he had raped her. Quite a few explored the powerful effect of Stella's realisation of what she has allowed to happen. However, there was a disappointing minority who seemed to do no more than to describe a few moments in the extract, being quite unable to engage with its dramatic impact.

Question 20

Most who tackled this were able to say relevant things about Stanley's personality. Rather too many did not really make the next step, which was to look at the way Williams creates memorable drama out of this personality at specific moments in the play.

Question 21

This was one of the most successfully attempted of the empathic tasks on the paper. There were some responses which precisely created Blanche's way of speaking, and the content in the majority of answers was convincing in conveying her apprehension of what lies ahead, though sometimes she was given knowledge, for instance about Stanley, that she would not have had.

Coleridge

There was a relatively limited take-up of this poetry text. A reliance on basic narration characterised many responses to **Question 22** and **Question 23**. There was work on display which actually engaged with Coleridge's world but it was greatly in the minority. The choices made from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* seemed too often to have been made because they were remembered rather than because they were very suitable to the task.

Question 24

There was rather more response here to the scene Coleridge paints and to his thoughts. However, deep probing of the poetry was rare.

Songs of Ourselves: The University of Cambridge International Examinations Anthology of Poetry in English (Set poems in Section C)

This was by far the more popular of the poetry questions and there was much good, or very good, work seen. But many candidates are not scoring higher because of failing to engage more fully with the power of poetic language, even in work where there was clear realisation that it was important. Giving candidates a hatful of terminology like *lexical choices*, *internal vocalisation*, *positive and negative lexical fields* (as seen in some answers) does not of itself ensure engagement with the associations and music of words which are the essence of poetry.

Question 25

The question was not asking for a decoding of the poem; experience already suggests that it is a poem whose 'meaning' remains a matter for considerable conjecture. It should have been an exploration of Mungoshi's evocation of the early morning. Alas, for so many candidates this involved probing what the words precisely communicate and what makes those words peculiarly effective, and they were unprepared to engage with the poem on this level.

Question 26

There were some sensitive answers seen on both of these poems, but some showed the barest understanding of them. Some thought that *Farmhand* was a past love affair, and some thought that 'sandy' suggested how unkempt the farmhand was.

Question 27

Most wrote on 'Caged Bird'. Paraphrase and decoding ruled the day, with, as already has been suggested, this being unconvincing at times. Is the poem intended to have only relevance to black Americans and their situation? A few thought it was about cruelty to birds. Only a minority really related in detail to the way the words powerfully depicted the contrast between freedom and captivity, whether actual or in the mind. Some of these were very impressive in their response to the power of Angelou's poetic language. The Shelley poem for the most part received at least sensible responses as to its purpose, though again precise engagement with the words of the poem was often lacking.

Things Fall Apart

Question 28

This was done well by the majority who were able and willing to engage with Achebe's writing in detail. The weakest answers amounted to little more than a description of events in the extract.

Question 29

This was the most popular of the Achebe tasks . While it produced a number of answers which were just character sketches, the majority presented a case, in some instances conducting a sophisticated argument with telling detail in support and capturing the ambivalent manner of Achebe's presentation of the man.

Question 30

While very few attempted this, a handful of very good responses were seen.

Great Expectations

Question 31

Most of the answers on this task saw clearly what a dysfunctional family the Pockets were and there were accurate assessments of Mrs. Pocket's total lack of interest in the raising of her children. What was often disappointing was the lack of response to the humour in the passage; some answers read like the report of a horrified social worker, and it would have been good had more responded to the image of Mr. Pocket's desperation depicted by his pulling himself up by his hair.

Question 32

There were some impressive responses to Wemmick and Pumblechook, but Orlick might hardly have existed.

Question 33

Far fewer did this, but those who did usually captured Biddy's mixed feelings well.

The Siege

Question 34

There was some quite delicately perceptive work on this extract, though for some it presented problems of striking a balance between setting the passage in context and attending to the undercurrents of the passage itself.

Question 35

This proved a testing task in that it was difficult for some to make a distinction between the effects of the siege and those for which the regime was responsible, even though the evidence of the latter is wide ranging in the novel.

Question 36

Far too few answers were seen to make general comment appropriate.

Lord of the Flies

This was a very popular text and the consensus amongst Examiners was that much of the work was excellent.

Question 37

There were a great many insightful responses to this extract. Few failed in some measure to see what a shocking moment this was and many were ready with copious detail to say why it was. Even better were those who in considerable numbers at least reacted to the novelist's art, latching onto the setting with relish. There were some who failed to make any connection between this and the dreadful deed about to be perpetrated and there were some who were surprisingly unsure who or what was the beast, failing to make anything of the last paragraph.

Question 38

There was much thoughtful argument to be found in this task, though some made no distinction between the irritation shown by figures in the novel and their own. Most found good reason in the end to sympathise strongly with Piggy.

Question 39

There were some very strong assumptions of Jack's character at this juncture. They captured his shrugging off of the death of Simon and his understanding of the opportunity this gave him to extend his hold over the boys. His gratuitous cruelty and his ego were well captured. Quite a few answers, however, gave him insights into his own motivation which he would not have had, and some even made him quite uncharacteristically remorseful.

Travels with My Aunt

Question 40

Nearly all the answers on this text were to this question and generally it was competently done, at least as to understanding Henry's state of mind. What was not always grasped was the significance of the passage in the novel, it being the moment when Henry sees his past and present life with some clarity. Some took things quite literally and thought that he decided here to go back to his old life.

Question 41

Far too few answers were seen on this text to make general comment appropriate.

Question 42

Some answers did justice to the Aunt, at least in establishing her pleasure at the prospect of her son marrying. A few caught her wry voice. Conversely some made her quite uncharacteristically maudlin and sentimental.

To Kill a Mockingbird

Question 43

This was a popular task in a popular novel and it was usually done solidly at the very least, with pleasingly few resorting simply to describing what was going on. Most attempted to convey the atmosphere at least to some degree. However, in a significant number of scripts there was a repetitive nature to much of the comment. Where this happened it was usually because candidates were not probing the tone of the detail sufficiently; answers often did not detect humour, for example, in the writing.

Question 44

There were many answers to this question and in a majority of them there really was some attempt to make judgement rather than just to tabulate some instances of Atticus's methods of bringing up children. All seemed to approve, as no doubt the author intended them to!

Question 45

This task was the least often chosen on this text, and in general the results were less accomplished than those of the passage and essay question. Perhaps Jem's elder brother personality proved rather elusive for some and certainly a number of character assumptions were way over the top for this son of Atticus.

The Getting of Wisdom

There were far too few answers seen on this novel to make general comment appropriate.

Into the Wind: Contemporary Stories in English

Question 49

This task was frequently attempted and the great majority saw the true nature of the relationship quite clearly. The strongest answers were those which really looked hard at the inferences to be drawn from the detail of the extract. Some lost focus by in effect writing their essay on the story as a whole. Only a few really conveyed the full detestability of the husband and, extraordinarily, a few seemed disposed to berate Molly for cowardice and other such failings.

Question 50

This task required a close attention to the way the writing develops the tension and suspense. Most candidates were quite good at pointing to moments in their chosen story which were full of suspense but were less good at tracing the build up of detail.

Question 51

This proved one of the best answered of the empathic tasks on the paper. Perhaps it was the case that Alice's contradictory feelings associated with leaving the nest struck a chord with a number of young people. Whatever the reason, Examiners commented on how touching were some of the assumptions of the character, and how well understood was the symbolism of this short story by the year's Nobel Prize winner.