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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.**

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 0397/01

Poetry, Prose and Drama

General comments

The examination in this session prompted a wide range of answers from candidates, many showing confidence and a real engagement with their set texts. Examiners enjoyed reading some very stimulating answers to the questions and, by and large, candidates throughout the mark range were able to show a thorough knowledge of the texts they had studied. In some cases they were able to put this knowledge into a wider cultural and historical perspective, leading to very sophisticated responses.

With the departure of William Blake from the syllabus, many Centres chose to study the replacement poet, John Keats, while *A Grain of Wheat* remains an enormously popular text. Only the poetry of Stevie Smith was neglected, while again on Paper 9, few candidates had studied *Serious Money*.

The more confident candidates are able to shape and develop their answers to the open (a) questions, and the most successful are those who can focus their points with close reference and quotation. Such candidates avoid the retelling of narrative, constructing their answers around specific points of argument which are in turn related to specific parts of the text. A number of candidates write weaker answers because they lack close reference and quotation to support the points they make. It is very difficult to write successfully about a writer's techniques without quotation, and some of the poetry essays in particular were significantly hampered by a lack of quotation. The most successful answers to the passage (b) questions look very closely at the printed material and are able to comment in considerable detail on the writers' choices of language, imagery and form and their effects.

Comments on specific questions

Question 1

John Keats: *Selected Poems*

- (a) Though a popular choice, Keats seems to have caused problems for a number of candidates. Though those candidates who answered this question were aware of what narrative poetry is, many answers were inappropriate. Some elected to write about suitable poems, such as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *The Eve of St Agnes*, *Hyperion* and *Lamia*, but merely recounted the story without addressing the question. Others tried, usually unsuccessfully, to construct a case for *Ode to a Nightingale* or *Ode on a Grecian Urn* as narrative poems. This meant that those candidates who tackled the question with confidence shone out, and there were candidates who wrote with skill and sensitivity on Keats' use of setting and his creation of atmosphere, of his characterisation and use of dialogue, on his management of actions and events within the poems. In such answers, candidates usually concluded that the skills of the poet and the skills of the story-teller were very closely interwoven in these poems.
- (b) There were, equally, some very successful and well-informed answers on this poem, including those who were able to place it within Keats' development as a poet. Such answers traced the references to Shakespeare and *King Lear* and connected them to Keats himself, noting the 'cockney poet's' own desire for immortality. On the other hand, there is little to be gained by beginning such an essay with a substantial biography of Keats, as a number of candidates did. There were some misreadings of the poem, notably those who connected *King Lear* with 'the golden-tongued romance', and others who thought the poem voiced Keats' complaint about being obliged to read Shakespeare again. Such answers suggested that the candidates may not have prepared the poem, and perhaps had not prepared the longer narrative verse either and thus felt unable to answer (a). The attraction of the set selection is its variety, and candidates should be encouraged to be prepared to answer on the whole range of Keats' poetry contained in it.

Question 2

Ed. Hydes: *Touched with Fire (Sections A and B)*

- (a) *The Wild Swans at Coole, The Pond, Porpoises, Tall Nettles and Thistles* were all popular choices of poems by candidates answering this question. While many candidates were able to give at least reasonable accounts of the poems, only the most confident went beyond that to look more precisely at what the question was asking. Those candidates who linked their points about the language and form of the poems directly to the responses of the poets, and compared those responses, did very well.
- (b) The question on *Piano and Drums* was probably the most frequently answered question on the entire paper. It stimulated an enormous number of responses, many of which were very good – thoughtful, observant and sensitive. Some candidates wrote about the two forms of music only, but most placed the two instruments within a cultural context and noted the two influences pulling the narrator of the poem in different directions. While there was some polemic writing about colonialism, the most successful candidates based their answer on details from the poem, noting the singular and plural in the title, for example, the connections and differences between ‘spears poised’ and ‘daggerpoint’, the energetic verbs in the drums section. Candidates noted the warmth and nostalgia in the writing about the drums, and some dismissed the piano, but other more sensitive readers noted the ‘coaxing diminuendo’ and the ‘new horizons’; the narrator is ‘lost’ and ‘wandering’, but the final ‘mystic rhythm’ is of the drums and concerto combined. The last stanza is crucial, and it is therefore not surprising that many of the excellent answers to this question began with that stanza, rather than taking a linear approach to the poem.

Question 3

Stevie Smith: *Selected Poems*

- (a) There were very few answers on Stevie Smith, but those who answered this question chose appropriate poems. *Not Waving But Drowning, Egocentric, Deeply Morbid* all appeared, alongside a number of others. While candidates were able to illustrate the ‘frustrations, anxieties and despairs’ of life in the poems, they tended to be less successful in showing how their presentation in the poems is ‘fresh’ and ‘unexpected’.
- (b) The pattern was similar with this question. Candidates chose additional poems usefully to discuss alongside *God and the Devil*, and made comments on Smith’s view of humanity. Few, though, explored how Smith communicates that view.

Question 4

Elizabeth Gaskell: *North and South*

- (a) The stumbling block for some candidates with this question was the tendency to write a narrative summary of Margaret’s time in Milton Northern. Others, more successful, cited the influences in Milton which affect Margaret’s development: Thornton, the Higginses, the riot and her parents, for example. The best answers clearly focused on the question, which was on ‘the ways’ Gaskell shows ‘Margaret learning’. Such answers referred to Gaskell’s description of the physical impact Milton makes on Margaret, on the sympathetic conversations with Bessy Higgins and the more earnest ones with her father, on the robust arguments between Margaret and Thornton and on the presentation of her own self doubts. Such answers were able to range through the novel, citing episodes from London, Milton and Helstone to focus the points of argument, and thus avoided any lapse into narrative summary.
- (b) The passage was a popular option, offering plenty of material to candidates. Successful answers focused closely on the language employed by Gaskell, noting the ‘deep lead-coloured cloud’, the descriptions of streets and buildings, the verbs of motion and activity and Margaret’s mental comparisons between the northerners and the crowds in London. Reference was made to the dialogue, comparing Margaret’s rather terse contributions to conversation with her father’s longer, informative sentences, suggesting a difference between their responses before they ‘looked at each other in dismay’ at the end of the extract. Candidates who summarised the content of the passage, without such close attention, missed opportunities and were less successful.

Question 5Katherine Mansfield: *Short Stories*

- (a) This was the less popular of the two options on Mansfield, and while the candidates who attempted it usually chose appropriate stories to discuss, many of the answers tended towards narrative and did not explore the significance of the location in the kind of detail required by the question. *The Woman at the Store*, *Frau Brechenmacher Attends a Wedding*, *The Garden Party* and *At the Bay* were frequently chosen stories, offering different types of locations and different effects upon the stories and the characters who inhabit them.
- (b) Many of the answers on the extract from *Her First Ball* were enthusiastic and sensitive. Candidates noted the bird imagery and the interweaving of description, dialogue and thought which contributes to Mansfield's dreamlike presentation of Leila's experience at the ball. Some answers compared this fantasy presentation of dancing with the description of the grim dancing lessons with the 'cold piano' and "Miss Eccles poking the girls' feet" and connected this harsher reality with the fat man and the development of his character later in the story.

Question 6Ngugi: *A Grain of Wheat*

- (a) This question provoked some very interesting answers, some candidates acknowledging that they found the narrative structure challenging at first reading, but came to appreciate the perspectives on the tale and history which it provides. Many candidates recognised the importance of the past in determining the present and the future as a reason why Ngugi employs the dislocated chronology in the novel. A number of candidates wrote only about the importance of the past, however, without acknowledging the structure of the novel. Others noted the interweaving of past and present, often indicated in the narrative by such references as 'Then, as now...' and 'Without warning he was back in Nyeri...' Some linked these timeshifts with the different perspectives of the novel and noted the effects on the reader. Such effects suggested were the creation of puzzles and suspense, and the modification of the readers' sympathies as they read.
- (b) The most successful answers to this question noted how closely the personal and political were interrelated; some answers listed the sections they considered personal and those they considered political, which was a much more limiting approach to the question. Confident candidates noted that the personal was first indicated by the passage being Mumbi's first person narration, and showed how wider political actions caused individual suffering, highlighted by the fact that the rebel leader at the centre of the political actions was her brother. Other candidates compared the political events with personal concerns of human relationships and love within the passage, noting Karanja's attraction to Mumbi, while others considered how characters balanced their personal concerns and their political awareness, contrasting Kihika and Mumbi's detained husband with Karanja's choice to join the homeguards. The irony of Mumbi narrating her story to Kihika's betrayer was also often noted. There were many different and interesting approaches to the question; the most successful candidates argued their position using close references to the passage on the question paper.

Question 7Caryl Churchill: *Serious Money*

- (a) Though there were comparatively few answers on Churchill, there was nevertheless some enthusiastic and appreciative writing about the play and the playwright's technique. For this question, candidates referred to the pace created by the rhythm and rhyme of Churchill's verse dialogue and the action of the play being interspersed with scenes of financial dealing. The speed of the action itself, the rapidity of entrances and exits of characters and the use of songs were also features mentioned by candidates.
- (b) The nature of the conversation between Biddulph and Duckett puzzled some candidates who attempted this question, while others were able to discuss the ruthlessness of the negotiations and the changing nature of business. Good answers did not neglect Zac's comments at the end of the extract, while other good answers referred to the way characters interrupt each other and share lines of verse, increasing the pace of the dialogue.

Question 8

William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*

- (a) Surprisingly few of the candidates who answered on *Macbeth* attempted this question. One of the key discriminators in the answers was the candidates' care in answering the question set. A number of candidates opted to write just about the witches, and missed the question's focus on the 'uncertainty surrounding the supernatural' in the play. Those who picked this up noted the ambiguities of the witches' predictions and the riddling nature of the apparitions, while others considered whether Banquo's ghost may be a hallucination of Macbeth's mind.
- (b) Candidates responded enthusiastically to Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, often noting a balance between loving and supportive wife and malignant and powerful influence. Good answers noted that change in structure between the reading of the letter and the shift to blank verse for her own musings and picked up some of the language opportunities, such as the link between ambition and illness and some similarities with the witches' speeches.

Question 9

Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*

- (a) Candidates responded well to a question about a character who does not appear in the play, noting the reference to the portrait of the father in the stage directions, and linking Tom's character with that of his father. Successful answers noted the influence of his absence on each member of the family, and the way therefore that he seems to inhabit the play as an unseen fifth character.
- (b) Answers on the extract tended to focus on the conversation between Tom and Amanda, whose dialogue dominates the passage. Careful and observant candidates also noted the importance of Laura's largely silent presence, an observer of her mother's and brother's discussion of Amanda's past. These answers considered the likely impact on Laura of her mother's reminiscences of her past triumphs with 'gentleman callers', and the implicit comparison with Laura's lack of success. Strong answers were also characterised by attention to the effects of the stage directions and the screen legend, as well as the dialogue.