

O Level

English Literature

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ENGLISH LITERATURE

ORDINARY LEVEL

Subject 2000

Paper 2000/1

It was obvious that *Mr. Polly* had been much enjoyed and it was perhaps the best answered section on the paper. *The Crucible* was also a popular choice, but it had not, on the whole, been well studied. Some examiners felt it was more of an 'A' level text, though it was approved by others. The *Short Stories* was another frequent text, but the answers on it were usually disappointing, and there was a suspicion among examiners that too many Centres, wrongly regarding the book as being a soft option, leave these for candidates to read by themselves.

As for the paper, it was generally felt that most of the essay questions provided the candidates with clear guidance, ensuring a fair and worthwhile examination. In general the 'sectional' questions 6, 10, 13 and 15 were approved of, though some examiners queried their fairness and pointed out that these different types of questions made it hard to equate the marks with other questions. Perhaps, too, there was a tendency for marks to be out of balance in these 'fragmentary' questions, which do not demand the grasp, organisation and flow of thought required in a full essay answer. It was felt that some questions (10, 11 and 13, for example) required too much detailed knowledge on small areas of long novels. There proved to be some overlap between Q.7 and 9, Q.20 produced some surprisingly good answers, Q.25(a) was not very successful, Q.27 might have been improved by specifying the poems to be used, and a few examiners regretted the absence of an open-ended poetry question. In general, though, it was felt that the questions offered plenty of scope, being straightforward without being predictable.

There were widely different opinions about the quality of the work offered, largely dependent on the quality of the examiner's allocation. One examiner wrote that 'it was heartening to mark so many scripts that were relevant, perceptive and well-organised'; but another bewailed that 'the candidates' spelling, misuse of words, inappropriate and insensitive use of slang all continue to deteriorate'; and a third wrote a lament on bizarre spelling, saying that 'the entire fabric of the language is beginning to deteriorate'. Though there was evidence of much hard work, and a good deal of genuine response, many candidates did not pay sufficient attention to the wording of the question, so that knowledge was not always relevantly applied. For example, Q.6(a) asks for an account of Jessica's behaviour to Shylock, but many wrote on Shylock's behaviour to Jessica. Q.5 asks why we admire Portia; but we tended to get flat character sketches, unpointed to admiration. In Q.14, the material offered was frequently not confined to the *Malthouse*, but ranged over the whole novel. A number of candidates offered a great deal of generalised but unsupported comment. However responsive this may be, it must be related to the text, and justified by it. There was not enough apt and short quotation, the long speech learned by heart being offered instead; there was too much unpointed narrative, especially in the *Short Stories* section; the answers to the context questions were frequently far too long; and, most sadly of all, far too many candidates had no idea, apparently, of the difference between prose and

blank verse. 'Stephano, and Trinculo spoke in blank verse because their minds were blank, while Caliban spoke in prose because he was more sensible' was merely the most foolish of many similar answers.

This last point raises the matter of the teaching. Though there were plenty of heartening examples of Centres that had been admirably taught, there were also many occasions when examiners felt that the pupils had suffered from lack of good teaching. The elements of grammar, spelling and punctuation seemed to have been ignored, for example, and too many candidates had little idea how to write a structured essay. In fact, it was often a matter of non-teaching, rather than of obsessive or slanted teaching. However, odd teaching also occasionally produced some extraordinary responses. For example, one Centre, answering Q.25(a), seemed to have been taught that the soldiers were not entitled to go to heaven because they were murderers, and would go to hell. It was noticeable that the more challenging texts seemed to attract the abler teachers, and the quality of the teaching was perhaps most noticeable in answers to the poetry section. There is an intellectual as well as an emotional response to a poem, and good teachers ensure that this is understood. It was astonishing how few candidates understood Bassanio's reasons for choosing the lead casket, or why Gratiano's fortunes 'stood upon the casket there' or what was meant by the word 'infidel'. One final point: while it is admirable for teachers to encourage their pupils to see films or productions of works of literature, they should make them aware of where these productions differ from the actual texts.

ENGLISH LITERATURE

Paper 2001/1

Candidates taking this paper are required to answer the Shakespeare section of paper 2000/1, for which they are allowed 1½ hours. Perhaps the extra time is not necessarily an advantage, since it often leads to unnecessary padding. Another difficulty experienced by the candidates is that the freedom they enjoy in course work answers often means that they are unaccustomed to the disciplines of examination work and frequently fail to answer the questions that are set.

However there is plenty of evidence of well-prepared work. It was pleasing to note the number of schools who chose to do 'The Tempest' – a more demanding text perhaps than 'The Merchant of Venice'. Those who accepted the challenge were frequently well rewarded.

Paper 2002/1

1. Selection of Books (Syllabus)

It is a pity that *Twenty-one Great Stories* should have been on the syllabus (albeit a somewhat different selection therefrom) for so many successive years. Having said that it is only fair to add that, for reasons which may appear later, the book worked well on this year's paper. The other books all worked well. *Washington Square* was chosen by only a few schools but those candidates who did take this book produced some good and interesting work.

2. *The Examination Paper*

The paper this summer proved rather better balanced than last summer's paper. The questions set on *Twenty-one Great Stories* were not only accessible to candidates but also succeeded in eliciting thoughtful, perceptive and personal responses. This was particularly true of Question 7 (Section A) and Question 16(a). There was an abundance of good work on *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Far from the Madding Crowd* and work which revealed very strong sympathy and understanding. We had been dubious about delivering the list of four events in Question 11(c) but in fact this turned out to be very successful – perhaps due to the fact that the strength of Gabriel Oak's character was the unifying factor. We have still some nervousness about the questions which are concerned with direction and production of plays. Such questions often attract less able candidates – but on all such questions this year there were certain very perceptive answers.

There was a small ambiguity in Question 10(a) where a few candidates took it to ask what sort of king Shakespeare would himself have been and in Question 3 some candidates, more excusably, assumed that the three men referred to were Oak, Boldwood and Coggan rather than Oak, Boldwood and Troy.

There were a few good answers on the Poem (Q.17) but the general level of answer was not very good – partly, perhaps, because of the particular poem but partly, we think, because of the direction taken or implied by the rubric.

The question of direction is a fundamental cause of concern. The vigour and thrust of this paper stems from an intention which should be present in the teaching and at all stages of approach to literature: to enable people to read with perception, thought and sensitivity but without predetermined directions. In setting questions we still have a good deal to learn about how to open questions freely without implying directions to candidates about 'approved' ways of thinking.

But certainly there was good work – some quite excellent work and much at all levels which made one aware of exciting work happening in schools. This is what is most stimulating about the examination. I personally learned a great deal from the candidates.