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Specification A

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Report on the Examination

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General

The first full examination of LTA1A, the new English Literature Specification A Victorian Literature option, was a great success. The single figure entry for the January 2009 LTA1A paper provided only a limited indication of how the new examination would perform, so examiners were understandably apprehensive as they approached the scripts of candidates whose responses were to be assessed by an examination which takes well-established question styles and applies them in entirely new ways. However, any misgivings proved completely unfounded: the paper performed extremely well, producing a wide range of very impressive responses. As one senior examiner commented, "I really enjoyed marking this fabulous new paper; it was a perfect blend of LTA3 and LTA6 and allowed candidates to respond in personal, independent and unique ways." The paper proved popular with candidates, too: one reported response was "It was really good. That was my best exam!"

The subsequent sections of this report deal with the responses to each of the questions in detail. This introductory section offers some general thoughts on the ways in which the candidates had been prepared for the examination and some observations on their overall approach to the paper. It should be stated that great credit is due to the teachers who prepared the candidates for this examination: the examiners were privileged to read a wealth of inspired and enthusiastic responses which were obviously the result of consistently high-quality teaching. Many candidates had been given the scope and space to develop their own ideas through exploratory approaches to Victorian literature and came to the examination prepared to think for themselves. Specification A has always valued highly the informed personal response to literature and the examiners were thrilled by the independence, originality and autonomy displayed by many candidates in this summer's examination.

Unfortunately, not all candidates had been prepared for the examination in this manner. Some centres seem to have prepared candidates by placing excessive emphasis on a very limited number of texts with little breadth of reading. This resulted in every candidate from these centres relying on very similar references to the same texts, often using the same quotations. Centres should avoid this restrictive approach: it makes differentiation between candidates very difficult and denies them access to the higher bands of the mark scheme which require a display of confidence, maturity and sophistication. Similarly, candidates are advised not to prepare all-purpose answers which can be unloaded whatever the question happens to be. Although such materials may offer a spurious sense of reassurance, they are seldom of any practical use. Whether referring to their wider reading or selecting appropriate set poems, it is essential that candidates consider each question afresh, rather than trying to twist inappropriate material prepared in advance to fit the keywords. The best way to prepare candidates for this examination is through a full course of Victorian wider reading and by studying the whole set poetry text: there are no short-cuts.

It is also important that candidates are prepared for the experience of the examination by following a programme of regular timed essay practice. This is essential not just for the development of their skills in structuring and organising ideas into coherent forms, but also to enable them to develop and to practise legible handwriting under pressure: candidates will have a far greater chance of examination success if the examiners can read what they have written. Centres are reminded that the examination requires very different skills to the coursework and handwriting is one of them. Procedures exist which enable candidates with serious handwriting difficulties to access an amanuensis or a word processor for the examination: centres are advised to make full use of these opportunities.

The general quality of some candidates' written expression was also the cause of some concern to examiners this summer. Too many candidates do not avail themselves of the structuring opportunities which writing in paragraphs would offer them: they seem to regard paragraphing as an optional extra, for aesthetic purposes only, rather than a vital requirement in meeting Assessment Objective 1. Similarly, some candidates are unable to spell simple but important words such as "woman" or "angel" The unthinking use of colloquial expression was also worrying: describing Ruskin as "a nutjob", Bill Sykes as "the dodgy betting man" or Sir Launcelot as "the real deal" is not acceptable in a formal AS examination – even if all three descriptions have a ring of truth about them! In the same way, candidates who claim "the poem talks about…" show little awareness of the literary artefact with which they are dealing, while the unfortunate tendency to offer alternatives with a slash in a multiple choice manner (for example, "In Victorian times, a woman was not allowed/permitted…") only adds uncertainty to the statement made. On the other hand, examiners were pleased to note that a significant number of the candidates *are* able to express their views with clarity in an appropriate and articulate manner: a skill which centres should continue to encourage.

Although the main purpose of this report is to summarise the ways in which this summer's candidates responded to the demands of the LTA1A paper, as is already evident it also offers advice on how centres can most effectively prepare their candidates for future examinations. Centres should use the report in conjunction with the June 2009 mark scheme which contains not only the relevant assessment grids but also an Indicative Content section for each question, suggesting possible approaches which successful candidates might adopt in their responses.

To look at the achievement of candidates question by question:

Question 01

This section tests the candidates' breadth of knowledge about Victorian Literature, developed through their course of wider reading, by inviting them to link relevant texts to a short non-fiction extract. One senior examiner reported that "the structure of the paper was helpful to students because they had something to get their heads round straightaway in exploring the Ruskin passage", while another felt that "the unseen material really enabled candidates to grapple with issues about context and women."

The success of this question is perhaps best indicated by the fact that, despite the worries of some teachers, a surprising number of candidates did better on Question 1 than they did when answering the question about their set text. As one senior examiner commented: "The high quality of these responses should allay any concerns there may have been about wider reading and how candidates might struggle to handle the breadth of this question's demands."

A discriminating feature in assessing the quality of these responses was often the candidate's ability to make purposeful and relevant use of wider reading texts. One senior examiner advised that "teachers need to prepare their students to cover a wide range of potential Victorian topics, using whole texts and the extended use of themed extracts to cover detail as well as breadth of issue." As recommended in the January edition of this report, centres familiar with the legacy specification would do well to bear their previous practice at LTA6 in mind here, as the skills required to meet the demands of Question 01 are very similar to those necessary for the A2 synoptic paper. Of course, responses to the LTA1A extract question are assessed at AS standard rather than A2, but the best way to prepare candidates is by supporting whole-text study with an extract-based course of Victorian wider reading in the same way that successful centres previously offered their students a broad course in the literature of the First World War. The regulations require centres to identify three wider reading texts (one from each literary genre) but it is vital that candidates' wider reading extends beyond this

required minimum. The new Specification emphasises this point ("These three texts may be supplemented with a collection of relevant extracts and shorter pieces of writing."), but it is worth repeating this here as, on the evidence of this summer's examination, a small number of centres is not yet fully aware of its importance. Candidates whose wider reading only stretched as far as three nominated texts found themselves at a disadvantage in the examination because their opportunities to establish relevant links to the extract were limited by the narrowness of their reading. To maximise their candidates' chances of success in answering Question 01, centres are advised to develop a full programme of wider reading, such as the one in the AQA-endorsed Nelson Thornes publication, *AQA English Literature A: Victorian Literature* (ISBN 978-0-7487-8293-2). Of course, centres are not obliged to use this supporting textbook, but they may find it useful as a model when constructing their own programme of wider reading.

It is also worth re-stating here that the extracts used in Question 01 will relate to at least one of the four key areas identified to help centres focus their studies when planning their course of wider reading. These areas are:

- Ideas of progress: industry and empire
- The position of women in Victorian society
- Social problems: urban poverty and the working class
- Evolving attitudes: culture, religion and science.

The introduction to the question will usually include some of the key words or phrases from these topics, offering guidance to candidates as they consider which of their wider reading texts will be of most relevance to the extract. However, it should also be noted that candidates are not confined to the area suggested in the question. While many candidates found more than enough to write about when linking Ruskin's views to other literary representations of women in Victorian society, some saw his use of the words "speculation and invention" and "adventure…war…and…conquest" as an opportunity to explore either the presentation of industrial progress or the literature of Empire. These were relevant avenues of exploration, but moving beyond the given topic is not compulsory: it is for the candidate to dictate the agenda here. Whether the candidate chooses to stay within the suggested area or to move into wider Victorian literary issues, the important thing is to make the relevance of the connections clear and explicit in the answer.

The candidates who did least well in this examination were often those unable to establish any sort of convincing connection between the extract and their wider reading: their use of arbitrary, bolted-on texts with no obvious relevance to the extract resulted in narrowly assertive answers. In many cases these unsatisfactory responses appeared to be the consequence of very limited wider reading or of the candidate's determination to twist some sort of all-purpose, pre-written material to fit whatever the extract happened to be about. Fortunately, the vast majority of candidates did not approach the examination in this manner: those with a broad knowledge of Victorian literature were able to select the most relevant examples from their wider reading and build a persuasive and cogent argument. It is to be hoped that this open-minded approach will persist among the candidates taking LTA1A and that centres will not fall back on a narrower, more formulaic approach as the patterns of the extracts and questions become more familiar in subsequent series of this examination.

A few centres seemed unprepared for the adjustment to the wording of this section's generic question which was first implemented in the January paper. This arose from the concerns expressed by LTA6 examiners that candidates sometimes become bogged down while trying to address the idea of "typicality" (and, indeed, this proved to be the case for a small group of LTA1A candidates this summer), so candidates are now directed simply to compare the extract

with relevant aspects of their wider reading. Of course, in answering this question, candidates will still be considering what is typical of Victorian literature, but they will be doing so through the more direct means of exploring the similarities and differences between the extract and the most relevant parts of their wider reading.

In attempting Question 01, most candidates got the balance between the extract and their response about right. There are no hard-and-fast rules about this (candidates adopted various approaches to structuring their answers and each response was considered on its respective merits) but the weightings carried by the Assessment Objectives in this question mean that at least a third and up to a half of the response should be devoted to an analysis of the passage. When reading time is taken into account, it is appropriate for candidates to split their time evenly between the two parts of the question. It is perfectly acceptable for candidates to focus on the extract for thirty minutes, then spend the next thirty minutes writing about their relevant wider reading. However, more confident and sophisticated candidates produced integrated responses in which their comments on the extract and their wider reading comparisons were interwoven throughout the answer, often using phrases from Ruskin as a yardstick with which to measure the ideas and attitudes presented in other texts. One senior examiner commented that “the best answers were skilful and seamless”, while another reported “It was impressive to read answers that were able to include several well-developed links between wider reading and the Ruskin passage. Successful candidates used apt, well-chosen quotations and brief analytical references to support their argument.”

Unfortunately, some candidates only cited two genres when referring to their wider reading, despite the clear injunction on the examination paper that they should refer to prose, poetry and drama. In extreme instances, only one genre was cited – or there were no references to wider reading at all. Omitting a genre is bound to have a limiting effect on the mark awarded to a candidate – and merely mentioning the title of a text in passing cannot be credited as an acceptable wider reading reference. Similarly, some candidates struggled to move beyond re-telling the story when attempting to establish links to their wider reading. Plot-based links may take candidates into Band 2 for Assessment Objectives 3 and 4, but to access the higher bands of the mark scheme they need to use relevant quotations and explore the ways writers use form, structure and language to create effects in the wider reading texts. Conversely, other less successful candidates wrote very little about the passage and used the question as an excuse to unload swathes of often irrelevant wider reading which felt as though it had been prepared in advance, to be used irrespective of the passage set. As one senior examiner reported, “In some responses there was insufficient focus on the extract, consequently there was an imbalance in the answer with some students becoming very quickly immersed in wider reading which was not well linked to the passage.” Candidates are strongly advised against adopting this approach to the question.

Senior examiners were unanimous in their acclaim for the choice of extract on this paper. One reported that “the passage itself was an effective discriminator as good candidates could see some of the subtleties of both form and content, while none failed to gather at least a general sense of what Ruskin is saying.” Others felt that “the Ruskin passage proved to be very accessible to all candidates” and that “the question worked well. Most candidates had some understanding and were able to comment on aspects of language and the author’s intentions. A significant number were able to explore and analyse the passage in a confident way, paying close attention to the more subtle ways in which Ruskin presents his ideas on gender and roles.”

This close attention to Ruskin’s subtleties became a key discriminator in the assessment of these responses. Less secure candidates remained at the surface of the text, jumping to the conclusion that Ruskin presents women as inferior, while closer readers argued that he sees

women as different but equal. The extract certainly provoked strongly divided opinions: one candidate felt that "Ruskin is obviously frightened of empowered women" while another thought that "Ruskin must have been a model for feminist movements" (and, indeed, as one particularly perceptive candidate pointed out, the delivery of this lecture coincided with the beginning of the Suffragette movement: the Women's Suffrage Petition Committee was formed in 1865). Many saw Ruskin as an arch-reactionary enforcing sexist stereotypes (and it should be noted that elsewhere Ruskin described himself as "a violent Tory of the old school", despite his progressive attitudes) rather than a free thinker who presents women as equals; one felt that his assured tone displays a "profound arrogance concerning all men – including himself." One thinking candidate identified a species of "Gender Darwinism" in the lecture, while another argued that Ruskin views women as "useful only to massage the male ego" - and although it is undeniable that such attitudes may well lurk not far beneath the surface of the passage, the more outraged responses sometimes lacked the textual support required. Those who searched out evidence for their interpretations (such as the passage's structure, in which men are treated first, or Ruskin's shift into repeated imperatives when defining the woman's role: "she must…She must") were more successful.

Ruskin's use of language with Biblical overtones attracted much attention. Candidates seized on the god-like status conferred on men by his use of the word "creator" and the heavenly effects created by the description of the home as "a place of Peace". His warning against female "temptation" provided an inviting opportunity to explore Victorian presentations of fallen women. The poem 'The Bridge of Sighs' was often used to good effect here, its drowned adulteress tellingly identified by Hood as "one of Eve's family" while Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' also provided an illuminating example of a tempted woman who meets with inevitable destruction.

Many candidates gave careful consideration to the extract's genre, exploring the effects created by Ruskin's use of rhetorical devices and making informed comments on the lecture's likely audience. Some candidates, members of the News 24 generation, misguidedly attempted to link the idea of a lecture to Ruskin's role as a cultural commentator, envisaging him as our reporter on the scene of the latest aesthetic developments in the manner of *Monty Python's* novel-writing sketch ("Hello and welcome to Dorchester, where a very good crowd has turned out to watch local boy Thomas Hardy write his new novel, *The Return of the Native*…Hardy has just completed his first sentence and it's a real cracker…"). Ruskin's use of the word "office" also led to occasional misreadings, with some candidates claiming he thought it was acceptable for women to do secretarial work. In fact, as readers of Dickens well know, most Victorian clerical work was done by men.

Senior examiners were also unanimous in reporting that candidates were able to make clear connections between their wider reading and the ideas in the passage. One reported that "most links have been at least adequate; they were frequently highly competent and often most illuminating. The deftness in extracting relevant material to compare and contrast from all the genres, including non-fiction sources, in exam conditions and under time constraints has been pleasantly surprising and very enjoyable to mark. Most candidates conveyed a sense of having enjoyed their wider reading and have been able to use it relevantly as they engaged with the question." Another was impressed by the way in which candidates "were able to select good examples of contrasting attitudes from their wider reading, showing how accepted Victorian attitudes were beginning to be challenged by many writers as subjugating and repressive."

One examiner commented that "it was the sheer variety of texts offered which made marking this paper so interesting" and the profusion of illuminating links was frankly humbling. *Jane Eyre* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* were the most commonly cited prose texts, with other novels such as *Vanity Fair*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Hard Times*, *Bleak House* and *David Copperfield* often

put to very effective use. The matriarchal society of *Cranford* received some attention and candidates made interesting use of non-fiction texts as varied as *The Subjection of Women* by John Stuart Mill and *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*.

'The Angel in the House' by Coventry Patmore was probably the most popular poem to feature in these answers with Hood's 'Song of the Shirt' also receiving much attention. Tennyson's excursions into sexual politics were closely scrutinised, including the little-known 'Godiva' and 'The Princess' with its uncanny echoes of Ruskin ("Man for the sword and for the needle she"). Several perceptive candidates explored the contrasts between Ruskin's ideal of a woman who is "incapable of error" and Tennyson's celebration of male heroism which results from error ("someone had blundered") in 'The Charge of the Light Brigade'. Christina Rossetti's poetry was also a frequent feature of these responses: 'Goblin Market' offered plenty to those candidates who chose to analyse the presentation of temptation and its consequences, while the easily overlooked 'What Does the Bee Do?' (And what does Father do? / Bring home money.") provided handy confirmation of Victorian stereotypes.

A Doll's House was by far the most popular of the wider reading drama texts and there can be no doubt about its relevance here. In the play's early scenes, Torvald and Nora seem to be the theatrical embodiment of the roles Ruskin describes and candidates made impressive use of relevant textual detail as they explored the ways in which Ibsen presents men and women. In many answers, the play's conclusion was used to provide a powerful contrast to the ways in which Ruskin envisions the home as "the shelter…from all terror, doubt, and division." Shaw's Professor Higgins and Barrie's Crichton were often cited as Ruskinian examples (they are each "the doer, the creator, the discoverer, the defender"), while Wilde's drama furnished such usefully controversial views on the issue as "You are unjust to women in England." (Hester Worsley) and "The home seems to me to be the proper sphere for the man." (Gwendolen Fairfax).

Many candidates also made effective use of relevant nineteenth century contextual information. Although this was occasionally assertive and erroneous ("only boys were allowed to go to school in them times", for instance), it was often very illuminating. In delivering the course, some centres have made resourceful use of the Victorian visual context and their candidates' responses were enriched by relevant references to images such as Redgrave's 'The Governess', Rossetti's 'Found' and 'The Awakening Conscience' by Holman Hunt. Others used the adoption of male noms-de-plume by Eliot and the Brontës as appropriate evidence of Victorian attitudes towards women, while a few well-informed candidates were highly amused by the irony of Ruskin's pontifications, eleven years after his own marriage was annulled for non-consummation. Candidates should be careful, however, not to overdo the contextual information: primarily this remains an English Literature examination and the main focus should be on the texts. One examiner regretted the tendency of some answers to "digress into long descriptions of Victorian social and economic conditions" – an approach which should be avoided. Similarly, a senior examiner reported that "in responses from weaker candidates there was a strong preoccupation with context, which became the dominant feature of the answer. When expanding on aspects of social deprivation, candidates lost focus on the passage. Attention to historical and social perspectives was disproportionate in some cases with students omitting references to their wider reading texts or else offering no close analysis of literary devices."

Successful candidates:

- explored the ways Ruskin presents his thoughts and feelings about the position of women in Victorian society with confidence
- established a range of relevant links between the extract and their wider reading
- referred to all three literary genres when writing about their wider reading, analysing the effects created by the writers' choices of form, structure and language.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of Ruskin's views, remaining at the surface of the text
- established basic, plot-based links or missed out genres
- made assertive claims about the nineteenth century context.

Section B: Poetry

The poetry set text questions will be familiar for centres with experience of the English Literature A legacy specification: just as Question 01 is modelled on the LTA6 paper, Questions 02 – 07 operate in the same way as the post-1900 questions did for the LTA3 module. Although the number of the Assessment Objective has changed (AO3 is the new AO4), the expectations of the AS candidates remain the same – they are required to produce a balanced debate in response to the given critical opinion, supporting their arguments with an analysis of the poetry they choose to use as evidence. Unfortunately, this information appears not to have reached a small number of centres. In a few cases, candidates seem to have been taught that they only need to agree with the given view: this is not the case and such an approach is unlikely to get far beyond the Band 2/3 borderline of the mark scheme.

Similarly, a few centres laboured under the misapprehension that contextual knowledge should be the most significant feature of the poetry answers. Again, this is not the case. While AO5 *was* the dominant Assessment Objective for these poetry texts on the legacy specification, candidates are now required to evaluate the given view and construct a balanced debate. Of course, integrated contextual details can be useful when analysing the detail of the poetry, but candidates need to bear in mind that excessive biographical speculation will not be credited by the examiner when deciding on the answer's final mark. There is no need for long passages on Enclosures, consumption or Darwinism in these answers, but close analysis of the poetry itself is vital.

Examiners were also concerned by the inability of some candidates to grapple with a poet's meaning while also engaging with stylistic techniques. One examiner reported that "there appeared to be quite a lot spurious spotting of linguistic features purporting to convey meaning. For instance, individual words identified as "speeding up", "slowing down" or creating some other effect in the verse; often the function of the chosen words would be misnamed, confirming the dubious nature of the claim. It seems to me a better bet for candidates to write about what they know, understand and can do, rather than experiment with terms of which they have no real knowledge."

Selected Poems of John Clare

Unlike the other poetry texts on LTA1A, Clare arrived here from LTA4 rather than LTA3; consequently this text was examined at both AS and A2 this summer. The AS candidates certainly coped well with Clare: many had a secure understanding of Clare's wide poetic range in terms of both his subject matter and his style. Inevitably some Clare candidates strayed too heavily into biographical details, but those that kept an eye on the question and stuck closely to the text usually met with success.

Question 02

This was the more popular Clare question and candidates were spoiled for choice when deciding which poems to use in support of the given view: 'Remembrances' ("I thought them joys eternal"), 'Emmonsales Heath' ("the waters, fields and woods would sing their joys aloud") and 'First love's Recollections' ("Joy's first dreams will haunt the mind") were among those most frequently cited. Unfortunately, some candidates left it at that, believing that they were required simply to provide further evidence for the study mentioned in the question. This, of course, was not the case: to reach Band 3 of the mark scheme securely, candidates should develop a balanced debate with alternatives. The more successful candidates had a firm grasp of these alternatives, noting that the later poems are beset with depression and doubts. Here the joy has often departed and Clare's tone becomes wistful and elegiac. As one candidate shrewdly pointed out, "Clare still uses the word 'joy' but the context in which it is used does not connote 'joy' at all": 'Love and Memory' was used to provide persuasive evidence of this idea: "Now joy's cup is drained".

Unfortunately, some candidates appeared to be prepared only for a question about love and spent their allotted hour desperately attempting to make this pre-written material fit the question set: this approach is not recommended. Others quickly dropped the keyword "joy", substituting it with the vague, all-purpose label "positive". This was not a successful approach: candidates are advised to stick with the keywords used in the question, rather than resorting to such unhelpful terminology.

Successful candidates:

- explored Clare's poetic techniques with confidence
- engaged sensitively with Clare's presentation of joy
- produced balanced debates which also considered poems that are not joyful.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of their chosen poems
- struggled to engage with "joy" so wrote about positivity instead
- showed little awareness of Clare's poetic techniques.

Question 03

This was the less popular Clare question and it produced a rather mixed collection of responses. Whereas more successful candidates demonstrated their sound knowledge and understanding of 'Sighing for Retirement', evaluating the idea of its "central importance to the whole selection" via a range of interesting comparisons and contrasts, many were less successful. Some candidates restricted themselves to a simple consideration of the poem with a few broad generalisations as a conclusion. Others did at least suggest a few basic links, but these were not always fully developed. Those who attempted a balanced debate were more effective, developing some compelling arguments which revealed genuine empathy with Clare.

The multiple presentation of key Clare ideas in 'Sighing for Retirement' (nature, poetry, isolation) offered a wide range of opportunities to establish connections, both thematic and stylistic, to other poems across the whole selection. Some adventurous candidates exploited these opportunities to the full, while others played it safe and restricted their links to other poems in the "John Clare, Poet" section of the set text: this was a valid enough approach but it did limit their potential for counter-argument.

Successful candidates:

- explored 'Sighing for Retirement' with confidence
- developed a range of comparisons and contrasts, using the whole selection
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of "central importance".

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of 'Sighing for Retirement'
- struggled to make connections with other Clare poems
- simply agreed with the view that the poem is of central importance.

Selected Poems of The Brontës

The Brontës were the least popular of the set poets on this first LTA1A paper, although that may be due to some publication difficulties (which have now been resolved: the selection is in print and available), rather than to the relative merits of their writing. At least one examiner felt that the candidates studying this set text got the text/context balance right in their answers, reporting that "candidates who wrote about the Brontës' poetry were able to make relevant, integrated links with context in their exploration of the poetry." Other examiners had a less happy experience, feeling that "there were too many candidates who referred to context at great length without embedding it in a close reading of the poetry: they wrote about biography, landscape and family - rather than grappling with the poems themselves."

Question 04

This was by far the more popular Brontë question and candidates had plenty of appropriate poems from which to choose when answering it. Since the question was framed around the idea of death and morbidity in their poetry, it was inevitable that references were made to the events of the Brontës' lives in these responses. More successful candidates integrated this relevant biographical information while exploring the poetry in detail; others, however, allowed the contextual description to take over their answers, crowding out the poetry. Some very confident candidates explored the differences in tone between the autobiographical poems which reflect the reality of death and the synthetic romantic attitudes which pervade the Gondal and Angria pieces. Many candidates produced balanced debates which gave detailed consideration to alternative, less gloomy, aspects of the Brontës'poetry. These counter-arguments were often effectively presented, using a wide range of poems by all three sisters (nobody found anything very cheerful in Branwell's output!) and displaying the candidates' secure knowledge of the whole selection.

Successful candidates:

- explored the Brontës' poetic techniques with confidence
- selected relevant poems about death
- produced engaged debates which showed understanding of the poetry's other aspects.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of their chosen poems
- simply agreed with the given view
- wrote at length about the Brontës' lives, rather than their poetry.

Question 05

This was by far the least popular question on the entire paper. Perhaps this was because most candidates were unable to resist the deathly allure of Question 04 – or perhaps it was because few candidates had studied Branwell Brontë's poetry in any great detail. Those candidates who did choose this question certainly did so with confidence: the responses were invariably well-informed, displaying a high degree of autonomy and originality in the ways in which they linked 'Augusta' to the rest of the selection. The effects created by Branwell's use of elemental imagery received much attention in these answers: candidates often argued that this technique provided a highly effective introduction to the work of his sisters. The poem's place within the Angrian cycle also offered well-informed candidates an opportunity to explore its connections to other presentations of that fantasy world. Even the less successful candidates who attempted this question had at least a basic grasp of the focal poem, although their links to other poems were not always securely established.

Successful candidates:

- had a secure understanding of 'Augusta'
- explored the links between Branwell's poetic techniques and those used by his sisters
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of "an effective introduction".

Less successful candidates:

- wrote straightforward accounts of 'Augusta'
- established some superficial connections to other poems
- simply agreed that this poem is an effective introduction.

Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy

As expected, Hardy was by far the most popular poet among the set texts for this paper. Many candidates responded to his writing with sensitivity and insight, but examiners were worried by the number of answers in which a preoccupation with biographical details crowded out close attention to the text. Similarly, some candidates seemed to have very limited knowledge of the set selection and, in extreme cases, every student in a centre wrote about the same three, sometimes inappropriate, poems. Centres are reminded that candidates are expected to have read every poem in the selection (the poetry selection is LTA1A's only set text, after all, so it is hardly an onerous requirement) and restricting the experience of candidates to just a few Hardy poems is bound to limit their chances in the examination.

Question 06

This popular question proved to be very successful because the keyword "pessimism" was such an effective differentiator. One senior examiner felt that "the critic's opinion sparked some lovely answers"; another reported that "generally, it was answered extremely well. Candidates were well prepared for this aspect of Hardy's work and many were able to evaluate the pessimistic elements in some of the most ambiguous poems. This led to very confident, well-balanced considerations of the question. Candidates were enabled to offer personal, insightful ideas on the poems, which allowed for alternative interpretations. Close analysis of language, form and structure was particularly effective on this question. These were thoughtful, perceptive responses which demonstrated insight, confidence and maturity."

On the other hand, some examiners felt that "quite a lot of candidates were not at ease with the term 'pessimism'." In some cases, this seemed to be because the candidates had been thoroughly briefed to expect a question relating to Hardy and 'time'. This led to a great deal of scratching around as candidates desperately attempted to adapt their knowledge to

'pessimism', often with dubious success. Centres are strongly advised against promoting such an approach to the examination: it is essential that candidates consider each question afresh, rather than trying to twist ill-fitting material, prepared on another topic, to fit the keywords. Many of these candidates focused on increasingly tenuous interpretations of the keyword, such as sadness at Emma's death or the poet's regret about his actions towards her. Other candidates discarded pessimism entirely, writing about "Hardy's negativity" instead. Hardy seems doomed to be this paper's Larkin, glibly labelled as "negative" by unthinking candidates who choose to ignore the keywords. Such vague terminology is to be avoided and candidates should heed the warning of Bob Dylan in 'Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues': "negativity don't pull you through".

At its best, however, the work on Hardy was very impressive. Examiners saw thoughtful responses to Hardy's poetic technique, featuring confident analysis of the effects created by the poet's choices of form, structure and language. 'The Darkling Thrush' and 'Drummer Hodge', complex poems that mix both pessimism and optimism, produced some particularly memorable responses.

Successful candidates:

- explored Hardy's poetic techniques with confidence
- engaged with the concept of pessimism
- produced thoughtful, balanced debates of the given view.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of their chosen poems
- struggled to engage with the meaning of the keywords
- wrote at length about the poetry's context.

Question 07

This was the less popular Hardy question and, in general, it was less well done than Question 6. Although plenty of candidates displayed a secure knowledge of 'He Resolves to Say No More' and were able to establish relevant connections to other poems in the collection, some candidates struggled - for a variety of reasons. One examiner reported on "candidates who appeared to be reading the poem for the first time and were unable to offer anything more than paraphrase", while others felt that some candidates were unable or unwilling to read the poem closely (perhaps they had resolved to read no more?). These less successful candidates often made only general or assertive responses to the rest of the selection and were thus unable to substantiate their agreement with the view that the poem provides an appropriate conclusion. More successful candidates provided balanced debates which considered both ways in which the poem does provide an appropriate conclusion and, via analysis of key poems on other themes, reasons why it does not.

'Channel Firing' was frequently cited in the responses to this question, its apocalyptic imagery linked to "the charnel-eyed / Pale Horse" of the focal poem. (Several less well-informed candidates thought Hardy *was* the horse: pale, because he wasn't feeling too well when he wrote the poem.) Some candidates made better use of their ideas about Time here than those who tried to force it into Question 6 answers, while others, having studied a hundred pages of Hardy's innermost thoughts, were rather amused at the irony of his gnomic claim that "What I have learnt no man shall know."

Successful candidates:

- explored 'He Resolves to Say No More' with confidence
- developed links to a range of other poems
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of "an appropriate conclusion".

Less successful candidates:

- produced basic accounts of 'He Resolves to Say No More'
- wrote more about Hardy's biography than about other poems
- simply asserted their agreement with the given view.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results statistics** page of the AQA Website.