



General Certificate of Education

English Literature

Specification A

LTA1A Victorian Literature

Report on the Examination

2010 examination – January series

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General

Over 90% of the candidates who sat the January 2010 Victorian Literature paper were taking the LTA1A examination for the second time. For senior examiners, this is a very gratifying statistic: since this new Specification was launched, the message has gone out to centres that the January paper is aimed primarily at re-sit candidates and the vast majority of centres have sensibly heeded this advice. On the other hand, over 70 candidates did take the examination for the first time this January: a worrying increase on last January's single-figure entry. Of course, these may be Year 13 candidates who have waited until their A2 year to enter the AS modules – and there would be some wisdom in adopting such a traditional, almost linear, approach to the whole A-Level course (as long the demands for AS grades on UCAS applications can be withstood) as candidates' performances often improve with maturity. If, however, these are Year 12 candidates being entered for AS only four months after GCSE, their centres' motives must be questioned. As was stated in last January's LTA1A report, "there is nothing to be gained from entering candidates early for this examination: it is intended for candidates who have reached the end of Year 12 and who have developed a breadth of knowledge about Victorian Literature through a course of wider reading". Only the most exceptional candidate is likely to have developed that necessary breadth of knowledge by early January.

The two most significant issues to arise from this January's LTA1A responses are an excess of context and an absence of debate. Both caused considerable concern to examiners – especially as these features had been so fully addressed in the report on last summer's examination, when they marred the otherwise pleasing answers of obviously able candidates. Far too many responses to Question 1 began with a whole page, and sometimes more, of general contextual description which had no obvious relevance to the passage or the question: this approach should be avoided. On the other hand, a significant number of candidates performed far better on Question 1 than they did when answering the question on their set poetry text - because they appeared not to understand what the poetry questions require. In some cases the gap was extreme and very worrying: well briefed and widely read candidates, who were able to explore an unseen text with some confidence, produced only simple accounts of the poems they had studied, ignoring the wording of the question and making no attempt to construct any sort of debate. Affected centres can recognise this problem by scrutinising the relevant performance data for their candidates: where such a discrepant pattern is identified, centres are strongly advised to re-consider the ways in which their chosen poetry text is taught.

Inevitably, some less sophisticated responses displayed unacceptably informal expression in their responses: "gives out a positive vibe", for example, should not be used for the purpose of literary analysis. Less mature responses often referred to writers by their first names and, whilst calling Besant "Annie" has a certain right-on, sisterly quality, it is not really appropriate for a formal AS English Literature examination. On the other hand, some more enlightened candidates referred to her as Ms Besant, a title of which she would certainly have approved! Other, less careful, candidates sometimes gave themselves away without realising it: when citing Dickens as a wider reading source, several candidates referred to "his musical play *Oliver!*". Presumably, after the examination, they went to the school dining hall for "hot sausage and mustard" followed by "cold jelly and custard".

The subsequent sections of this report deal with the responses to each of the questions in detail. This introductory section has been kept deliberately brief in order to avoid lengthy repetition of the advice offered in the introduction to last summer's report. That detailed guidance, however, still holds good and centres are advised to refer to it as required. Other

helpful sources of information are also available from AQA: the January 2010 mark scheme (“very clear and easy to apply”, as one examiner reported) will appear on the website in due course, featuring the relevant assessment grids supplemented by an Indicative Content section for each question. Future candidates may well wish to adopt the approaches and frameworks offered in these sections. The AQA-endorsed Nelson Thornes supporting textbook, *AQA English Literature A: Victorian Literature* (ISBN 978-0-7487-8293-2), is also still available: a number of candidates made evident use of its advice and extracts to produce successful responses in this January’s examination.

To consider the achievement of candidates question by question:

Section A: Contextual Linking

Question 1

As mentioned above, some candidates, dimly aware of this question’s dominant Assessment Objective 4, thought that they were required to write long contextual accounts of conditions in the Victorian era; some even churned out a rote-learned side of contextual description before they began to address the actual question. This approach should be avoided. This is an English Literature examination, not a History one: candidates will be rewarded for the integration of contextual information where it is relevant to the text they are considering, not for regurgitating sweeping generalisations and tired stereotypes. It should be remembered that historical background is actually only a small part of this Assessment Objective: the mark scheme descriptors for Assessment Objective 4 require “an understanding of the relationships between the extract, wider reading texts and the Victorian context”, while that context is defined as “the influence of culture, text type, literary genre or historical period on the ways in which Victorian texts were written and received.” Essentially, candidates can meet this Assessment Objective via sustained, relevant, comparison between the passage and their wider reading texts, integrating comments on the context (which may well be literary rather than historical) where appropriate.

The extract from Annie Besant’s ‘White Slavery in London’ worked extremely well as a starting point for the question and was welcomed by candidates, examiners and teachers alike. Centre feedback on the question included the comment: “As one who teaches the paper I appreciated the way the extract allowed candidates to branch off in different directions for wider reading; no one could have been stuck for ideas.” The extract did indeed offer candidates a variety of opportunities, especially in the choice of two obvious routes into the key areas of their wider reading: the role of women in Victorian society or urban poverty and the working class.

The majority of candidates coped well with the extract. As one examiner reported, “Most appreciated Besant’s tone and her rhetorical style. Even weak candidates were able to extract the gist and make something of it – but it would have helped more if some candidates had read and used the information which introduced Besant’s article. The better ones did and often used it effectively - linking Besant’s stance to the early days of the Suffragette movement, for example.”

Some candidates, however, did not read closely enough. Some confused Mr Bryant with Mr Gladstone and assumed that the former had erected a statue of himself. Even those who realised that Mr Gladstone was a separate individual seemed unaware of his status, despite his appearance on a recent commemorative postage stamp (on which, inexplicably, he is depicted against a background of Cannon Street station, rather than one of the three great Victorian termini of his native Liverpool). Similarly, a worrying number of candidates appeared never to

have heard of Dante and his *Inferno*, so Besant's powerful idea of "a special circle" for parasitical capitalists was lost on them.

Although some candidates were thrown by the semantic change which attaches to the term "pathetic" (it may be an insult now, but it wasn't then), most were able to engage with Besant's heavily ironic use of words such as "privilege" and "holiday", as well as the persuasive effects created by her use of devices such as listing and rhetorical questions. Similarly, most candidates were able to appreciate the emotive resonances of the term "White Slavery", although many ignored, or were unaware of, the underlying subtleties of Besant's argument based on the differences between "chattel slaves" and "wage slaves". This did not unduly affect the ability of most candidates to make sense of the passage, but a willingness to tackle this distinction, and the ideas of ownership it entails, was often an indication of sophisticated reading skills and conceptual grasp. Closer readers often noticed the way in which the language of slavery pervades the article, citing examples such as "driven to work while still children". **One less close reader, however, responded very differently to this phrase, admitting that Besant's claim "surprised me because I thought only wealthy families could afford this."**

Similarly anachronistic readings were evident in some candidates' responses to Besant's use of the term "slums". More than a few thought that this was a reference to India (We can probably thank Danny Boyle for this!) and seemed unaware that, 122 years ago, Britain had plenty of slums of its own, quite apart from those in the more distant parts of the Empire. On the other hand, there was much in the article which seemed genuinely topical and relevant to the young adults of 21st century Britain: Besant's graphic imagery of self-harming provoked much comment, as did her hints of Mr Bryant's vampirism. And, in the wake of the Credit Crunch and the banking crisis, it was no surprise that some idealistic candidates shared Besant's disgust with those materialistic shareholders for whom "their consciences" *are* "their pockets".

For many candidates, Besant's article embodied the gender stratification of Victorian society: the bosses are men and the workers are women; the men are given individual identities and titles; the women are merely an anonymous mass. Some seized on Besant's choice of the term "erected" as an all-too-obvious symbol of Bryant's masculinity and domination; others explored the significance of "girls" as a label for all the female factory workers, irrespective of their age. Thoughtful candidates sometimes commented on Besant's typically Victorian verbosity ("the execration of posterity", for example) despite her New Woman radicalism; others argued that her long sentences are used to reflect the long working day at the matchworks. Some well-informed candidates made effective use of their knowledge of the matchgirls' working conditions, carefully weaving into their answers relevant contextual information about "Fossy jaw" and the dangerous consequences of a working day spent amongst sulphur, phosphorus and other toxic chemicals. However, some less well-informed candidates confused factories with workhouses and, while there are some obvious similarities between the two, this lack of basic general knowledge about the period under study led to some dubious or erroneous claims as candidates moved into their wider reading.

The way in which candidates moved from Besant's article to their wider reading texts was an important factor in the assessment of this question. While many established a range of well-developed, relevant links which enabled them to explore the techniques used by the writers of their wider reading texts, too many candidates lost their way once they finished exploring the extract. Some links were content-based or entirely narrative (a Band 2 feature, at best); others merely mentioned the titles of texts they had studied: these cannot be credited as actual links at all. A worrying number of candidates omitted a whole genre while writing about their wider reading; some even omitted two whole genres. Although not strictly speaking a rubric infringement, it is nevertheless an expectation that candidates will refer to each of the three genres at some point in their answer to Question 1: failure to do so will inevitably impact on their

final mark for Section A. Although some candidates overlooked a genre due to the pressure of time during the examination, others indicated that they were ignoring genres deliberately with claims such as “there was nothing about factories in my drama or poetry”. While that may have been the case, this approach should be avoided: successful candidates are resourceful enough to find alternative, less obvious, ways to establish relevant links between the passage and their wider reading – and the manner in which they do this is often a key feature in the determination of their final mark.

As in the summer, examiners were highly impressed by the sheer range of the wider reading links which featured in these responses. Besant’s presentation of Bryant as the stereotypical Victorian factory owner was often connected to fictional hard-hearted employers: Bounderby in *Hard Times*, Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* and Thornton in *North and South* were popular choices, while the industrial unrest of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* also provided an effective comparison in some answers. Dickens’ choice of language in *Hard Times* provided some illuminating links too: in exploring the de-humanising effects of industry, some perceptive candidates noted the similarity between Besant’s protesting workers crying “savagely” and the comparison of Coketown with “the painted face of a savage”. Similarly, many candidates connected Besant’s nameless “workgirls” to Dickens’ Sissy Jupe, labelled “Girl number twenty” by Mr Gradgrind..

While reading these responses, examiners became familiar with the words of Morley in Disraeli’s *Sybil*:

“Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts and feelings, as if they are dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.”

For many candidates, this was a useful way into the subject matter of Besant’s article and, although there was some doubt about how much more of the novel most candidates had read, the relevance of this passage could not be denied.

The prose of other social commentators, such as Engels and Mayhew, provided useful comparative material in many responses, while Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* was deployed effectively as further evidence of how slavery was presented by Victorian authors. For some candidates, Conrad also provided the gateway to a relevant excursion into the literature of Empire, where Kipling’s ‘The White Man’s Burden’ was used to support the idea that nineteenth century attitudes to the “new-caught, sullen peoples, / Half-devil and half-child” were not dissimilar to Mr Bryant’s view of his workforce. On the other hand, examiners were also pleased to see Ruskin’s proto-ecological work, *The Stormcloud of the Nineteenth Century*, being used as a parallel to Besant’s anti-industrial rhetoric.

Some candidates made perceptive and original links based on particular details from the Besant extract. The statue which so powerfully symbolises the workers’ oppression was sometimes compared with the statue of Nelson in Melville’s *Redburn*: significantly, a statue whose chained naval prisoners also remind the novel’s narrator of “four African slaves in the market-place”. Similarly, the Gothic image of the “blood trickling on the marble” was connected by a number of candidates to Lockwood’s shocking confrontation with Cathy’s ghost in *Wuthering Heights*: “I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes”. Emily Brontë’s use of dialect, in the presentation of the sometimes incomprehensible Joseph, also featured in several answers – linked to the way Besant uses colloquial speech to give a voice to the workers: “We don’t want no holidays”.

Thomas Hardy's use of a similarly colloquial voice in 'The Ruined Maid' occasioned much comment in these responses and the same poet's 'We Field-Women' was often used to provide a useful alternative perspective on Victorian working conditions. By far the most popular choice of poem in these answers, however, was 'The Cry of the Children' which offered a wealth of relevant connections to those candidates with a secure understanding of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's persuasive poetic techniques. Barrett Browning's poem 'The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point' was also a relevant wider reading choice and was frequently used to illuminating effect in the answers to Question 1.

Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott' was also a popular choice but was not always used so effectively. Of course, the poem can be read as a powerful allegory of female entrapment in the Victorian era but, although many candidates made this claim, not all were able to substantiate their interpretation by close reference to Tennyson's poetic techniques. Still less successful were those candidates whose wider reading of Victorian poetry appeared to be confined to their GCSE Anthologies: those who attempted to recycle their knowledge of Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' usually struggled to establish any kind of relevant connections. There is no quick fix for Victorian Literature candidates and this desperate, corner-cutting approach to an AS examination is not recommended.

Several less well-known poems on the subject of the Victorian working class were put to relevant and effective use in this January's responses: centres may wish to consider these for use with future candidates. It was good to see that some candidates' reading of Matthew Arnold does not end at 'Dover Beach': his contrasting sonnets 'East London' and 'West London' provided some interesting comparisons with Besant's depiction of poverty in the capital. Caroline Norton's campaigning 1836 poem 'A Voice from the Factories' was also a relevant choice: like Besant, she too writes of "poor little FACTORY SLAVES" and capitalises the phrase, just in case the reader has missed her point.

Some perceptive candidates also noticed that Lord Illingworth uses similar language in response to Kelvil's observation that "our East End is a very important problem" in Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance*. Like Besant, Illingworth is well aware that "It is a problem of slavery." Many candidates shrewdly linked Lady Caroline's smugly complacent contribution to the discussion ("Blankets and coals are sufficient.") to Besant's presentation of Mr Bryant's uncaring attitude. Some candidates went on to develop thoughtful connections between Mrs Arbuthnot's monologue on sin in Act IV of the play ("I have never repented of my sin") and the wording of Besant's concluding moral argument ("let us at least avoid being 'partakers of their sins'"), while others argued that Hester's view of British society as "a dead thing smeared with gold" echoes Besant's indictment of a society that starves its workers so that it can put up statues of the prime minister.

Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Maggie in Brighouse's *Hobson's Choice* also provided useful links in some answers: like the militant Bryant & May workers, these are women who are presented as willing to stand up for themselves, despite the conventions of Victorian society. Perhaps the most effective drama links, however, were made by those candidates who chose to use *Mrs Warren's Profession* by George Bernard Shaw. The life of Mrs Warren's half-sister mirrors those of Mr Bryant's workgirls ("worked in a whitelead factory twelve hours a day for nine shillings a week until she died of lead poisoning. She only expected to get her hands a little paralyzed; but she died."), while Mrs Warren's career choice is also reflected in Besant's "Who cares if they go on the streets?" – a euphemism whose meaning quite escaped the more innocent candidates! Shaw's *Pygmalion* also featured in some answers, where candidates

often noted that, although not a child, Eliza, just like the workers in the match factory, is diminished by the label of “a flower *girl*”.

Successful candidates:

- explored and analysed the ways Besant presents her thoughts and feelings about the position of working class women in Victorian society
- 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 Besant’s article but remained at the surface of the text
- established only basic, plot-based links or missed out whole genres
- wrote lengthy, often irrelevant, descriptions of the nineteenth century context.

Section B: Poetry

In writing about their poetry texts, many candidates showed that they were aware of the importance of addressing form, structure and language in their answers. Not all of the poetry questions refer to this directly – it is felt that too many words in a question may ultimately distract the candidates – but most candidates obviously understand that it is vital if they are to meet Assessment Objective 2. Unfortunately, too many appear to be oblivious to Assessment Objective 3, which requires them to make connections between poems and debate the critical opinion of another reader. Examiners were concerned by the number of candidates who simply agreed with the view given in the question or ignored it altogether: either of these courses of action is bound to have a serious impact on the mark awarded. As stated in last summer’s report, successful candidates will “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, some centres still seem to be unaware of this.

On the other hand, some of last summer’s other concerns are in the process of being rectified: there was less reliance on irrelevant biographical context, for example, although it remains the default position for some less confident candidates. Similarly, some insecure candidates find the open text a great temptation and there is a tendency (thankfully, not widespread) to copy out whole verses, rather than carefully selecting relevant short quotations. Finally, there are still a few candidates who confine themselves to a question’s named poem and never move into the rest of the selection. Again, this approach should be avoided.

Selected Poems of John Clare

As expected after last summer’s examination, Clare was much in evidence on this January’s LTA1A scripts, although he is far behind Hardy in terms of popularity with centres. Clare’s poetry proved to be an effective discriminator on this paper. One examiner wondered whether centres choose him because he *appears* to be the easy option among the Victorian poets: his poems are mostly short and seem fairly straightforward. If this is the case, such centres would do well to reconsider their choice: Clare’s simplicity is deceptive and can trap less wary candidates into superficial readings that never get to grips with the rich subtext of his verse. Ultimately, candidates divided themselves into two very distinct groups in their approach to Clare: those who were willing to read closely, exploring the subtle poetic effects he creates, and those who provided simple accounts of how the poetry shows that he loves nature, ignoring the complexity and variety of his oeuvre.

Question 2

This was the less popular Clare question but it was very successful in differentiating between those candidates who were able to tackle the idea that Clare's descriptions obscure his feelings and those who wrote very general answers because they were not really sure what the keywords meant. The poet of Clare's time who voiced the opinion used in the question was, somewhat ironically, John Keats – who shared a publisher with Clare. Of course, Keats only knew Clare's early published work from the height of the "Peasant Poet" craze: had he read Clare's later poetry, he may well have concurred with those perceptive candidates who argued that Clare's feelings become very clear indeed as his poetry turned inward during the asylum years. As it was, many candidates understood what Keats was getting at and were able to distinguish between the almost purely descriptive poems (such as 'The Skylark' and 'Winter Fields') and those which make explicit references to Clare's feelings ('I love to hear the evening crows go by' and 'Emmonsales Heath', for example). Many candidates argued that Clare often strikes a delicate balance between description and feelings in his poetry, while others persuasively claimed that the very reverse of Keats' view applies to later poems such as 'I Am' and 'A Vision', where the description is minimal but the raw emotions are presented in graphic detail.

Some less successful candidates struggled with the keyword "sentiment", equating it with simple nostalgia (which at least led them some way in the right direction) or substituting the unhelpful "positive feelings" – which often generated only vague responses. Those who realised that Keats used the term to encompass strong feelings of all kinds were able to produce far more relevant and engaged answers.

Successful candidates:

- engaged with Clare's poetry in a sensitive manner
- understood the idea that "the description too much prevailed over the sentiment"
- evaluated Keats' opinion by using a balanced choice of examples.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of poems whose relevance was not always obvious
- struggled to engage with the question's keywords
- showed little awareness of Clare's poetic techniques.

Question 3

This was the marginally more popular Clare question and it produced an interesting collection of responses. Whereas more successful candidates demonstrated their sound knowledge and understanding of 'To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait', evaluating the idea that it would form an effective conclusion via a range of interesting comparisons and contrasts, others were less successful. The obvious autobiographical content of this poem tempted some less confident candidates into writing lengthy accounts of Clare's life, rather than linking the given poem to others in the selection. These candidates also tended merely to paraphrase the focal poem and appeared unable to engage even with Clare's most obvious poetic techniques, such as the repetition of the word "Bard" – a word whose meaning was clearly unknown to some of these candidates. Worryingly, some candidates did not seem to know what a portrait is, either.

Better informed candidates saw this as one of the poems in which Clare has an eye on posterity and his future reputation ("Known through all the ages") and went on to explore the ways in which his synthesis of nature and literature ("Daisies bloom by thy bed / And live in thy pages.") is reflected in poems such as 'Sighing for Retirement' ("I found the poems in the

fields”) and ‘The Peasant Poet’ (“A Peasant in his daily cares- / The Poet in his joy.”). Those candidates who produced balanced debates used a variety of the typical Clare techniques not featured in ‘To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait’ as counter-arguments: the satirical approach of ‘The Parish’, for instance, or the narrative poetry of his ballads.

Successful candidates:

- explored ‘To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait’ with confidence
- developed a range of links from across the whole selection
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of “an effective conclusion”.

Less successful candidates:

- produced simple accounts of ‘To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait’
- struggled to make sense of Clare’s language
- wrote about Clare’s biography rather than other poems.

Selected Poems of The Brontës

As in the summer, the Brontës were the least popular of the LTA1A set poets this January and it would be erroneous to draw any significant conclusions from such a small sample of responses to this text. However, the few answers seen by examiners did cover the full range of the mark scheme: from illuminating and original explorations to assertive paraphrases which failed to address the questions. Clearly, this text can move and inspire candidates, but others struggle with it: centres would do well to consider carefully both its appropriateness for their students and the ways in which this selection is taught.

Question 4

After the majority of Brontë candidates avoided the Branwell question in the summer, responses to this January’s questions were far more evenly divided. On the whole, however, this question was the less successfully attempted of the two. Although most candidates understood the idea of “solemnity and lack of humour”, there was a tendency simply to agree with this judgement: there is, after all, no shortage of supporting examples to be found throughout the selection. Few candidates managed to develop a counter-argument to Norris’ view of the Brontës’ poetry, but those who did drew on poems such as the relatively upbeat ‘Tell me, tell me, smiling child’ (although one candidate thought that Emily was being “very sarcastic” in this poem) and Branwell’s cartoonish ‘The man who will not know another’. One thoughtful candidate argued that a lack of humour does not necessarily imply solemnity, citing Emily’s triumphant ‘No coward soul is mine’ in support of this view.

One examiner reported her concern that a candidate “with a sound knowledge and understanding of the poetry immediately substituted the term “negative” for the question’s keywords. Inevitably, the counter-argument was then based on supposedly “positive” poems about the Brontës’ strength of character and stoicism in coping with adversity. Unfortunately, the candidate then used solemn and humourless poems (‘The Parting’, ‘Penmaenmawr’ and ‘Last Lines’) to illustrate her counter-argument, resulting in a highly convoluted and self-contradicting answer to the actual question. This response was very hard to mark.” Obviously, this approach is inadvisable: successful candidates usually stick to debating the keywords used in the given view. As stated in last summer’s LTA1A report, the substitution of “positive” and “negative” for the question’s actual wording is not a helpful practice and should be avoided.

Successful candidates:

- displayed a secure knowledge of the whole selection
- explored the Brontës' poetic techniques with confidence
- produced engaged debates which featured convincing alternatives or counter-arguments.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote accounts of their chosen poems with little reference to the Brontës' poetic techniques
- simply agreed with the given view
- ignored the keywords altogether and wrote about "negativity" instead.

Question 5

One examiner reported that "this question was often done well: 'To Imagination' seemed to inspire candidates. It enabled them to make effective links to other poems and the responses were well constructed to include a balance. For some reason, this question worked much better than the equivalent question in the Hardy section." Perhaps the reason for this significant difference is the fact that most of the candidates who attempted this question had a secure knowledge of the given poem and understood that they were required to select links from across the whole selection: this was not always true of the candidates who attempted Question 7. Many candidates successfully engaged with the ways Emily presents the important Brontë themes of freedom and the imagination in this poem, establishing links to similar treatments in poems such as 'Stars' and 'Dreams'. Thoughtful counter-arguments sometimes came in the form of poems with the theme of captivity ('The Prisoner' and 'The Captive Dove', for example); other candidates explored the contrasting poetic forms to be found elsewhere in the selection.

Successful candidates:

- explored 'To Imagination' with confidence
- established a range of links to other poems in the selection
- produced a balanced debate in response to the idea of "the key to the whole selection".

Less successful candidates:

- wrote straightforward accounts of 'To Imagination'
- established some basic connections to other poems
- simply agreed with the given view, rather than debating it.

Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy

Hardy was by far the most popular poet on the paper this January, just as he was in last summer's examination. Once again, his poetry produced some thoughtful and engaged responses, but the minority of candidates who allow biographical details to crowd the text out of their answers are still a source of some concern. It should be remembered that the poetry questions are testing Assessment Objectives 1, 2 and 3: lengthy contextual passages do not gain any marks and should be avoided. In approaching these questions, candidates should make debating the given view their primary aim – illustrating their ideas with evidence from Hardy's poetry rather than his life. Examiners also expressed reservations concerning the narrow range of poetry which featured in these answers. This selection presents a wide variety of Hardy's verse, yet the same half dozen poems pervaded the responses, even though they were sometimes inappropriate choices for these two questions. Successful candidates often showed a willingness to move beyond the obvious and were rewarded for this autonomous, even adventurous, approach.

Question 6

This was the more popular Hardy question and it produced many thoughtful, balanced debates. Candidates often found evidence of Hardy's pity for the sufferings of others in poems such as 'Drummer Hodge', 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' and 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy'; others developed the idea to incorporate the sufferings of creatures ('The Blinded Bird') and even the sufferings of the unresting dead ('The Levelled Churchyard' and 'Channel Firing'). Persuasive counter-arguments came from those who felt that Hardy often pities his own sufferings more than those of others ('Hap' was a popular choice here, as was 'Thoughts of Phena'), while some candidates focused on those poems which seem to represent an absence of pity in their callousness ('Neutral Tones', for example, and 'The Convergence of the Twain' which disregards the human cost of the *Titanic's* loss).

Unfortunately, some candidates were less convincing in their interpretations of the poetry. 'The Ruined Maid' was sometimes cited as evidence of Hardy's pity, although Hardy's attitude to 'Melia seems to be one of admiration or amusement – if pity is shown to anyone here, surely it's the poem's un-named but un-ruined speaker? Some candidates ignored the question's keywords entirely and chose to write about pessimism instead: an unobvious and unsuccessful attempt to recycle ideas from one of last summer's Hardy questions. This approach should be avoided. Although many candidates were able to comment on Hardy's use of form, structure and language in a pertinent fashion when answering this question, others struggled. Claims such as "Hardy uses a fast paced rhyming scheme", "it helps the poem flow" and "Hardy uses compassionate brackets" were a feature of these less successful answers: they usually indicate candidates who know that some comment on style is required but who lack sufficient command of the appropriate poetic terminology.

Successful candidates:

- explored the effects created by Hardy's use of form, structure and language
- engaged with the idea of pity for the sufferings of others
- produced thoughtful, balanced debates of the given view.

Less successful candidates:

- struggled to engage with Hardy's poetic effects
- wrote general responses with little attention to the keywords
- misread or misunderstood their chosen poems.

Question 7

Although this was the less popular Hardy question, it proved to be very effective in sorting candidates who read carefully from those who lack the close reading skills expected of AS English Literature students. A surprisingly large number of those who attempted this question did not read it carefully enough and took it to be about the effectiveness of 'The Going' as an introduction to Hardy's *Poems of 1912-13*, rather than the whole selection set for study. Consequently, these candidates wrote about a very narrow range of poems and, invariably, they simply agreed with what they thought was the question's given view, limiting themselves to Band 2 of the mark scheme. More successful candidates acknowledged the effectiveness of the given poem as a useful introduction to Hardy's love poetry, but were able to balance this view by referring to a wide range of contrasting poems with styles or subject matter very different to 'The Going'. More subtle candidates even noted that the attitudes expressed in the later Emma poems are very different to those in 'The Going' – although they do not, perhaps, represent the "veritable rollercoaster ride of emotions" which one candidate effusively claimed.

Unfortunately, some candidates thought that the question merely required them to go through the poem line by line, without referring to the idea of "an appropriate introduction" and without

making references to any other poems. Another disappointing approach was adopted by those candidates who merely spotted stylistic features and ticked them off, as if they were numbers on locomotive cabsides. They counted the lines in the verses and identified the rhyme schemes, but they made no attempt to link form to content or to consider the effect of these poetic devices. Candidates are strongly advised against tackling the poetry questions in this simplistic manner.

Successful candidates:

- explored 'The Going' with confidence
- developed relevant links to a range of other poems
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of "an appropriate introduction".

Less successful candidates:

- wrote only a simple account of 'The Going'
- confined their links to other Emma poems
- merely agreed with the given view and made no attempt at debate.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.