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English Literature A LTA1A

(Specification 2740)

Unit 1: Texts in Context
Victorian Literature

Report on the Examination

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PRINCIPAL EXAMINER'S REPORT LTA1A JANUARY 2012

As in previous January LTA1A examinations, the vast majority of the students sitting this paper were making a second attempt at the unit, aiming to improve on the mark they achieved last June. Although the January examination invariably generates some excellent responses, these can be at a premium and, consequently, the perspective of some examiners can be skewed by the nature of the scripts in their allocation. One examiner lamented this January: "I am left with the thought that many of these students have chosen to study a subject that is about reading – but reading is an activity that they don't really like doing. Few of the papers I have seen show any great enthusiasm for or against the Rhodes extract. Most students appear to have learned by rote a narrow range of Wider Reading references and they are determined to use these irrespective of the unseen extract's subject matter and style." Fortunately this was not the experience of all LTA1A examiners this January, but it does raise a serious point: this examination is all about reading, yet a significant number of students struggled to engage with the extract featured in Question 1 and others did not appear to have developed the breadth of reading which the second part of the question requires. The question of why this should occur is not an easy one to answer, but it is an issue to which schools and colleges should give some serious consideration.

Similarly, another examiner wrote in relation to her experience of marking Section B this January: "If students are re-sitting the LTA1A examination they must re-read their set texts." This might seem a self-evident piece of common sense, but a surprising number of the students who sat this examination seemed to have only a slender acquaintance with the set poetry text on which 30% of their final AS grade depended. The references these students made to their set texts were frequently superficial or underdeveloped; in the worst instances they displayed serious misreading or misunderstanding. Unfortunately there does seem to be an assumption among some complacent students that simply turning up on the day of the examination will be enough: an improved grade is bound to follow. This is far from the case: the LTA1A examination is rigorously assessed and the successful students will be those who have continued to expand the breadth of their reading, put in long, hard hours of revision and kept their examination technique sharp by regular practice through the autumn. Too many students fail to adopt this essential approach to their re-sits.

It would be misleading, however, to dwell solely on the more disappointing aspects of this January's LTA1A examination in these introductory remarks. Examiners were pleased with much that they saw, both in the operation of the paper and in the performance of many students. As one examiner was happy to report: "Once again, the paper was clearly 'fit for purpose' in that it enabled examiners to discriminate effectively between the performances of individual students." This was especially notable in the responses to Question 1 where, as an experienced examiner observed, "the Rhodes extract was accessible to all students and proved to be perfect at differentiating them." Similarly, an examiner was pleased to see that "most students seemed to have a fair idea of what they were trying to do: attempting to address the question, keeping the keywords in view and using textual references to support their ideas", while another commented on the fact that "the majority of students are now using references to all three genres of their Wider Reading, although some of them never really begin to explore the different effects created by

variations in form, structure and language.” This absence of exploration and analysis is not a new concern: it has been expressed in previous editions of this report, as have the examiners’ serious concerns regarding the standard of written expression in some responses.

20% of the overall mark for this paper is allocated to Assessment Objective 1 but some candidates still seem unaware of its importance and its requirement that they “use appropriate terminology and coherent, accurate written expression.” Examiners do not allow themselves to become unduly exercised about spelling errors, but the use of the word “women” as a singular noun is seldom an indicator of a high-quality response. In the same way, students who referred to Rhodes throughout their answers merely as “Cecil” (a presumption of intimacy to which Rhodes would certainly have objected) signalled their ignorance of the conventions that should be observed in an English Literature examination – as did those who thought that “vibe” is an acceptable term for use in literary analysis. Despite the warnings of previous reports, the unhelpful labels “positive”, “negative” and “meaningful” appeared far too often in the responses of many less successful students, as did vague claims such as metre “makes the poem flow” and imagery “paints a picture in the reader’s head.” These indicators of an inadequate critical vocabulary were joined this January by the misused adjective “empirical” - which is derived from the Greek *empeirikos*, rather than the Latin *imperium* (as any fule kno).

Some students referred to the “paragraphs” in the poems they had studied but neglected to use any paragraphs in their own answers. Considering how much emphasis the National Curriculum places on paragraphing at Key Stage 3, many examiners were forced to wonder where it has all gone wrong. Even students who otherwise wrote very well seemed to eschew paragraphs, apparently unaware that paragraphing is an essential element of a well-structured answer. The punctuation situation was similar. Some students, though seldom venturing beyond commas in their own writing, obsessively freight the punctuation of Victorian authors with a dubious burden of meaning: the student who rhapsodised “Hardy’s emotional use of the semi-colon” really should have been engaging with the words on either side of that piece of punctuation instead. Successful students pay close attention to the language used in the texts they have read: they do not allow themselves to become unduly distracted by the small marks which writers sometimes use to clarify or modify the meaning of that language.

To consider the achievement of candidates question by question:

Section A: Contextual Linking

Question 1

The extract from Cecil Rhodes’ *Confession of Faith* provided an effective and successful stimulus for this January’s Question 1. One experienced examiner reported that “the passage seemed to be readily understood by most students, giving plenty of scope both to analyse presentation and consider the idea of Empire. The passage also featured several other important aspects of the Victorian context, which clearly benefited students whose Wider Reading had not directly focused on the colonial aspects of the Victorian era. Consequently, these students were able to make effective use of the texts they had studied without drifting into irrelevance.”

Another examiner was pleased to note that “there was much evidence of schools and colleges being more adventurous with their text choices this January. The responses to Question 1 featured many interesting references to relevant non-fiction texts, while there was far less regurgitation of the extracts from previous LTA1A papers (although, regrettably, this does still sometimes happen).”

Most students were able to engage with at least some of the features of Rhodes’ highly rhetorical approach: his persuasive mixture of comparatives (“more”, “better”, “greater”, “higher”), superlatives (“finest”, “highest”, “perfect”, “ultimate”) and abstract ideals (“Justice”, “Liberty”, “Peace”, “fair play”), for example, as well as his use of the inclusive “we” and his frequent repetition of the terms “British” and “English”. Many students also commented on Rhodes’ blend of excited exclamations, rhetorical questions and apparently unquestionable logic (“Therefore…”). Rhodes’ attitude provoked many thoughtful personal responses: one perceptive student wrote that it was unclear whether he was “a mad man or a great one” (a judgement with which Niall Ferguson would probably concur), while others were clearly disturbed by the racist subtext they discerned in Rhodes’ ‘Master Race’ ideas and supremacist vocabulary. Rhodes’ multiple repetitions of the word “race” is perhaps one of the most sinister features of his technique and, indeed, one candidate suggested that some of the writer’s sentiments would not have seemed out of place at the Nuremburg Rallies. Some students felt that Rhodes seems “power-crazed”, others labelled him “delusional”; one opined that “he thinks he’s the Messiah” and another pertinently wondered which faith it is that he is confessing in his autobiography.

Many felt that the passage is simply imperialist propaganda and were mildly amused by Rhodes’ flawed arguments and his unsubtle attempts to present the Empire as a force for progress and world peace. Some questioned Rhodes’ apparent rejection of “the military clan or fighting Empire”: how else could his global aim of “every acre added to our territory” have been achieved? Some were unconvinced by Rhodes’ claim that world domination could be achieved “simply”, while others noted the way in which his euphemism “absorption” shields the reader from the unpleasant realities of conquest and colonialism. Most transparent of all, many argued, is Rhodes’ ‘With God on Our Side’ argument – an argument he seems, unwittingly, to undermine by placing only “a fifty per cent” probability on God’s existence.

For some students, Rhodes’ uncertainty was not confined to the fifty-fifty chance that God exists. Much attention was paid to the extract’s one-line second paragraph, in which Rhodes not only acknowledges that his objective is merely “a dream” but also moves quickly from “probable” to “possible” – a telling gradation of adjectives. Rhodes’ image of his desire “to paint as much of the map of Africa British red as possible” was also the subject of much comment. Well-informed students knew that, on the surface, Rhodes is simply referring to the convention of showing the Empire in red in Victorian maps and atlases; however, many students also read this as a metaphor. For some, it was an image of the ease with which Rhodes thought that the Empire could be developed; for others, it showed his belief that the Empire itself was a work of art; for many it was a, perhaps unconscious, reference to the bloodshed involved in imperial expansion

Perhaps inevitably, Joseph Conrad’s novella *Heart of Darkness* was the Wider Reading prose text which appeared most frequently in this January’s responses to Question 1. Students who had developed a thorough knowledge of Conrad’s

nightmarish presentation of European imperialism in Africa were able to establish a wide range of contrasts between the horrors of colonialism, as witnessed by Marlow in the Congo, and the idealistic vision of peaceful assimilation propounded by Rhodes. Many of these students made impressive use of textual detail, exploring Conrad's techniques with some confidence; however a surprising number were contextually ill-informed. Conrad does not explicitly condemn British imperialism in *Heart of Darkness* (although such a condemnation may well be implicit in the frame narration of the novel's opening and concluding passages): it should be remembered that the atrocities presented in the novel are committed by Belgian colonists. This is not to deny, of course, that such abuses also occurred under British rule: widely read students were often able to draw on popular or mainstream Victorian texts for evidence of surprising (and now totally abhorrent) racial attitudes – R.M. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island*, for instance.

Jane Eyre was also a popular choice of prose text among the students who sat this January's examination. Many explored Brontë's presentation of Bertha Mason, arguing that she might be considered a representative example of what Rhodes calls "the whole uncivilised world". In the context of Rhodes' condemnation of slavery, some thoughtful candidates also discussed Mr Rochester's reference to "bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes": a line which, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not make it into Cary Fukunaga's impressive recent adaptation of the novel for the cinema. The way in which Brontë develops the novel's colonial dimension through St John Rivers' determination to undertake missionary work in India was also the subject of much comment. A similarly fanatical character who received some attention from students this January was Mrs Jellaby in Dickens' *Bleak House*: this was a relevant choice, a woman obsessed with the relief of African poverty yet unconcerned that her own children live in destitution.

Some students used Rhodes' phrase "between man and man" as a starting point for their considerations of Victorian gender roles, noting that empire-building was a largely male pursuit while women were expected to devote their energies to home-building. Many students made sensible use of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to support this view, but more thoughtful readers found a fruitful contrast in Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession*: Mrs Warren is also an empire-builder, as some noted, and her international chain of brothels includes establishments in Brussels, Ostend, Vienna and Budapest. Unfortunately, some less successful students used the "between man and man" quotation as a means of unloading considerable quantities of pre-learned material about Victorian women and sexual politics without making any further links to Rhodes beyond the initial brief quotation: schools and colleges should advise their students to avoid this approach. One examiner regretted this tendency which was all too evident in his allocation of scripts: "too many students did not read the text carefully and closely – instead they scanned it in order to locate pegs on which to hang their prepared material, paying minimal attention to Rhodes in the process." The phrase "between man and man" was also the source of some confusion among those students who were unfamiliar with the name Cecil and assumed that the writer was a woman.

Similarly, some less secure students used Rhodes' reference to "the industrial commonwealth" merely as a beginning for their general accounts of industry in Victorian literature, making no further reference to the *Confession of Faith*. On the other hand, the phrase provided more thoughtful candidates with an opportunity to

explore literary presentations of Victorian industrialisation and its symbiotic relationship with the Empire. Inevitably, the "Key-Note" description of Coketown in *Hard Times* was a frequent choice among the students who adopted this approach. Closer readers explored the ways in which Dickens' use of colour, comparing the "unnatural red and black" of the smoke-discoloured buildings with "the painted face of a savage", can be contrasted to Rhodes' symbolic use of "British red" in opposition to "the whole uncivilised world". Indeed, many students saw Rhodes' pronouncements as a typical example of Victorian hypocrisy: attempting to force British values on other countries and cultures while Britain itself was far from the "perfect society" Rhodes claimed it to be. These students readily picked up on the contradictions between Rhodes' visionary list of ideals and the reality of life in Britain as experienced by many working people in the Victorian era. Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was a popular choice of text here: students perceptively contrasted Rhodes' view of the world outside the Empire as "uncivilised" with Engels' claim that it is "impossible for a human being in any way civilized to live in such a district" as inner Manchester.

Some students attempted to connect Rhodes' opinions on the evils of slavery with the status of the working class in Victorian Britain, although the results were sometimes rather vague or assertive. One examiner reported that "as in previous papers, there seemed to be some haziness about what exactly constitutes "slavery". Students often refer to the British working class as "slaves" and, whilst I can see where they are coming from, it is not the same semantically as forced captivity, denial of freedom and being held in bondage." Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that, for some members of the Victorian working class, there probably was not that much difference and, despite this semantic quibble, many students were able to make valid links between the conditions experienced by the working class in Victorian Britain and the ideas Rhodes presents in the passage. The most effective links were created by those who worded their responses carefully (noting, for instance that "white slavery" was often used as a euphemism for enforced prostitution) and those able to back up their ideas with reference to specific, relevant texts (such as Melville's *Redburn*, where the statues of the defeated at the foot of the Nelson Monument behind Liverpool Town Hall invariably remind the novel's narrator of "four African slaves in the market-place").

Many candidates convincingly argued that the influence of Darwin could be traced in Rhodes' ideas: there is certainly something of "the survival of the fittest" in Rhodes' contention that "we are the finest race in the world" and he does seem to advocate a breeding programme ("the birth of more of the English race") to ensure Britain's continued pre-eminence. Some students connected Rhodes' "fifty per cent chance of the existence of God Almighty" with the religious doubts which resulted from the publication of Darwin's theories: the kind of uncertainties which are also evident in Anna Tellwright's tentative response to Mr Banks the evangelist in Arnold Bennett's *Anna of the Five Towns*: "I think I do believe." For many students, however, the extract's final paragraphs provided further evidence of Rhodes' hypocrisy, if not outright blasphemy. These last two paragraphs were seen by many as a calculated, manipulative ploy, appealing to believers and non-believers alike in order to justify his views and to increase the number of people likely to approve his plans. Some perceptive candidates linked Rhodes' ultimate claim, that he is doing "what He would like me to do", to the self-justifications of Joseph in *Wuthering Heights*: "the wearisomest, self-righteous pharisee that ever ransacked a Bible to rake the

promises to himself and fling the curses on his neighbours.” Others responded to Rhodes’ claims by using the words of Tess after her encounter with the text-painter on her way home from Trantridge at the beginning of Phase the Second of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, ‘Maiden No More’: “Pooh--I don't believe God said such things!”

Similar doubts about God’s existence featured in the poetry links made by many students: Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s ‘The Cry of the Children’ was a popular choice here and much purposeful use was made of the lines “grief has made us unbelieving: We look up for God, but tears have made us blind”. Perhaps the most popular and relevant choice of poem, however, was ‘The White Man’s Burden’ by Rhodes’ close friend, Rudyard Kipling. Many students produced exceedingly good treatments of this poem, closely engaged with Kipling’s poetic techniques and with the complexity of his ideas; students who read less closely were often too ready to dismiss the poem as an imperialist rant. Admittedly Kipling’s view of the natives as “Half-devil and half-child” might be used in support of the latter view, but those who explored beneath the surface of the poem found much to discuss in the oxymoron “The savage wars of peace” (a more realistic presentation of the imperial process than Rhodes’ euphemistic “absorption”) and discovered many parallels to the *Testament of Faith*: Kipling’s invocation of “the best ye breed”, for instance, and his loaded use of the imperial buzzwords “bondage” and “Freedom”.

Tennyson was also a popular choice in this January’s responses to Question 1. Many students noted a patriotic pride similar to Rhodes’ in ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’: “Charging an army while / All the world wonder’d”. A select group of very well read students drew on Part Three of ‘Maud’ in which, attempting to justify Britain’s role in the Crimean War, the narrator of the Monodrama, like Rhodes, mixes ideas of dreams and justice: “And it was but a dream, yet it lighten’d my despair / When I thought that a war would arise in defence of the right, / That an iron tyranny should now bend or cease”. Similarly, Rhodes’ sporting reference to “fair play to all” was often linked with Sir Henry Newbolt's poem “Vitae Lampada”, in which images of public school cricket are intercut with acts of patriotic heroism on an unnamed desert battlefield, where the cry of “Play up! Play up! And play the game!” is heard, even when “The Gatling's jammed and the colonel dead, / And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.” The anti-imperialism of Thomas Hardy’s poetry was often used to develop a contrast to Rhodes’ patriotic rhetoric: ‘Channel Firing’ was a popular choice among students who adopted this approach, as was ‘At the War Office, London’ with its “hourly posted sheets of scheduled slaughter” and it’s ironic image of imperial “Peace../From Ind to Occident’. Hardy’s presentation of Empire seems very different from Rhodes’ vision of simple “absorption”.

Oscar Wilde’s *A Woman of No Importance* was by far the most frequent choice of play to feature in the responses to this January’s Question 1. Obviously this is, to some extent, due to the play’s popularity as a coursework text, but it is also worth stating that Wilde’s drama provided students with a wide range of material which enabled them to establish relevant connections with Rhodes’ *Testament of Faith*. These connections often focused on British attitudes to Americans and America. Whereas Rhodes somewhat arrogantly considers “the recovery of the United States” and its return to “British rule” a possibility worth pursuing, the attitude of those gathered at Hunstanton Chase verges on the contemptuous: Hester Worsley is merely a “dreadful girl” to be patronised (her host tells her that “there was a great deal of truth in what you said…and you looked very pretty while you said it”), while in a line Wilde deleted from the final version of the play, Lord Illingworth condemns

America as “corrupt without ever having been cultured, which is a crime”. Some students suggested that Rhodes’ implicit admiration for the United States finds a more explicit parallel in Wilde’s own attitudes: Hester becomes a mouthpiece both for his pro-American views (“true American society consists simply of all the good women and good men”; it is a country that is “better, wiser, and less unjust”) and for his attack on the stagnation of imperial Britain (“a leper in purple…a dead thing smeared with gold”). Other students used *A Woman of No Importance* to develop their ideas about the ways in which Victorian literature presents slavery, either literal or metaphorical - and the most successful students displayed a sufficient command of written expression to make this distinction clearly. Lord Illingworth’s response to urban poverty (“It is the problem of slavery And we are trying to solve it by amusing the slaves.”) featured in a significant number of these relevant responses.

Some students made effective use of modern plays about the Victorian era in their responses. Brian Friel’s *Translations* was a particularly appropriate choice of Wider Reading text in the context of the *Testament of Faith*: the dramatist presents British cultural imperialism in action, through the Anglicisation of Irish place names and, in the play’s references to the potato blight, reminds the audience of the devastating consequences of British rule in the 1840s. Examiners are always pleased to note the appearance of new Wider Reading texts in the answers to Question 1 and particularly interesting this January were the references made by students from several schools and colleges to *We are Three Sisters*: Blake Morrison’s newly-staged synthesis of Chekhov and the Brontës. Although Morrison makes little direct reference to the Empire in the play, the sisters discuss their experience of industrial progress in vivid terms, enabling these fortunate students to make relevant connections to a fresh Wider Reading text.

The use made by students of their Victorian contextual knowledge was often a significant discriminator in the assessment of the responses to this January’s Question 1. In less successful answers, the contextual material often consisted either of pre-learned facts unloaded despite their irrelevance to the extract or of sweeping generalisations which took no account of the complexity of the Victorian context. On the other hand, several examiners reported that a significant number of well-informed students not only demonstrated their secure factual knowledge relating to the expansion of the British Empire, but also used that knowledge to enhance their responses in an effective and relevant manner. This latter approach should be encouraged by schools and colleges: it is important that students consider the literary context in their Question 1 responses, but it is vital that the contextual material they decide to use is relevant to the extract.

Successful students:

- explored and analysed the ways in which Rhodes presents his thoughts and feelings about the British Empire and Victorian progress
- established a range of relevant links between the extract and their Wider Reading
- referred in detail 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 students:

- responded to Rhodes' autobiography in a simple or superficial manner, commenting on phrases in isolation rather than engaging with the extract as a whole
- referred only to the plots of their Wider Reading texts or missed out whole genres
- wrote about the Victorian context in an arbitrary, general manner without making any effective connections to Rhodes.

Section B: Poetry

One examiner reported on Section B: "I thought all the poetry questions worked well but the even-numbered thematic questions were more popular and generally produced better responses. The odd-numbered questions, featuring a named poem, seemed less popular and often produced answers in which students either did not refer to any other poem or entirely overlooked the idea that was up for debate." Indeed, examiners frequently commented on this failure to engage with the claim offered for debate by the question. As another examiner reported: "Some students are still using far too many contextual references in their poetry answers, but make no attempt to construct a debate at all. They really need to be properly prepared for the different assessment focus in each of the paper's two sections." On the other hand, at least one examiner was more impressed: "I thought that more students had been taught to engage with form, structure and language this January and more students kept the keywords in focus throughout the debates they constructed."

Given the problems experienced by some students when attempting the named poem questions, it is perhaps worth re-stating what these questions require. Successful students understand the need to make links between the question's named poem and others in their set selection, either in terms of subject matter or style, in order to establish points of comparison or contrast – thus fulfilling the requirements of Assessment Objective 3 (the dominant Assessment Objective for all Section B questions) by constructing a balanced debate. Less successful students merely assert that the named poem would provide an effective conclusion (making no attempt to support this claim by establishing the necessary connections to the rest of the selection) or suggest alternative poems (without first properly debating the merits of the named poem). These somewhat limited approaches can only take students as far as Band 2 at best: to reach the higher bands of the mark scheme it is vital that students both analyse the given poem in detail and create a relevant, balanced debate by establishing clear links to a range of similar and contrasting poems. That range can be as small as one similar poem and one contrasting poem, but it is essential that these links are made.

Selected Poems of John Clare

Examiners saw a considerable number of responses to the poetry of John Clare this January: the Clare selection still lags some way behind Hardy in terms of its popularity with schools and colleges, but Clare remains a long way ahead of the Brontës. All of the examiners who were fortunate enough to have responses to John Clare's poetry in their allocations commented on the high degree of engagement,

enjoyment and sensitivity with which the students approached the verse. The most successful of these students demonstrated their overview of Clare's poetry by referring to a wide range of poems. In some instances, however, the range of reference was disappointingly narrow: it is a matter of some concern to examiners when all the students from a school or college use the same small group of poems – and even an identical collection of quotations – in their answers.

Question 2

This was the more popular John Clare question. One examiner reported "The question worked well. The keywords gave students plenty to write about and there was ample opportunity for them to create a balance by selecting contrasting poems. It was good to see far fewer students resorting to irrelevant chunks of Clare's biography than is sometimes the case: the question forced students to contrast Clare's poetry of loss to his other poems and offered some scope for the use of legitimately integrated biographical detail as a means of shaping and structuring the responses."

The phrase which provides the question's keywords comes from Tom Paulin and students interpreted it in a variety of ways. For some it signified the loss of Clare's familiar landscapes, as presented in 'Remembrances' ("Summer pleasures they are gone"),'The Flitting' ('The summer like a stranger comes; / I pause and hardly know her face') and 'The Moors' ("a hope that blossomed free / And hath been once no more shall be."); others focused on Clare's loss of his first love Mary Joyce in poems such as 'Ballad: The Spring returns, the pewit screams' ("But where is Mary?") and 'Love and Memory' ("Now joy's cup is drained / And hope's fountain is dry"); many explored the ways in which Clare presents the loss of his own identity – and even his mind – in later poems like 'I Am' ("what I am, none cares or knows") and 'A Vision' ("I lost the love of heaven above…I lost earth's joys"). Students often developed counter-arguments by using poems in which Clare explores ideas of permanence or literary immortality, such as 'The Eternity of Nature' and 'To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait'. Well-informed students sometimes argued that the recognition of transience is a key element in Romantic poetry (although none were reported as going so far as to use the Keatsian label "negative capability") and went on to consider the ways in which Clare's poetic vision assimilates loss as part of the natural process or the rhythm of the seasons in poems such as 'Sonnet: The landscape laughs in Spring', 'St Martin's Eve' and 'Sonnet: The morning mist is changing blue'.

Successful students:

- had a secure understanding of the keywords "the poetry of loss"
- explored the effects created by Clare's choices of form, structure and language
- used a range of poems to develop a balanced debate.

Less successful students:

- simply agreed with the given view
- described the content of Clare's poetry

- showed little awareness of the ways in which Clare uses language to create effects.

Question 3

Despite this question's comparative unpopularity, examiners reported that most students who attempted it were successful in establishing a range of links to other Clare poems. Perhaps this is a sign of how well Clare is taught in the schools and colleges that choose to study this text. Too often the LTA1A questions of this type seem to attract students who appear unwilling to address the keywords "an effective introduction to the selection" and who fail to move beyond the question's named poem. This was seldom the case with the responses to this January's Question 3.

It is possible, of course, that some students were deterred from attempting this question by the length of the focal poem, but those students who decided to tackle 'December' often displayed a secure understanding of the poem's subject matter and were able to engage with the poetic techniques Clare employs here. 'St Martin's Eve' was the most popular poem used to establish relevant links to 'December' but poems such as 'Sport in the Meadows' and 'The Cottager' also featured regularly in these responses. Clare's far more bitter and satirical take on village life and the rural community, 'The Parish', was the most frequently chosen contrasting poem used by students to develop a counter-argument. However some argued, persuasively enough, that although key Clare motifs - such as nature and memory - feature briefly in 'December', their importance to the whole selection is not sufficiently represented here. Others contrasted the fairly traditional, celebratory form of the given poem with the wide variety of poetic forms and voices employed by Clare elsewhere in this selection.

Successful students:

- explored 'December' with knowledge and understanding
- developed a range of relevant links to other poems
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea that 'December' would provide an effective introduction to the selection.

Less successful students:

- produced superficial accounts of 'December'
- struggled to engage with Clare's choices of form, structure and language in this poem
- made general comments about Clare's subject matter rather than establishing specific links to other poems.

Selected Poems of The Brontës

The Brontës remain the minority choice among the Victorian set poets and, once again, the LTA1A examiners found few responses to this text in their script allocations this January. The two Brontë questions produced very different responses: Question 4 was extremely popular and was often attempted with a considerable degree of success, whereas, unfortunately, the number of students

answering Question 5 did not reach double figures. This sharply contrasting uptake is perhaps an indication of exactly why schools and colleges are reluctant to offer this rich selection: the fact that the text contains the work of four different poets means that students who attempt to cut corners - by omitting the study of any one of them – will almost certainly be found out and their final marks are likely to suffer accordingly. It is worth remembering that there are no short cuts when preparing for this examination: it is vital that students have read the whole text and have developed a secure overview of the poetry of all four Brontës.

Question 4

This was by far the more popular question on the poetry of the Brontës. Although a brief glance at the selection's Contents page ('He saw my heart's woe', 'Death triumphant', 'A Death-Scene' and 'Despondency', for example…and the list does not end there) might suggest that students were spoiled for choice when it came to selecting poems which might be considered "dismal and gloomy", most resisted the strong temptation to agree wholeheartedly with the given view and leave it at that. The besetting gloom of the poetry was often considered the result of the poets' tragic lives but, as with the best John Clare responses, the most successful students used this biographical information as a means of shaping their answers; in the case of some less successful students, however, the biographical content did sometimes dominate the responses. Many students found sufficient cheer within the Brontës' poetry to develop an appropriately balanced debate in response to the view given in the question. As one examiner was pleased to report: "They were always prepared to seek out examples of "drear", but also looked for contrasts both within the collection and within individual poems: for example, the way in which Charlotte Brontë chooses to open 'Retrospection' in a manner which is far from "dismal and gloomy", in sharp contrast to the rest of the poem.

Aside from the poems mentioned above, the relevant choices made by students attempting this question frequently included Charlotte Brontë's poems on the deaths of her sisters; Branwell Brontë's 'On Caroline'; Emily Brontë's 'Hope' (ironically not a very hopeful poem at all) and 'Death'; and Anne Brontë's 'The Captive Dove' and 'Last Lines'. Emily Brontë's poetry was by far the most popular choice among those students who developed a successful counter-argument: 'Will the day be bright or cloudy?', 'Tell me, tell me, smiling child' or 'To Imagination' often featured in these answers.

Successful students:

- constructed balanced debates founded on a secure understanding of the question's keywords
- selected relevant poems to support their arguments
- confidently explored the effects created by the Brontës' poetic techniques.

Less successful students:

- agreed with the given view but struggled to find contrasting, cheerful poems
- simply described the content of the poems
- wrote more about the Brontës' biography than they did about their poetry.

Question 5

This question was the least popular on the entire paper by some considerable distance: it was attempted by just six of the 839 students who sat this January's LTA1A examination. Some of those attempting the question were less confident students who leaned too heavily on a biographical approach, spending more time on speculation concerning the secrets of Branwell Brontë's private life, as revealed in 'Epistle From a Father to a Child in Her Grave', than they did establishing links to other poems which might inform a debate about the idea that the poem is the key to the whole selection. Some examiners expressed their disappointment that so few students had opted to tackle what is perhaps Branwell Brontë's most accessible poem and wondered whether this was due to the incomplete textual knowledge of some students. Perhaps too many of those who had studied the Brontës were simply ignorant of this key poem? If so, it is worth taking this opportunity to remind schools and colleges that students are expected to be familiar with the whole of the selection chosen for study: limited knowledge can have a seriously detrimental impact on a student's potential performance in the examination. Students certainly did not eschew this question because it was significantly more difficult than others: the focal poem tackles important Brontë themes (love and death, parents and children, nature and transience) in an approachable manner (the epistolary form; the elemental and cosmic language) which should have enabled well-informed students to establish a range of relevant links and contrasts across the selection. Unfortunately, very few chose to do so.

Successful students:

- displayed a secure understanding of 'Epistle From a Father to a Child in Her Grave'
- established a range of relevant links to other poems in the selection
- engaged with the idea that "this poem is the key to the whole selection".

Less successful students:

- wrote simple accounts of 'Epistle From a Father to a Child in Her Grave'
- established few connections to other poems
- indulged in excessive biographical speculation about Branwell and Mrs Robinson.

Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy

Thomas Hardy remains the most popular set poet on the LTA1A paper: as usual, this text was studied in the vast majority of schools and colleges entering candidates for the January examination. It is worth remembering, however, that Hardy's time as a set poet on this Specification is now drawing to a close and questions on Norman Page's selection will appear on just two more papers: in June 2012 and in January 2013. The questions on the latter paper are intended as a final opportunity for re-sitting students to answer questions on Hardy. The January 2013 paper will also feature the first questions on the replacement set poetry text: the Everyman's Poetry Tennyson selection (edited by Michael Baron; ISBN 978-0-460-87802-9). Many schools and colleges have already begun to consider their choice of a replacement

text for Hardy and initial feedback suggests that Tennyson will be a very popular choice. Alternatively, schools and colleges may wish to consider the option of John Clare or the Brontës: these poetry texts will remain on the paper until January 2015 with replacement texts, still to be decided, first available to students who will complete their AS courses in June 2015. Although no longer a set text, Hardy's poetry should certainly not disappear from Victorian Literature courses: the verse will continue to provide a useful Wider Reading resource and examiners fully expect to see students making effective use of Hardy in future responses to Question 1.

This January's Hardy answers, as in previous LTA1A examinations, covered the full range of the mark scheme: examiners saw many relevant, well-informed and exploratory responses to the poetry, however the work of less successful students was characterised by some familiar weaknesses. There is still a tendency for less secure students to fall back on biographical approaches to Hardy, even though Assessment Objective 4 is not assessed by the poetry questions. Here too, as with the other set poetry texts, those students who had failed to develop a detailed knowledge of the whole selection soon gave themselves away by their unsuccessful attempts to fit inappropriate or irrelevant poems into their answers. Students with limited textual knowledge cannot expect to succeed in this examination.

Question 6

This was the more popular Hardy question and most of the students who chose to attempt it had at least a basic grasp of the ways in which Hardy presents women in his poetry. The key differentiator for examiners assessing the responses to this question was what the students chose to do with this knowledge of the relevant poems. Successful students focused directly on the keywords "weak, helpless victims" and evaluated their chosen poems accordingly; less successful students often prefaced their answers with long contextual descriptions of the role of women in Victorian society and proceeded to write generalised responses about the women in Hardy, paying scant attention to the question or the keywords: schools and colleges should strongly advise their students against this broad approach which can result in a Band 2 mark at best.

'The Ruined Maid' was by far the most frequent choice of poem in the responses to this question and most students argued enthusiastically that, despite her disgraced status, 'Melia is certainly not presented as weak or helpless. The same cannot be said for her unnamed friend, however, whose envious attitude to the finery of a fallen woman emphasises her own lowly situation with its implication of weakness and helplessness. Some less successful students seemed oddly distant from the actual text of the poem, however, and their argument that Hardy is taking a conventionally Victorian moral stance in condemning 'Melia's behaviour (or that he is portraying her as a victim of society) appeared at odds with Hardy's tone of slightly ironic admiration for the spirit displayed by the ruined maid. Most students were on more secure ground when considering the spirit displayed by the agricultural workers in 'We Field Women' (a logical development in answers which had previously considered 'Melia's former life of "digging potatoes, and spudding up docks"): few were in any doubt that Hardy presents these women as neither weak nor helpless.

'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' and 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy' were also popular choices among the students who attempted this question, both poems providing

effective support for those who argued in favour of the given view. As many students noticed, the former poem even includes one of the question's keywords (the trampwoman repeats the phrase "I lay weak" in the twelfth of the thirteen numbered stanzas), although some students developed a counter-argument on the basis of the long miles of walking suggested by the poem's litany of place names: a woman who can cover these distances on foot is certainly not physically weak. The "daughter flower-fair" of the latter poem was frequently used as an example of a woman that Hardy presents as a helpless victim. There was plenty of relevant material for students to choose from here: the daughter's treatment by a feckless sweetheart, her mother's attempts to induce an abortion and the subsequent lingering death-bed scene were all recognised as typical (and, indeed, stereotypical) of the melodramatic ways in which Victorian literature sometimes presented women.

The responses from students who chose to write about the poems in which Hardy presented the women to whom he was closest were of mixed quality. Inevitably, this question attracted some Emma answers that had been prepared in advance and which were only of general or, at best, implicit relevance to the actual task set. Students who applied the keywords to the Emma poems in a relevant manner reached some interesting conclusions: some felt that her frail and spectral presentation conforms to the given view (and, indeed, one of the question's keywords also appears in 'The Walk': "You were weak and lame"), while others argued that Hardy is the weak one in these poems: even in death, Emma is presented as exerting a power over him. Hardy's mother also featured as an example of a woman who is neither weak, helpless nor a victim: 'The Roman Road' was a popular choice in these responses, as was 'A Church Romance' (although in this poem she had not "gone to church to see 'Mellstock', Hardy's father's band", as one student claimed). 'Thoughts of Phena' was also used to develop a relevant counter-argument in some responses to this question: Hardy's idealised, vivacious presentation of his "lost prize" certainly seems very different to the given view (although, as one student unsubtly remarked: "Phena is certainly weak and helpess – because she's dead").

Successful students:

- engaged with the keywords "weak, helpless victims"
- explored the effects created by Hardy's use of form, structure and language
- produced balanced debates based on a wide range of Hardy's poetry.

Less successful students:

- wrote about Hardy's presentation of women in general
- described the content of the poems but did not consider Hardy's poetic techniques
- unloaded contextual material about Victorian women rather than writing about the ways Hardy presents them.

Question 7

This was the less popular Hardy question and students attempted it with variable degrees of success. Most at least had a secure understanding of 'Afterwards', although the cursory treatment of the focal poem by a few suggested an incomplete knowledge and a desire to move quickly on to other, more familiar poems which they had hoped would come up on the paper. Successful students understood the need to make links between the question's named poem and others in the selection, establishing points of comparison or contrast in order to construct a balanced debate. Less successful students merely asserted that the poem would provide an effective conclusion or suggested alternatives without first properly debating the merits of 'Afterwards'. The most common poems used for debate in the responses to this question were 'The Darkling Thrush' (a poem in which, like 'Afterwards', Hardy uses images of the natural world to present his thoughts and feelings about an uncertain future) and '1967' (another poem in which Hardy imagines the world after his death, although his macabre technique in this poem is in sharp contrast to the tone of gentle, modest surmise he creates in 'Afterwards'). While many of the students who attempted this question agreed that a poem about the ways posterity will regard Hardy would make an effective conclusion, some were determined to argue the claims of the poem that actually does end the selection: the gnomic 'He Resolves to Say No More'. Some more adventurous students offered the little-noticed 'He Never Expected Much' as a plausible alternative; others preferred the imagined afterlife of 'My Spirit Will Not Haunt the Mound'.

Successful students:

- explored 'Afterwards' perceptively and sensitively
- developed relevant links to a range of other poems
- engaged successfully with the idea of "an effective conclusion".

Less successful students:

- wrote only a simple or brief account of 'Afterwards'
- did not consider Hardy's poetic techniques
- dismissed 'Afterwards' cursorily and asserted that other poems would provide a more effective conclusion.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into marks on the Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) by visiting the link below:

www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion.