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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
Many examiners were impressed by the thorough manner in which schools and colleges had prepared their students for the LTA1A examination. Many students approach this paper with a wide knowledge of Victorian literature, a secure understanding of their set poetry text and an open mind. Among successful students, this last is a key attribute - both when analysing the unseen extract in Section A and when engaging with the critical views offered for debate in Section B. To some extent, it is unsurprising that most students are well prepared for the demands of this examination: the paper is well established (this June's LTA1A was the eighth since the new AQA English Literature Specification A was first taught in the autumn of 2008) and most schools and colleges are by now familiar with its question styles and the ways in which it tests the AS Assessment Objectives. There are though a small number of schools and colleges which prepare their students for the LTA1A examination less effectively than the rest, apparently because they are unaware of the most effective ways to meet the Assessment Objectives tested in this paper. Inevitably, the responses of this minority will occupy a large part of this report, but this should not be allowed to obscure the fact that many schools and colleges know what they are doing and they do it well. Unfortunately, the responses of less successful students all too frequently suggest that their teachers have paid scant attention to the previous *Report on the Examination* or to any of the other sources of support made available to schools and colleges by AQA.

It was clear from this June's LTA1A scripts that some schools and colleges are thinking carefully about the ways in which their students can make the most of the two hours available to them in the examination. Several examiners reported on entries where the entire cohort attempted Section B first, apparently because the students had been trained to do so. Students are, of course, at liberty to answer their two questions in whatever order they choose. However it is worth pointing out that, where this strategy was implemented, it appears to have backfired in some cases: examiners reported that it sometimes caused students to rush their reading of the unseen extract and their mark for Question 1 suffered accordingly.
It is also vital that students know their texts well. Some students approach this examination with a limited knowledge of their set poetry text: they hope that a handful of obvious poems will be enough to get them through the paper, but this "Greatest Hits" approach is seldom successful. It is also a matter of concern to examiners when every student in the entry of a school or college adopts this unhelpful approach to the examination: these students have not been properly prepared and this will inevitably impact on the marks they are awarded. A small number of students displayed an even sketchier knowledge of what they claimed to be their Wider Reading.

Worryingly, a more significant number of students confined their Wider Reading links to a single brief sentence ("The Artful Dodger in *Oliver Twist* is a thief too.") or barely a title ("*Anna Karenina* is also about adultery."). Of course, these are not really Wider Reading links at all: it is essential that students show that they have actually read the texts they choose to connect with the unseen extract – by developing detailed textual references which also display their understanding of the writers' techniques. The Wider Reading requirements of this examination go far beyond the simple mention of a text's title or a single quotation thrown in with no reference to its place within a whole text.

For the most part, the written English in this June's LTA1A answers was of the high standard that would be expected of students who are following an A-Level course in English Literature, although there were a few basic errors which made frequent appearances in these responses. It should be remembered that Assessment Objective 1 requires students to use "appropriate terminology" when analysing literature.
To look at the achievement of students question by question:

Section A: Contextual Linking
Question 1
The choice of a letter by Jane Welsh Carlyle for this year's Question 1 extract worked very well. As one experienced examiner reported: "students of all abilities found the passage accessible and it offered plenty of opportunities for the development of relevant Wider Reading links." Victorian attitudes to the role of women in society and to class division were the themes most frequently explored through the Wider Reading but, among more thoughtful students, Carlyle's flippant (and potentially blasphemous?) reference to "the Virgin Mary" stimulated some informed consideration of the important part played by Christianity in nineteenth century life and literature. Another examiner was happy to report that "most students struck the right balance between a critical analysis of the extract and a range of developed links to their Wider Reading." On the other hand, several examiners expressed their disappointment with schools and colleges where the students had a secure command of potentially relevant Wider Reading material but made no attempt to link these texts directly to the extract. In such instances, the effect produced by the students was one of "unloading" pre-learned material in a general manner (a feature of Band 2 answers, at best) rather than actually answering the question that has been set: schools and colleges are strongly advised to avoid such an approach in the future. A similarly unsuccessful approach was adopted by a number of students who scoured the extract for stylistic devices which they then used as hooks on which to hang examples of similar devices from their Wider Reading – without paying any attention at all to the actual content of Carlyle's letter. While it is important that students engage with the writer's choices of form, structure and language in order to meet the demands of Assessment Objective 3, to do so in isolation constitutes a failure to answer the question: "subject matter" and "thoughts and feelings" are important keywords which must not be avoided.

One examiner reported that many successful students began their responses to Question 1 with a purposeful paragraph in which matters of form, audience and the writer's intentions were considered, before moving on to engage with the details of the letter's structure and language. Not all students, however, were able to adopt this effective approach and some students appeared to be confused by the form of the extract. This June's paper was the first time that a private letter has been used to provide the stimulus for Question 1 of the LTA1A examination and there was some uncertainty among less confident students about the ways in which they should respond to the text. Some students decided to treat Carlyle's letter as a historical resource rather than as a text suitable for literary analysis: these students spent too much time speculating on the writer's reliability or bias, instead of engaging with the effects created by her choices of language and structure. Similarly, a worrying number of students seemed entirely unaware of the extract's form: some referred to it as an "article" throughout their answers; others treated it as a political tract or an

example of polemical oratory. Quite frequently, students appeared ignorant of the fact that they were reading an extract and commented on how strange it is that Carlyle does not open her letter in the conventional manner or sign it at the end. Clearly, it is important that students use the text, and any additional information offered, to develop a secure understanding of the extract's form, audience and purpose – but it is also vital that they do not become bogged down in these matters: some students spent precious examination time on a page (and, in some instances, even more) of unnecessary explanation or speculation, thus limiting their opportunities to analyse the actual text of the letter in any significant detail.
As a genre, the personal letter produced some surprisingly naive or superficial claims: examiners read a significant number of responses in which students made great play of their broad assumption that, as this is a letter to a friend, everything in it must be real, true or genuine. However, more thoughtful readers probed the self-pitying surface of the text and questioned whether Carlyle's words should be accepted at face value or whether the letter contains an element of self-mockery and knowing over-exaggeration deliberately intended to entertain the recipient. These students often supported their interpretations by analysing the devices Carlyle uses to create the letter's somewhat hysterical tone: the hyperbolic self-dramatisation ("witnessing in me as sad a spectacle of human agony as could have been anywhere seen"); the multiple underlinings and exclamation marks; the rhetorical flourishes such as "Need one ask…?" and "oh I can't go on" (although she does).
Students found plenty to explore in the language used by Carlyle too. Many commented on the middle-class attitudes inherent in her account of events: a life of "tea in the dining room" and "reading in the Drawingroom", of "fine napkins" and feminine "softness". In contrast, Carlyle's demonization of the working class and her presentation of the below-stairs demi-monde - an underworld of "laughing and swearing", where a servant can make audacious "threats of poisoning…and cutting her own throat" - were considered by many students as emblematic of Victorian middle-class fears. The depersonalising and diminishing effects created by Carlyle's use of labels such as "the Creature" and the "Boy-Father" were also explored by many students. In addition, some sensitive readers found a certain bitter humour in Carlyle's use of puns and double meanings: her free association of the homophones "wretch" and "retch" was the subject of considerable comment, as was her comical allusion to "the Virgin Mary".

Carlyle's reference to her husband as "Mr C." also provoked much interesting discussion. Some students saw the phrase merely as a jokily familiar term of endearment. Others argued that, although she is clearly an educated woman with a wide vocabulary and a distinctive prose style of her own, Carlyle is happy to conform to the Victorian stereotype of the submissive wife, unable – even in a letter to a friend – to refer to her husband by his Christian name. These were the readings of thoughtful and engaged students, but others did not read so closely: inexplicably, some students claimed that the letter was written to Mr Carlyle. Similarly, a small group of students, perhaps over-exposed to nineteenth century "sensation novels" as part of their Wider Reading, asserted that Thomas Carlyle was secretly the father of the illegitimate baby born in that "small room at the end of the dining room". The small room itself, incidentally, can still be seen by members of the public: the Carlyles' house at 24, Cheyne Row, Chelsea is now a National Trust property and offers students a valuable opportunity to catch a glimpse of the lifestyle of the Victorian literati.

Perhaps inevitably, a significant number of students were unsympathetic to Jane Welsh Carlyle's plight: from their liberal 21st century perspective it was difficult to see what all the fuss was about and Carlyle's attitudes seemed so alien that many felt it necessary to explain her use of the term "illegitimate" - a term which, in their experience, is no longer applied to children. Indeed many examiners reported that students were often more inclined to show sympathy for the plight of Mary the servant, while condemning Carlyle as "self-absorbed and pompous", "obnoxious and dim-witted", "self-centred and arrogant" or as "a drama queen". Many engaged responses explored the ways Carlyle presents her concern for her own dignity ("I have been cheated and made a fool of, and laughed at") and her possessions ("Need one ask where all my fine napkins went…?") in contrast to her apparent unconcern for the welfare of the unmarried mother she renders jobless and homeless. Similarly, Thomas Carlyle was the subject of some dismissive comments: one student wondered how acute his social commentary could have been when he didn't even know what was going on in the next room. The image of the "thin small door" which separates an intellectual at study from a servant in labour was the subject of much engaged exploration. Some students argued that the door symbolises the nineteenth century divide between the social classes (an idea summed up neatly by the student who wrote that "To the lower classes, having an illegitimate child was as common as reading in the Drawingroom."); others felt that it represents the division between men and women in Victorian society. Some thoughtful students established illuminating connections between Carlyle's use of the door image and Ibsen's use of doors, both theatrical and symbolic, in *A Doll's House.*

A Doll's House was a popular Wider Reading text, deployed to good effect by many students in their responses to this June's Question 1. Students often developed interesting comparisons between the presentation of Nora's exit from the Helmer family home and Mary's departure from Cheyne Row, while those who knew the play well made relevant use of the minor character Anne-Marie. As some perceptive students noted, Ibsen presents Anne-Marie's situation as an inversion of Mary's: she gave her own illegitimate "child away – to strangers" in order to take up employment as Nora's nurse because "A poor girl what's got into trouble can't afford to pick and choose." This absence of socially acceptable options for Victorian women who found themselves pregnant and unmarried is also a key theme in the most popular play to feature in this June's Question 1 answers: *A Woman of No Importance*. Many students developed relevant links between Wilde's presentation of Mrs Arbuthnot and Carlyle's description of Mary, while others explored the ways in which the tone of Carlyle's letter is echoed in the exchanges of scandalous gossip between the ladies of Hunstanton Chase – the "sphinxes without secrets", as Lord Illingworth calls them. Other students made successful use of Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a play in which illegitimacy becomes a subject of comedy ("I was in a hand-bag…In the cloak-room at Victoria Station…The Brighton Line.") and in which Algernon, like Jane Carlyle, realises that "the lower orders…seem, as a class, to have absolutely no sense of moral responsibility."

In contrast to the light social comedy of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, the melodrama *Maria Marten* was used by some students to show a far more extreme theatrical presentation of the consequences of illegitimacy. Other students made effective use of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* to show that sexual immorality in the nineteenth century was not the exclusive preserve of society's lower orders. *Mrs Warren's Profession* by George Bernard Shaw also made frequent appearances in

the responses to Question 1. This was a relevant choice of drama text which enabled students to develop some illuminating comparisons of the ways in which morality and respectability are presented in Victorian literature: many of these students cited Mrs Warren's exasperated exclamation "Oh, the hypocrisy of the world makes me sick!" Examiners also saw a significant number of responses in which students developed effective links to J.M. Barrie's *The Admirable Crichton*: many argued that Carlyle's attitudes to the lower classes are reflected in the character of Lord Loam, who dismissively reminds the play's eponymous protagonist that "I was born a peer, and you…were born a servant." Some of the more successful students referred not just to the printed text of these plays in their responses, but also to the plays in performance. Their exploration of the ways in which specific productions had interpreted the texts often enriched their answers, showing a secure understanding of theatrical devices and the effects these can have on an audience. This approach is to be encouraged: it effectively differentiates these well-informed students from the less successful who refer only to a play's "readers".
Most students were able to develop relevant connections to at least one prose text in their answer to Question 1: fallen women abound in Victorian novels and many students obviously felt that they were spoiled for choice. Perhaps inevitably, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* appeared in a large number of responses: many of the students who wrote about Hardy's novel displayed a secure knowledge of this text, developing their comparisons in detail and exploring the writer's techniques with understanding. John Fowles' twentieth century excursion into Victorian territory, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, was also a very popular choice of Wider Reading prose text, offering a wide variety of potential links to Carlyle's letter. Some students focused on Fowles' presentation of Sarah Woodruff who, like Mary, is a servant but who is not, of course, the fallen woman everyone supposes her to be at the beginning of the novel. In some responses Carlyle's behaviour was compared with that of the tyrannical Mrs Poulteney, while other students made effective use of the ways Fowles presents the relationship between the servants Sam and Mary. Some of the novel's significant details were used to illuminate perceptive interpretations of the extract: for instance, Charles Smithson's late realisation that "the lower classes were secretly happier than the upper" seems to be confirmed by Carlyle's neurotic outpourings. Others linked the letter to Fowles' observation that "what drove the new Britain was increasingly a desire to seem respectable": as one student so eloquently put it, "our buttoned-up stereotypes of the Victorians are actually based on the values of their middle and upper classes." For those students whose reading of *Hard Times* had progressed beyond Mr Gradgrind's school and 'The Key-Note', these buttoned-up moral values were embodied in Bounderby's insistence that Stephen Blackpool cannot leave his drunken wife for the saintly Rachael but must remain in his disastrous marriage: "There's a sanctity in this relation of life . . . and-and-it must be kept up."
Among the other interesting choices of prose text to feature in these answers were *Ruth* and *The Crimson Petal and the White*, both of which feature fallen women as protagonists. Surprisingly, Elizabeth Gaskell's controversial 1853 novel is not as well known as much of her other work (perhaps because it offers neither the Northern industrial grit of *Mary Barton* nor the superficial cosiness of *Cranford*) so examiners were pleased to see it being used effectively by some adventurous schools and colleges. Michael Faber's 2002 representation of Victorian society's seedy underside furnished students with the pertinent observation from Sugar the prostitute: "I am a fallen woman, but I assure you: I did not fall. I was pushed." – a quotation which, many argued, might apply to Carlyle's servant Mary too. Some students connected Mary's duplicity - and the emerging dual nature which so surprises Carlyle - with

Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*; others compared Mary with another servant who is more devious and malign than she first appears: Nelly Dean in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith also appeared in some thoughtful responses: students found relevant links between the petty snobberies of Charles Pooter and Carlyle's self-centred presentation of her own feelings. These two texts also enabled students to explore the effects created by the writers' use of the first person - an exploration also undertaken by those perceptive enough to connect Carlyle's use of the epistolary form with the letters which feature in the narrative structure of a number of Victorian novels (A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, for instance, was cited by a number of students). In addition, some students made effective use of Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Girl of the Period*: this essay provided an immediate language link to Carlyle's letter as the writer presents her disapproval of any "creature who dyes her hair and paints her face".

The poetry of Thomas Hardy featured regularly in the answers to this June's Question 1. 'A Sunday Morning Tragedy' and 'A Trampwoman's Tragedy' were popular and relevant choices here, as was 'The Ruined Maid'. Examiners continue to find some responses to the last of these poems problematic, however, as too many students appeared determined to impose their own highly dubious interpretations on the character of Amelia. Many asserted that the ruined maid is an emaciated syphilitic who is deeply unhappy with her role in life (as, undoubtedly, many Victorian prostitutes were) and that Hardy is issuing a dire warning against sexual immorality. In attempting to force the poem to conform to the conventional representation of fallen women in Victorian literature, these students seriously misread the text, evidently unaware of Hardy's irony and the possibility that the poet intends the ruined maid to be admired for her spirit and her self-amelioration. Tennyson's presentation of repressed and confined women also provided some interesting comparisons with Carlyle's own narrow horizons: 'Mariana' and 'The Lady of Shalott' were the most popular choices here. Some students used Christina Rossetti's heavily symbolic 'Goblin Market' to explore Victorian representations of sexual temptation, while 'The Song of the Shirt' by Thomas Hood ("a woman sat in unwomanly rags") enabled others to create relevant links to Carlyle's ideas about femininity.

Thomas Hood's lesser-known poem, 'The Bridge of Sighs', made an appearance in the responses of several students. As many noted, Hood's presentation of a fallen woman driven to suicide in the Thames is far more sympathetic than Jane Welsh Carlyle's presentation of Mary. Indeed, in Hood's poem the corpse recovered from the river is transfigured into an almost sacred object of veneration and beauty:

"Touch her not scornfully;
Think of her mournfully,
Gently and humanly;
Not of the stains of her,
All that remains of her
Now is pure womanly."

Some contextually well-informed students developed this idea further by considering the ways in which Hood's imagery finds visual echoes in celebrated Victorian paintings such as G.F. Watts' "Found Drowned", Augustus Leopold Egg's "Past and Present" triptych and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's unfinished "Found". This use of the

Victorian visual context is a valid response to the demands of Assessment Objective 4 and the answers of these confident students were enriched by this approach. Conversely, the students who attempted to use 'The Angel in the House' in their answers were often less successful. In examining terms, Coventry Patmore's best-known work is a poem "More honor'd in the breach than the observance": for students who have not read sufficiently widely in poetry its title has become a convenient shorthand for Victorian attitudes to women, but few students display any knowledge of the poem beyond an awareness of its title. Unfortunately, some students even get that title wrong: for examiners, references to 'The Angle in the House' became a cause of acute concern. Similarly unconvincing were those few students who attempted to recycle half-forgotten poems from their GCSE English Literature course: 'My Last Duchess' was something of a favourite here but it was seldom used to any great effect. As has been stated in previous editions of this report, students must be aware that there are no easy short-cuts when developing a detailed knowledge of a range of relevant Wider Reading texts. The most successful students have applied themselves conscientiously to the courses of Wider Reading offered by their schools and colleges, supplementing the taught texts with regular independent reading of their own across all three genres of Victorian literature. This meticulous approach is recommended to all aspiring LTA1A students.

Successful students:

- thoughtfully explored the ways in which Carlyle presents her thoughts and feelings about her servant Mary
- established a range of relevant, developed 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 studnets:

- wrote simple accounts of Carlyle's letter, remaining at the surface of the text
- missed out whole genres of their Wider Reading or made only very brief, plot-based links
- unloaded large chunks of unassimilated information about the nineteenth century context without any reference to the details of the text.

Section B: Poetry

Several examiners reported that most of the students in their allocations understood the need to construct a balanced debate in response to the critical opinion offered by the poetry questions. In many ways this was unsurprising: as stated in the introduction, LTA1A is now a well-established AS examination and most schools and colleges are fully aware of the most effective ways that their students can meet the Assessment Objectives in Section B. Unfortunately, a small minority of schools and colleges persist in offering their students unhelpful advice concerning the ways in which to approach this section of the LTA1A paper. Examiners were disappointed to find that some schools and colleges are still training students to interpret their set poetry texts solely in the light of biographical details, rather than engaging with the effects created by the writers' choices of language and poetic technique. As one

examiner reported, "It is difficult to find anything to reward in responses which consist largely of irrelevant biography and unsubtle assertion, but make virtually no attempt to meet Assessment Objective 2." A few other schools and colleges seem to advise their students to meet this important Assessment Objective through feature-spotting: the trainspotterly ticking-off of poetic devices without any thought about the effects these devices create or their significance within the poem as a whole. One experienced examiner regretted the tendency of less successful students "to believe that punctuation and rhyme schemes have some sort of sacramental power to convey meaning. They spent far too much time on these features instead of reading carefully and engaging with what the poet is trying to tell the reader." Similarly, examiners lamented the inability of some students to engage with the named poems in Questions 3, 5 and 7. Consequently these questions proved difficult for many students, largely because they had not studied the poems carefully enough to develop a detailed knowledge and understanding of them. It may seem all too obvious, but one examiner was eager to point out to schools and colleges that "the difficulties experienced by these students lead to the thought that reading is one of this examination's most crucial skills: it is far more important than learning answers in advance so that they can be churned out irrespective of the actual question."

Selected Poems of John Clare

Clare remains fairly popular among the schools and colleges that offer the Victorian Literature option at AS: around a quarter of this June's LTA1A students studied his poetry. Unfortunately, 2012 was not a vintage year for Clare responses: of the three set poets, it was the writing of Clare which produced the least satisfactory answers in this examination. That is not to decry the work of every student who had studied Clare's poetry - there were, of course, some fine responses to both Questions 2 and 3 - but a significant number did appear to struggle with the demands of the Clare questions. Too many of those who attempted Question 2 chose to ignore the key idea that Clare "offers the reader the voices" of others, while those who opted for Question 3 often displayed an inadequate knowledge of 'The Flitting'. There are clear lessons for schools and colleges in the performance of this year's Clare students: it is essential that future students read the questions carefully and it is vital that they enter the examination with a full knowledge of their set text.

Question 2

Although it was by far the more popular John Clare question, a significant number of the students who attempted it failed to engage fully with the question's keywords: consequently they often produced Band 2 responses, despite their evident Band 3 potential. Most of these students were at least able to identify some examples of the "silent or ignored" (the "quiet, pilfering, unprotected race" of 'The Gipsy Camp', for instance, or the overlooked songbird in 'The Wren') but little attention was paid to the idea that "Clare offers the readers the voices" of those who usually pass un-noticed. The students often showed that they had been well briefed about the ways in which Clare presents rural life in nineteenth century Northamptonshire but, unfortunately, many were unable to move beyond their fixed idea that it is Clare's own voice that we hear throughout the poetry.

In constructing a debate, more thoughtful students used the autobiographical voice of Clare's poetry to their advantage, arguing that Clare often presents himself as one of the "silent or ignored". This argument was frequently supported by well developed treatments of later poems such as 'The Peasant Poet' (where Clare describes himself as "A silent man in life's affairs") and 'I Am' (in which he complains "yet what I am,

none cares or knows”). Some well-informed students, with a secure understanding of the more radical aspects of Clare’s writing, explored the ways in which silence perhaps became a matter of political expediency for the poet because, as he protests in ‘The Parish’, “nowadays truth grows a vile offence”.
Although it was perhaps the most obvious way in which to address the idea that Clare offers other voices to the reader, surprisingly few students referred to the poems in which the poet creates a persona. Some students made relevant and effective use of ‘The Lament of Swordy Well’, a poem in which the landscape itself speaks to the reader (“I’m Swordy Well, a piece of land”), but very few considered the ways in which Clare adopts the voice of a woman in ‘Ballad: I dreamt not what it was to woo’. Similarly, it was only a select few students who explored Clare’s use of direct speech in some poems: the voice of Hodge in ‘St Martin’s Eve’, for instance, and the singing ploughman in ‘The Crow Sat on the Willow’. These successful students showed that they were able to meet the challenges of the question by engaging thoughtfully with its keywords and by selecting appropriate poems from across the whole selection. Undoubtedly, their detailed knowledge of the set text was an important enabling factor here: many of the less successful students displayed a limited knowledge of the selection and were forced to rely on a narrow, sometimes unhelpful, range of poems.

Successful students:

- engaged with the idea that Clare “offers the voices of the silent or ignored”
- explored the effects produced by Clare’s poetic techniques with sensitivity
- considered a range of possible voices as part of a balanced debate.

Less successful students:

- described the silent or ignored that feature in some of Clare’s poems
- struggled to engage with the idea that Clare offers other voices to the reader
- showed little awareness of Clare’s poetic techniques.

Question 3

Surprisingly, this was not a very popular question among the students who had studied the poetry of John Clare as their LTA1A set text. ‘The Flitting’ is a major poem which offers a detailed treatment of key Clare themes such as the poet’s deep sense of place, his love of nature and his growing sense of alienation. Stylistically, the poem offers much with which students can engage: Clare’s typical stanzaic form and his use of a distinctive first person voice; his powerfully elegiac language, seasoned with wistfully familiar place names and Northamptonshire dialect terms. Some examiners speculated that the question’s comparative unpopularity was simply due to the fact that many students were unfamiliar with this important Clare poem. This possibility seems to be confirmed by the examiner who reported that “many of the students who chose this question apparently had only a hazy notion of the poem. They therefore attempted to make their standard Clare inferences based on the first couple of stanzas, which was probably as much as they had time to read in the exam, but they were frequently wrong-footed by their lack of detailed knowledge.” It is worth reminding schools and colleges once again, as stated in previous editions of this report, that students are expected to be familiar with the whole of their set poetry text: selective reading can only have a detrimental effect on the potential quality of a student’s response and on the mark that will be awarded.

Those students who did answer this question successfully often established connections between 'The Flitting' and other poems with a strong sense of place, such as 'Emmonsales Heath' and 'Glinton Spire'. Similarly effective responses were often produced by those students who chose to explore the ways in which Clare's growing alienation from the once-familiar landscape around Helpston is presented in poems such as 'The Fallen Elm' and 'The Moors'. Others made perceptive connections between the rootlessness which Clare describes in 'The Flitting' and the shipwreck imagery of later poems such as 'I Am' and 'Song: 'A seaboy on the giddy mast". As with the other LTA1A questions of this type, many less successful students failed to move beyond a simple account of the given poem (or a simple account of its first few stanzas), making no attempt to establish links to other Clare poems and merely asserting their agreement with the view that 'The Flitting' is the key to the whole selection. Similarly unsuccessful students dismissed the question's focal poem in a few lines and instead wrote about the poem they hoped would come up on the paper because they had prepared it in advance. This second-guessing approach is not advisable: students should be ready to meet the demands of whatever question appears on the paper and can best prepare themselves for this by ensuring that they have a secure knowledge of the whole set text.

Successful students:

- displayed their secure knowledge and understanding of 'The Flitting'
- developed a range of relevant connections to other Clare poems
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea that the poem is "the key to the whole selection".

Less successful students:

- wrote simple or incomplete accounts of 'The Flitting'
- made no attempt to connect the given poem to the rest of the selection
- dismissed 'The Flitting' in a few lines and wrote about other poems instead.

Selected Poems of The Brontës

As in previous LTA1A examinations the Brontës were very much the minority choice among the set poetry texts, studied by only one in twelve Victorian Literature students. The overall quality of the Brontë responses was good: students are usually well prepared for the examination by the select group of schools and colleges offering this text. However there is still a tendency for some insecure students to fall back on the succedaneum of Brontë biography rather than writing an analysis of the poems and constructing a debate, as required by the Assessment Objectives. Students must remember that Assessment Objective 4 is not tested in Section B of this examination, so any contextual material relevant to the chosen poems should be used sparingly.

Question 4

For those students who really knew their set text well, the selection's Anne Brontë poems were often the starting point for the construction of a relevant response to this question. The poet's preference for "long, dark nights, and landscape drear" with "them that are at home" over the "genial glow" of Thorp Green featured in a significant number of these answers and the poem 'Home', with its plaintive, desperate capitalisation ("Oh, give me back my HOME!"), also made frequent appearances. Like Anne Brontë's 'Lines Written at Thorp Green', her brother's poem

set in the same location ("I sit, this evening, far away / From all I used to know.") similarly provided students with relevant material as they argued in support of the question's given critical view.

Some well-informed students offered 'The Teacher's Monologue' as an alternative perspective on the idea of home in the Brontës' poetry: here Charlotte Brontë's narrator is more concerned that "my very home / I think will soon be desolate" and the poem's images of "the hearth-fire quenched" and "the vacant chair" are certainly not representations of security. In many successful answers, students balanced the debate by exploring the polar opposites of the question's keywords: their counter-arguments were provided by poems in which a longing for freedom or a desire to escape are the dominant elements. Emily Brontë's 'No coward soul is mine' was a particular – and effective – favourite among these students, while Anne Brontë's 'The Captive Dove' was often deployed successfully here: "to wander free…In distant climes, at will to rove!"

A characteristic of the many better responses to this question was the way in which the students analysed the effects created by the Brontës' poetic techniques while simultaneously engaging with the content of the poems. Less successful students often find this difficult: some confine themselves to simple accounts of what the poems are about; others select individual stylistic features then write about them at length and in isolation, rather than discussing them in the context of the whole poem from which they have been extracted. In extreme cases, misguided students give more attention to examples of punctuation (for some reason, semi-colons seem to be a particular favourite) than they do to the words whose meaning is shaped or clarified by that punctuation. Students are strongly advised against this approach: in truth, it is a displacement activity which usually indicates an inability to grapple with what is really important in the poems under discussion.

Successful students:

- selected relevant poems as the basis for their answers
- analysed the effects produced by the Brontës' poetic techniques with assurance
- produced balanced debates in which they also explored poems about freedom and escape.

Less successful students:

- wrote simple accounts of their chosen poems
- simply agreed with the given view
- wrote at length about the Brontës' punctuation, rather than the language used in the poems.

Question 5

This was marginally the more popular Brontë question, perhaps because it offered students a comparatively short, accessible poem on which to base their responses – or perhaps because many students were well briefed on the importance of death as a theme in the Brontës' poetry and, consequently, did not find it difficult to establish relevant links to other poems from across the whole selection.

Many of the students who attempted this question displayed a secure understanding of ‘On the Death of Anne Brontë’ and were able to comment effectively on the ways in which Charlotte Brontë’ presents her response to her sister’s death: some engaged with the poem’s elemental imagery; others argued that, despite the title, there is very little about Anne Brontë in the poem, focused as it is on her sister’s feelings of self-pity. ‘On the Death of Emily Jane Brontë’ was the most popular poem amongst the many students who were able to develop relevant connections between the given poem and the rest of the selection. Branwell Brontë’s ‘Epistle From a Father to a Child in Her Grave’, Emily Brontë’s ‘No coward soul is mine’ and Anne Brontë’s own ‘Last Lines’ also made frequent appearances in the shaped and developed responses produced by this question.

Unlike the similarly structured Questions 3 and 7, this question produced comparatively few single poem responses: most of the students who had studied the poetry of the Brontës understood the need to move beyond the question’s focal poem in their answers. Similarly, most schools and colleges offering this text had trained their students to avoid the flawed approach whereby the named poem is quickly dismissed – only to be replaced by other poems prepared in advance and used irrespective of the actual question. On the other hand, some of the students who attempted this question tended to include excessive biographical content in their answers. While some contextual comment will often be necessary when analysing such obviously autobiographical poetry as 'On the Death Of Anne Brontë', it is important that students do not allow this to crowd out the text: Assessment Objective 4 is not assessed by the poetry questions and a student’s priorities here must be to analyse the poetry and to construct a critical debate.

Successful students:

- displayed a secure understanding of 'On the Death Of Anne Brontë'
- explored the links between the given poem and other Brontë poems on the subject of death
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of “an effective conclusion”.

Less successful students:

- wrote simple accounts of 'On the Death Of Anne Brontë'
- established some superficial connections to other poems
- wrote more about the Brontës’ biography than they wrote about the poetry.

Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy

This was Thomas Hardy’s last appearance on a June LTA1A paper. For those students who intend to make a final attempt at answering questions on the Hardy selection, an opportunity will be available in January 2013, when the Victorian Literature paper will also feature questions on the set text which will replace Hardy: the Everyman selection of Tennyson’s poems, edited by Michael Baron (ISBN-10**:** 0460878026, ISBN-13: 978-0460878029). The Hardy selection maintained its tremendous popularity to the end: over 70% of this June’s Victorian Literature students had studied this text. Both Hardy questions generated a very wide spread of responses. At one extreme, thoughtful students with a secure knowledge of the poems often produced fresh and illuminating answers which fitted the descriptors in the higher Bands of the markscheme; at the other, students frequently paid scant

attention to the wording of the questions and wrote general or biographical answers which failed to meet the Assessment Objectives in a successful manner.

Question 6

This question proved to be a very effective discriminator: the spread of responses to Question 6 covered all four Bands of the markscheme. In the lowest Band, students tended to unload excessive amounts of biographical information rather than writing in detail about the poems, despite the repeated reminders in previous editions of this report that Assessment Objective 4 is not assessed by the poetry questions: the dominant Assessment Objective here requires students to build a balanced debate in response to the given critical opinion. Band 2 students often limited their responses to the selection's extracts from Hardy's *Poems of 1912-13*; the poems were treated in an accurate, straightforward manner but the response to the given view frequently amounted to little more than simple agreement: yes, Hardy wrote a lot of poems about Emma. In Bands 3 and 4 the responses were far more analytical and balanced: these students were able to explore the poems with understanding and engagement, while arguing that Hardy's later poetry is not just about his wife but is concerned with a wide range of subjects. The best students considered both the metaphorical and the literal meanings of the keywords "haunted" and "ghost" in order to develop perceptive and sophisticated evaluations of the critical view offered by the question.

Many students chose 'The Voice' as a useful and relevant starting point for an exploration of the techniques Hardy employs in the Emma poems: the haunting, echoing effects of the phrase "call to me, call to me" received much attention, as did the ambiguously ethereal image of the "air-blue gown". Hardy's reference to Cornwall's "haunted heights" in 'I Found Her Out There' also featured in many responses; however, closer readers of this poem used its mood of uncertainty ("Yet her shade, maybe…") as the beginning of a tentative counter-argument. Similarly, 'At Castle Boterel' provided evidence for both sides of the debate. Those students who chose to follow Hardy's trail of spectral imagery through these poems made much of the "one phantom figure" that appears in the penultimate stanza of this poem, but others chose to focus on Hardy's final, defining denial of the eidolon: "Never again." 'The Shadow on the Stone' was also a popular choice among the students who attempted this question: a poem in which Hardy "wanted to look and see…an apparition", despite his realisation "That there was nothing in my belief." Many students built their counter-arguments on the later poems in which Hardy considers contemporary events rather than writing about Emma: 'The Convergence of the Twain', 'In Time of 'The Breaking of Nations'' and 'Christmas: 1924' were the most popular choices among these students. Others made thoughtful use of the keywords to balance the debate, exploring the ways in which other ghosts also haunt the poems written after Emma's death. In these responses "the ashen ghost" of 'The Photograph' made frequent appearances – although, worryingly, there are still some schools and colleges where the students have been taught that the woman in this poem is Emma: the lines "She was a woman long hid amid packs of years / She might have been living or dead; she was lost to my sight," clearly indicate that this is not the case. The multiple phantom presences Hardy imagines in 'Old Furniture' ("On this old viol, too, fingers are dancing…And I see a face by that box of tinder") also featured in a significant number of responses, as did the pet who calls from the grave in 'Dead 'Wessex' the Dog to the Household' .

Successful students:

- explored a range of relevant poems in a perceptive manner
- engaged thoughtfully with the question's keywords
- produced carefully balanced debates in response to the given view.

Less successful students:

- wrote basic accounts of their chosen poems, paying little attention to Hardy's poetic techniques
- simply agreed with the given view
- wrote more about Hardy's biography than they wrote about the poetry.

Question 7

Marginally, this was the less popular Hardy question; nevertheless, it was attempted by a significant proportion of the students who sat this June's LTA1A examination. As with Question 6, this question proved to be a highly effective discriminator, the key factors being exactly how well the students understood the focal poem 'Hap' and how successfully they were able to connect the poem with the rest of the selection. Examiners' experiences here were varied: one reported that most students in her allocation of scripts "could draw inferences from 'Hap' and were able to relate these to other poems in a sensible way", while another felt that "the poem was often not read carefully enough and only generated, at best, a general discussion of Hardy's religious views". It is true that the closeness of a student's reading of the poem often set the tone for the whole response: a surprising number appeared not to notice that the first word in 'Hap' is "If" and that the entire poem is written in the subjunctive. Well-informed students went on to explore the way Hardy begins each subsequent verse with a discourse marker ("Then", "But"), constructing a rational argument in which an abstract divinity has no place. Less successful students, however, often missed these stylistic subtleties altogether, arguing erroneously that Hardy actually believes in a vengeful Pentateuchal deity whose sole purpose is to inflict "sorrow", "loss" and "pain". Hardy's use of this semantic field of misery was often analysed in an engaged manner, although the student who found a drug reference in the line "thy sorrow is my ecstasy", while clearly a reader who was making her own meaning, displayed a worrying unawareness of the Victorian linguistic context. Hardy's wilful capitalisation of "Powerfuller", "Casualty", "Time" and "Doomsters", but not of "god", was also the subject of much pertinent comment, as was his use of the sonnet form. One very perceptive student, noting that this sonnet "is neither truly Petrarchan nor Shakespearean", suggested that the structure of the poem itself is subject to the "Crass Casualty" Hardy bemoans in 'Hap'. Some less successful students tried to use the phrase "thy love's loss" as a means of recruiting 'Hap' to the ranks of the Emma poems, even though the poem is clearly dated 1866 – four years before Hardy met Emma.

Many of the successful students who agreed with the idea that 'Hap' is an effective introduction to the selection supported their arguments by establishing relevant connections to other poems. The alternative creators offered by Hardy in 'Nature's Questioning' ("some Vast Imbecility", "an Automoton / Unconscious of our pains", "some high Plan… / As yet not understood") were a popular choice here, as were "the Immanent Will" and "the Spinner of the Years" which Hardy postulates in 'The Convergence of the Twain'. 'Channel Firing', a poem in which Hardy imagines the

voice of a resigned God ("The world is as it used to be"), also featured in many responses, as did Hardy's more wistful reflection on his loss of faith in 'The Oxen'. In appropriately balanced answers, the counter-arguments were often based on those elements of Hardy's writing not present in 'Hap', but less successful students frequently moved into this territory far too early. There is still an unfortunate tendency for some students to dismiss the focal poem very quickly (in some extreme cases 'Hap' got fewer than ten lines of the answer booklet) and write about other poems which they felt would make better introductions. This is not really answering the question: largely ignoring the given poem (possibly due to a lack of knowledge and understanding), then unloading material about some different poems instead, cannot take students into the higher Bands of the markscheme. Schools and colleges are strongly advised to discourage their students from adopting this unhelpful approach to the questions. Similarly unsuccessful were those students who only wrote about 'Hap' then asserted that it provides an effective introduction to the selection. Questions of this type always invite students to make connections between the named poem and the rest of the text they have studied: to refuse that invitation and confine their response to a single poem will inevitably limit the mark they can be awarded.

Successful students:

- displayed a secure understanding of the ideas Hardy presents in 'Hap'
- developed relevant, detailed links to a range of other poems
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of "an effective introduction".

Less successful students:

- did not fully understand the given poem
- made no attempt to connect 'Hap' to other poems in the selection
- simply asserted their agreement with the critical view offered by the question.

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.