



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
June 2011**

**English Literature A**

**LTA1A**

**(Specification 2740)**

**Unit 1: Texts in Context  
Victorian Literature**

***Report on the Examination***

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Set and published by the Assessment and Qualifications Alliance.

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## Texts in Context: Victorian Literature

Perhaps the most poignant thing read by an LTA1A examiner in this June's scripts was not some quotation from a delicate Victorian elegy but the plaintive cry of a frustrated candidate: "Unfortunately, my Wider Reading has only covered the topics of poverty and social class." It is disappointing that, in this third summer of the new specification and after six live LTA1A papers have been offered to AS students, some candidates should still find themselves placed in such a difficult position - apparently by their centres' failure to prepare them properly for the demands of this AS examination. The vast majority of centres are by now well aware that this is a specification which requires candidates to read widely and independently - indeed, it is often one of the main reasons that centres choose this specification. Successful centres understand that they have a duty to prepare their candidates thoroughly for the examination but, unfortunately, a few centres adopt the attitude of Lord Illingworth in this matter: "Oh, duty is what one expects from others, it is not what one does oneself." In terms of Question 1, this thorough preparation will ensure that all candidates have read widely in all three genres of Victorian literature and that this reading has covered all four of the areas of study on which the unseen passages are based. Most centres now offer a carefully planned course which, through a combination of whole texts, extracts and independent reading, enables their candidates to meet the challenge of Question 1 with assurance. Obviously a candidate who has only studied Victorian texts about urban poverty will struggle to establish any relevant connections to an unseen passage about the conflict between science and religion. It is highly regrettable that this small group of centres fails to prepare candidates adequately for the examination and it is vital for their future candidates that they urgently restructure the ways in which they deliver the Victorian Literature course. For the benefit of centres, the areas of study around which their teaching should be based are:

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

Unfortunately, a few centres also adopt a similarly reductive approach to their teaching of the LTA1A set poetry text and, here too, this has had a damaging effect on the performance of their candidates in this summer's examination. It is expected that all candidates will read all the poems in their set poetry selection, even though timetabling constraints usually mean that there will not be time to study every poem in detail in class. There is no doubt that the candidates who have read the whole text and have developed their own overview of the poetry are the candidates who do best in this examination. These are the candidates who are able to think for themselves and to respond to the questions in a fresh, relevant manner. Candidates who have been taught a narrow range of the set poetry often struggle because they are unable to make their limited knowledge fit the questions: these candidates tend to produce general or irrelevant answers characterised by an absence of genuine engagement. All centres and candidates should be aware of this whole text requirement. It is not an excessive demand: each of the set selections can be read in an afternoon and an informed reader will quickly perceive emerging patterns of meaning and style in the poetry. It is disappointing that there are still centres and candidates who do not invest the necessary time in such an obviously beneficial approach to the study of literature.

Having begun this report with such heartfelt complaints, it is important to maintain a sense of proportion. This June's LTA1A examination was, on the whole, highly successful. Examiners reported that the questions were effective and stimulating ("The Gosse passage was an excellent discriminator which enabled all candidates to respond, in their various ways, to the structure and content of the text"; "The poetry questions seem to have

given the candidates plenty to say”), while most candidates understood what the examination required of them (“I felt that more candidates were able to maintain their focus on the passage and its context this year. The connections they made were relevant and there was much less struggling to *force* a link to *Wider Reading*.”). For the most part, centres are to be congratulated on the thorough and effective ways in which they have prepared their candidates for this examination: as one examiner commented, “Marking this paper really highlights how challenging this is for the candidates; how hard they work and how well-prepared many of them are. It needs to be acknowledged how well-prepared many of them are; that they are clearly familiar with past papers, mark schemes and Principal Examiner’s reports and, of course, this is testament to the quality of teaching and learning that takes place in their centres.” It was obvious that many candidates had enjoyed their study of Victorian Literature and were able to respond to their reading in a thoughtful, relevant manner. At their best, the answers in this year’s LTA1A scripts were characterised by originality and insight: they were the work of autonomous readers whose engagement with the texts was clear from the strong personal voice in which they addressed the questions.

In addition, the work of the best candidates frequently displayed a sophistication of expression: a maturity of approach that was sometimes lacking in less successful candidates. It should be remembered that Assessment Objective 1 includes the requirement for “Articulate...coherent, accurate written expression” and, consequently, candidates sometimes disadvantage themselves by the ways in which they express their response to literature. Candidates do not do themselves any favours by adopting the unhelpful terms “positive” and “negative” in their answers: these are not useful critical labels as they suggest a simplistic judgment of a text rather than a close reading that appreciates complexity and ambiguity. Similarly, loose assertions such as “the rhyme gives it rhythm” and “the rhythm helps it flow” do not suggest a genuine understanding of how poetic effects are created by a writer. In the same way, candidates who refer to an autobiography as “a novel” or who mix up the terms “paragraph” and “stanza” reveal themselves to have an insecure grasp of genre. Some candidates attempt to impress the examiner by using flashy critical terms, even though they do not really understand them (a text published in 1907 is unlikely to be an example of Post-Modernism); others make grandiose but improbable claims for the effects of punctuation (semi-colons are seldom “meaningful”: candidates would do better to focus on the words in the vicinity of the semi-colon instead). As one senior examiner reported “there has often been an attempt to deliver ‘terminology’. So some modest candidates have been identifying semantic fields and rules of three fit to bust; without giving any consideration to how and why they have been used.” Some candidates use inappropriately colloquial expression (“It gives off a negative vibe” does not constitute an analytical approach to literature), while the phrase “The poem says...” often indicates a candidate with very little awareness of the writer or of the literary construct. Unfortunately, under the pressure of the examination, the expression of some candidates loses both accuracy (one examiner reported that “it was really disappointing to see so many AS level students unable to use possessive apostrophes”) and precision while, in the worst cases, clarity and coherence are often lost too. The best centres attempt to eliminate these avoidable errors by giving their candidates regular examination practice throughout Year 12: this is an admirable approach and is recommended to all teachers delivering the Victorian Literature course. A substantial archive of past papers, and their associated mark schemes, is now available to centres for this purpose. These materials can be found on the AQA website where, in due course, the mark scheme for this summer’s paper will also appear: in helping their candidates to avoid the unsuccessful approaches outlined above, centres will find this a useful document.

To consider the achievement of candidates question by question:

## **Section A: Contextual Linking**

### **Question 1**

The extract from Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* worked very well: it provided candidates with plenty to explore, in terms both of subject matter and of form, structure and language, while it also enabled them to make a wide range of relevant and interesting links to all three genres of Victorian literature. Some candidates appeared thrown by the choice of an autobiographical extract and wasted precious time vaguely speculating on Gosse's purposes: some tried to argue that this is persuasive writing and that Gosse is attempting to convince his audience that his father's theories were justified - these candidates were not close readers. The candidates who expected an autobiography to be a factual, historical source were similarly superficial in their approach to the literary construct, apparently unaware of the filtering effects created by the writer's stylistic choices. As those candidates who established links to the Grossmiths' *Diary of a Nobody* and to the diary kept by Cecily Cardew in *The Importance of Being Earnest* well knew, not all autobiographical writing is factual: it may present a version of the truth, but it is the *writer's* truth with which the reader engages, rather than an objective presentation of events.

Examiners expressed surprise at the apparent inability of some candidates to maintain a consistent spelling of the name of the extract's author: this failure to copy a five-letter word accurately was often an early indication that the careful approach expected of A-Level candidates would not feature in the answer. Gosse variously mutated into Goose, Grosse, Gorse, Fosse and Dosse. Combining his surname and religion, one candidate referred to the author throughout as Christian Gross, perhaps confusing him with the short-lived Tottenham Hotspur manager who famously travelled to White Hart Lane by tube.

Examiners were also left unimpressed by those candidates who wrote only a short paragraph about Gosse and used the rest of their answer to unload the Wider Reading materials they had prepared in advance, irrespective of the passage's subject matter and style. This was particularly frustrating when these candidates' Section B responses displayed their ability to write about form, structure and language in a securely analytical manner. As stated in previous editions of this report, such an approach is to be avoided: about half of what the candidate writes in response to Question 1 should be an analysis of the unseen passage; the rest of the answer should comprise relevant links to all three literary genres. These links do not have to be numerous: it is far better to write three detailed, exploratory links which engage with the writers' techniques than to amass a multiplicity of brief plot-based references which show no awareness of the writers' intentions and which include no supporting details. However, these links do have to be appropriate: the best candidates signpost the relevance of the connections they make, whereas less successful candidates often leave it to the examiners to try and work it out for themselves. Fortunately, the latter candidates are in the minority and, as one senior examiner reported, "The centres that I have seen appear to have really tackled the issue of wider reading and more candidates have written about all three genres this year; candidates not using all three are very much in the minority. The wider reading links were interesting and mostly demonstrated that candidates were thinking and applying their wider reading to link with Gosse."

The passage itself proved a very effective discriminator between those candidates who read at a superficial level and those who read more closely and carefully. The former tended to assert unhesitatingly that Gosse was a loyal, dutiful, typically Victorian son who revered his father; the latter began to engage with the ambivalence of Gosse's attitude. These closer readers argued that Gosse's repetition of the phrase "My Father", coupled with his surprisingly sparing use of "I" in a supposedly autobiographical passage, has the effect of distancing the writer from his father's theories. Others argued that, although Gosse never directly states his own opinion, it can be inferred from his language choices: the description

of *Omphalos* as “curious”, “obstinate” and “fanatical” is hardly a ringing endorsement – while his early aside, “oddly enough”, implies that he eventually outgrew the influence exerted by his father’s theories. That influence, nevertheless, is obvious throughout the extract: many candidates noted the way in which Gosse capitalises “My Father”, much as the Victorians habitually referred to God the Father; others commented on the significance of the title Gosse chose for his autobiography. Perceptive candidates often explored the ways in which Gosse’s style echoes the language of *The Old Testament*: his possibly ironic description of the evolutionary theories as “the new light”, for example; as well as the idea that fossils would “tempt geologists” (as Eve was tempted in *Genesis*) and the nod to *Ecclesiastes* in his reference to “a book cast upon the waters” (which is not, despite the claims of one candidate, an indication that the elder Gosse was aiming his publication at the overseas market created by the British Empire). Many candidates seized upon the Biblical overtones of “make the lion eat grass with the lamb”, often exploring Gosse’s metaphor in a thoughtful, perceptive manner. As one engaged candidate observed, “Seeing a lion eat grass with a lamb, you would be looking at a very sad lion with a bruised ego - having to lower himself to eating grass with a lamb, not even a fully grown sheep.”

In contrast to his Biblical language, some candidates paid close attention to the ways in which Gosse also deploys the sort of evolutionary scientific terminology that is found in Darwin, such as the “gradual modification of the surface of the earth” and the “slow development of organic forms”. The phrase “catastrophic act of creation”, however, caused some problems: a number of candidates saw this as a criticism of God and thought Gosse was arguing that it would have been better if He had never created mankind at all. Of course, the writer is actually using the term “catastrophe” in its geological, and original Greek, sense to mean simply a dramatic upheaval: not a Bad Thing but a Big Bang. Gosse’s use of the word “infidelity” caused similar problems for less well-informed candidates: they assumed it was a reference to marital infidelity (although why unearthing some fossils should make geologists want to leave their wives was never explained) and desperately attempted to connect Gosse with *Madame Bovary*. (Better-informed candidates linked this idea of a God who likes to play games with humanity to Thomas Hardy’s “President of the Immortals” who “had ended his sport with Tess”.) Elsewhere in the passage, Gosse’s use of the metaphor “take the wind out of Lyell’s sails” attracted much comment, often considered as evidence of just how personally his father took the struggle with the evolutionists; while *Omphalos*’ reception “by a hasty press” was seen as a nineteenth century example of media “dumbing down”. The effects created by Gosse’s conclusion were also explored in detail: the long paragraph with its carefully constructed sense of anticipation and increasingly exaggerated vocabulary; the anti-climatic final sentence with its ultimate irony – that “atheists and Christians” were united by the publication of *Omphalos*, although not in the way that its author had intended.

Although weaker candidates sometimes struggled to separate the thoughts of Gosse and his father, becoming confused between the notions of evolution and religion, the most able candidates conceptualised their response and were able to use the text as a springboard for a detailed consideration of their experiences of reading Victorian literature. Perhaps inevitably, Darwin was one of the most popular prose writers chosen by candidates as they established these Wider Reading links to Gosse. Although *The Origin of Species* was often cited as a relevant connection, examiners saw little evidence that many candidates had actually read any Darwin: certainly only a small minority were able to quote from this text. A select few candidates developed detailed links to Darwin by analysing his literary techniques: his use of imagery (such as the recurring motif of “the entangled bank”) was often considered, as was his frequent recourse to exclamations and rhetorical questions. Those who had not actually read any Darwin asserted his atheism, while better informed candidates displayed their awareness that Darwin did not, in fact, claim that there is no God: he was actually very careful to acknowledge the existence of “the Creator” and frankly admitted “that nature’s productions...bear the stamp of far higher workmanship”. Similarly, some

candidates asserted that Christians were unanimous in their hostility to Darwin. This too is a gross over-simplification: many Christians appreciated Darwin's theory of "the survival of the fittest" as it represented a "progress towards perfection" – a perfection they believed to be ordained by God. Admittedly, not all Christians felt this way and, as some thoughtful candidates pointed out, Darwin was treated by the Victorian public in exactly the same way as Gosse: like *Omphalos*, *The Origin of Species* was frequently derided and discarded. Other well-informed candidates noted that Gosse's book was actually published two years before Darwin's, although Darwin had been sharing his ideas with the scientific community for some time before he organised them into the definitive form of *The Origin of Species*.

Darwinian characters abounded in the prose links developed by many of this June's candidates, notably that triumvirate of doctors: Potter, Grogan and Potter. Those candidates fortunate enough to have studied Beryl Bainbridge's *Master Georgie* often put this Crimean War novel to good use in their answers to Question 1: not only is Bainbridge's Doctor Potter a devoted follower of Darwin, but his character also brings the added bonus of quoting Ruskin's response to the scientific passion for geological excavation: "those dreadful hammers! I hear the clink of them at the end of every cadence of the Bible verses." Many of these candidates developed detailed explorations of the highly symbolic episode in which Dr Potter and George Hardy visit Ince Blundell Hall to perform an experimental operation on a blind ape. John Fowles' Doctor Grogan is also committed to Darwin, so much so that he treats *The Origin of Species* as his Bible, forcing his fellow-geologist Charles Smithson to swear an oath on it. As many candidates were aware, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is a rich source of evolutionary allusions, from Mrs Poultney's view that "Mr Darwin should be exhibited in a cage in the zoological gardens. In the monkey house." to the geological layering of the novel's structure. The Doctor Potter of Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*, however, is a far less sympathetic character: his interpretation of Darwin leads him into the dubious territory of eugenics and, during the voyage of the ironically-named *Sincerity* to Tasmania (Kneale's satirical take on Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*), he applies his sinister, proto-Nazi theories of racial purity to the island's aboriginal population. Another geologist who frequently featured in the responses to Question 1 was Henry Knight: the hero of Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* who, hanging from the face of a Dorset chalk cliff, is forced to confront the significance of the fossil into whose long-dead eyes he finds himself staring as he contemplates his own imminent extinction.

Hardy was also a popular choice among those candidates who established their links to Gosse via Victorian prose texts which deal with the subject of religion. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* appeared frequently in these answers, with candidates expressing much righteous anger at the harsh way in which the parson refuses Sorrow a Christian burial (provoking Tess to the much quoted protest: "Then I don't like you! and I'll never come to your church no more!") and at the callousness with which Alec, in his tent preacher phase, rapidly abandons his religious calling. Arnold Bennett's presentation of a crisis of faith similar to that experienced by Tess Durbeyfield also received considerable attention. Anna Tellwright's uncertain response to the Bursley evangelical crusade ("I think I do believe") in *Anna of the Five Towns* was often cited as an example of the Victorians' declining religious faith. Other candidates made effective use of Andrew Drummond's *An Abridged History*, in which the Millenarian preachings of Melchior Rinck provide much amusement for his congregation of Scottish navvies. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* also proved some useful contrasts: a Victorian novel in which religion prevails where science has failed. On the other hand Robert Louis Stephenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was interpreted by some candidates as a fictional endorsement of Gosse's distrust of "the new light", presenting science as something which inevitably leads enquiring minds into dangerous moral territory.

Some candidates chose to develop relevant links between *Father and Son* and other Victorian presentations of the relationships between parents and their children. *Wuthering Heights* provided some useful material here (such as Mr Earnshaw's troubled words to his

daughter “Nay, Cathy, I cannot love thee; thou’rt worse than thy brother...I doubt thy mother and I must rue that we ever reared thee!”) while the damaging effects of the Gradgrind children’s upbringing in *Hard Times* was also the subject of much well-informed comment: for many candidates the title of the novel’s opening chapter, ‘Murdering the Innocents’, neatly summed up the process of Utilitarian indoctrination to which Louisa and her brother Thomas are subjected. Many candidates explored the ways in which Victorian drama presents these family relationships: the role of maternal characters such as Nora Helmer, Mrs Arbuthnot and Mrs Warren often provided an interesting contrast to the ways in which Gosse presents the “immense influence” of his father. Candidates who established connections to these three plays also made frequent use of the texts’ religious aspects: Nora’s shocking pronouncement “I want to find out whether Pastor Hansen was right - or anyway, whether it is right for me.” in *A Doll’s House*; Wilde’s use of *Genesis* imagery and temptation motifs in *A Woman of No Importance*; and Shaw’s presentation of the hypocritical clergyman, Reverend Samuel Gardner, in *Mrs Warren’s Profession*. The character of Maria Marten’s mother, in the melodrama *Murder in the Red Barn*, also appeared in several responses to Question 1 - although the anonymous author of this play was probably not Heinemann, as one candidate claimed.

The presentation of nineteenth century science in modern drama also featured in a number of answers: Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* provided some very interesting links to Gosse (“Is God a Newtonian?” Thomasina wonders - but her theories too are scorned and lost) while the cranial measurement experiments performed on Irish peasant “specimens” in Brian Friel’s *The Home Place* provided a further example of that sinister liminal space where Darwinism meets eugenics. Similarly, the social Darwinism of *The Admirable Crichton* featured regularly in the responses to Question 1: this play offered a wide range of relevant and interesting connections – especially to those candidates who were willing to tackle J.M. Barrie’s epic stage directions.

Examiners were not surprised to find Tennyson’s ‘In Memoriam’ and Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ making frequent appearances in the responses to this summer’s Question 1: the ways in which both writers address the decline of religion made these poems ideal choices for comparison with the extract from *Father and Son*. The treatment of the latter poem, however, was sometimes a little disappointing: while most candidates were able to engage with Arnold’s metaphor of “the sea of faith”, comparatively few explored the equally important symbolism of the “darkling plain...Where ignorant armies clash by night” at the poem’s conclusion. Hardy’s poems of religious doubt, such as ‘Hap’ and ‘The Oxen’, were also popular choices, while other candidates produced interesting explorations of the geological imagery (“Primaeval rocks...in Earth’s long order”) which Hardy deploys in ‘At Castle Boterel’. ‘The Cry of the Children’ by Elizabeth Barrett Browning produced some unexpectedly relevant connections to the extract (“grief has made us unbelieving” the infant factory workers tell the reader), but those candidates who chose to recycle a scientific poem from GCSE (Robert Browning’s ‘The Laboratory’) were not always as convincing. The presentation of temptation in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’ also enabled candidates to establish appropriate links to the unseen passage, but perhaps the examiners’ greatest delight was in the little-known but entirely relevant poems cited by candidates who, in the spirit of the specification, had read very widely indeed. Among these original choices were Arthur Hugh Clough’s hilarious ‘There is no God, the wicked sayeth’, Emily Dickinson’s blunt ‘Faith is a fine invention’ and Tennyson’s little-known ‘By an Evolutionist’. Some candidates made effective use of *Punch*’s 1861 poem ‘Monkeyana’, in which a monkey satirically echoes the anti-slavery slogan “Am I a man and a brother?”, while others connected the press reaction to *Omphalos* with May Kendall’s 1885 poem, ‘Lay of the Trilobite’: an essentially humorous re-tread of ‘In Memoriam’ in which the voice of the fossil pointedly reminds the reader that “all your faiths are ghosts and dreams”.

Successful candidates:

- explored and analysed the ways in which Gosse presents his thoughts and feelings about evolving ideas in the Victorian era
- established a range of relevant links between the extract and their Wider Reading
- referred to all three literary genres when writing about their Wider Reading, analysing the effects created by the writers' choices of form, structure and language.

Less successful candidates:

- responded to Gosse's article in a simple manner, remaining at the surface of the text and failing to engage with the writer's ambivalent attitudes
- referred only to the plots of their Wider Reading texts or missed out whole genres
- wrote about their Wider Reading in a general, all-purpose manner without making specific connections to Gosse.

### **Section B: Poetry**

It is gratifying to report the experience of the senior examiner who felt that "most candidates responded sensitively and often sympathetically to the poets they had studied" while, as mentioned earlier, the majority of candidates had been well prepared for the poetry section of the LTA1A paper – in terms both of their textual knowledge and of their examination technique. Inevitably, however, some candidates do not achieve their full potential – often because of the reductive or corner-cutting approaches they adopt in answering the poetry questions. Too many candidates seem to forget that Assessment Objective 3 is dominant in Section B: they simply write about one or two poems in a general manner, without making their relevance to the question explicit and without making any attempt to construct a balanced debate in response to the given view. This tendency is most marked in the questions which focus on a specific poem: some candidates write only about that poem, without establishing any links to the rest of the selection; others dismiss the poem in a few lines and then write about some different poems instead. Neither of these approaches leads to success.

In the same way, while it is important that centres prepare their candidates for Assessment Objective 2 by training them to recognise stylistic features and to use technical terms confidently, it is equally important to ensure that this does not degenerate into mere feature-spotting. Examiners saw too many candidates who made no attempt to engage with the intended effects of the literary devices used by the set poets, but merely ticked off those devices in a sterile, un-integrated manner. In extreme cases, this took the form of long paragraphs which did little more than list features and explain their use, sometimes with isolated quotations dropped in as examples, but made no attempt to respond to their meaning. Candidates who were not familiar with the whole of their set poetry text were similarly disadvantaged, as were those who attempted to recycle practice answers to past questions: a narrow range of textual knowledge will inevitably inhibit the quality of a candidate's response, while it is vital to consider the questions on the paper afresh - they may sometimes be similar to previous questions, but they are never the same.

### **Selected Poems of John Clare**

Over a quarter of the candidates for this summer's Victorian Literature examination had studied John Clare as their set poet. Several examiners commented on the consistently high degree of personal engagement to be found in this year's Clare responses: candidates appear to relate to Clare more easily than they do to Hardy or the Brontës and there seems to be a genuine sense of enjoyment in many of the Clare answers. Inevitably, there is still a tendency for less confident candidates to fall back on biographical information in their

answers, but most candidates now understand that Assessment Objective 4 is not tested in the poetry questions and that their answers must maintain a focus on the poetry while constructing a balanced debate.

### **Question 2**

This question attracted a variety of valid approaches and examiners readily rewarded any relevant interpretation of the label “minor nature poet”, even though some candidates did not fully grasp the phrase’s originally intended meaning. Some well-informed candidates had a secure understanding of the ways in which Clare’s critical re-evaluation has shifted his place in the poetic pantheon during the last half century. (Indeed, as recently as 1980, a leading northern university was using a core text which relegated Clare to the “Other Romantic Poets” section at the back of the book.) These candidates understood that the editor meant “minor” in the sense of “unimportant”: an assertion that Clare’s work is insignificant in comparison with giants like Wordsworth and Keats. Many of these candidates eagerly took up the challenge of disputing this out-dated view, arguing with conviction that Clare is a very important nature poet. They found plenty of evidence to support this response, drawing widely on the first fifty-five pages of the set selection and making very persuasive use of later poems such as ‘The Peasant Poet’, ‘Sighing for Retirement’ and ‘To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait’. The best of these candidates also took issue with the pejorative “only”, often defending Clare’s status in an impassioned and sensitive manner. Other thoughtful candidates made relevant use of Clare’s biography in shaping their responses, admitting that Clare may well have been a minor poet in his own time: an unrecognised genius, like Van Gogh, whose work did not sell well (once the brief vogue for Peasant Poetry had passed) and whose later years were spent confined to the obscurity of asylums. Many candidates simply took the view to mean that only a minority of Clare’s poetry is about nature: this was a plausible enough interpretation which gave them plenty to argue about and enabled them to consider Clare’s treatment of other subjects as part of a balanced debate. Some of these candidates reached the conclusion that other labels are more appropriate for Clare: some felt that, predominantly, he is a love poet; others championed the cause of Clare as protest poet; the well-informed were careful to position him among the Romantic poets.

This was a very successful question but, as one senior examiner reported, “Problems came from candidates whose answers were well written, had lots of ideas, explored two or three poems effectively - but did not refer to the terms in the question. I saw too many answers which had no mention of whether Clare was a ‘minor’ poet or not - or which simply, briefly, agreed or disagreed in the conclusion. These candidates are in Band 1 for Assessment Objective 3 but in much higher Bands for the other two Assessment Objectives.

Consequently, the accurate assessment of these responses becomes a difficult balancing act.” Candidates are advised against adopting this approach: addressing the given view should not be an afterthought - it must be an integral part of the entire response.

Successful candidates:

- engaged with the idea that Clare might be seen as “only a minor nature poet”
- used poems in which nature is not a key element to develop a balanced debate
- focused on Clare’s poetic techniques.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote effectively about their chosen poems but did not address the question
- simply observed that Clare writes a lot about nature
- showed little awareness of the ways in which Clare uses form, structure and language to create effects.

### **Question 3**

This year's responses to John Clare were distributed fairly evenly between the two questions: perhaps this was because the majority of candidates were familiar with 'I Am', whereas the question based on 'The Photograph' apparently had to be treated as an unseen exercise by some of the candidates who had studied Thomas Hardy's poetry. Most of the candidates who attempted this question had a secure understanding of the focal poem and were able to engage with the ways in which Clare presents his isolation and alienation. The poem's powerful shipwreck imagery provided a particularly effective stimulus to many candidates; others responded with sensitivity to the child-like simplicity and yearning of the final stanza. Successful candidates supported their argument that 'I Am' would form an appropriate conclusion to the selection by developing connections to other poems in which Clare reflects on "the vast shipwreck" that his life has become. 'Song: A seaway on the giddy mast' was a particularly relevant choice in this context, while 'A Vision', 'Sighing for Retirement', 'To be Placed at the Back of his Portrait' and 'Decay, a Ballad' were all used effectively by candidates who developed this argument in detail. Counter-arguments were often based on those aspects of John Clare's poetic technique which do not feature in 'I Am', such as the satire of 'The Parish' or the long narrative of 'St Martin's Eve', but, unfortunately, some candidates eschewed the opportunity to balance their debates in this manner - even though it is a key element of Assessment Objective 3, the dominant Assessment Objective for this question. In extreme instances, examiners encountered answers in which obviously able candidates offered only an exploration of the given poem, with no reference whatever to any other poems. As one senior examiner observed: "This problem comes down to candidates not paying close attention to the question set." Indeed, it is vitally important that candidates realise that simply knowing the poems is not enough: it is how that knowledge is used to create a relevant response to the question which ultimately determines a candidate's final mark. "Write everything you know about this poem" never features as a question on the LTA1A examination paper, but too many candidates appear determined to answer that particular question, irrespective of what has actually been asked.

Successful candidates:

- explored 'I Am' in a well-informed manner
- developed a range of relevant links to other poems
- produced a balanced argument in response to the idea of "an appropriate conclusion".

Less successful candidates:

- produced superficial accounts of 'I Am'
- responded in an assertive manner to the idea that the poem is "an appropriate conclusion"
- made no attempt to establish specific links to other poems.

### **Selected Poems of The Brontës**

While the number of centres opting for the poetry of John Clare appears to be increasing, the Brontës, who have always been the minority choice among the LTA1A set poets, are now studied by fewer than 3% of Victorian Literature candidates. For examiners, this is something of a disappointment: many candidates write well about the Brontës and their responses to this set text are often enjoyable to mark. It seems that some centres are intimidated by Pamela Norris' selection but, although it can seem daunting on an initial reading, candidates frequently rise to the challenges posed by this text – displaying a willingness to think independently which is sometimes missing from the Hardy-by-numbers answers which can occasionally dominate examiners' allocations. As the Hardy selection has only one year left on the specification, while the other two set poetry texts will run for

three more years, perhaps this is the time for centres to consider the stimulating effects which offering the Brontës' poetry could have on their candidates.

#### **Question 4**

Although well-informed candidates appeared to relish the opportunity to engage with both “unattractive” and “unconventional”, the key words offered by the 1846 reviewer of the Brontës' poetry, others tended to focus only one of these terms. “Unattractive” was the more popular choice among these candidates and they were usually able to provide some evidence of the less palatable features to be found in the writing of all four poets, most often their preoccupation with misery and death. Poems such as ‘Painful Death and Painful Life’, ‘The Prisoner’, ‘Despondency’ and ‘Oh, they have robbed me of my hope’ were among the poems used in these answers, although many candidates clearly felt that they were spoiled for choice when making their selections. Thoughtful candidates developed a carefully considered balance by exploring more lyrical Bronte poems, such as ‘Love is like the wild rose briar’, ‘Tell me, tell me, smiling child’ or ‘In Memory of a Happy Day in February’. Sometimes even these candidates failed to engage fully with the idea that the Brontës' poetry is “unconventional”, while many of those who did address this keyword tended to disagree with the reviewer's assessment, arguing that the Brontës' strictly metrical forms represent poetry at its most conventional – even by Victorian standards. Those willing to probe more deeply sometimes wondered whether it was the subject matter (obscure fantasy worlds; fathers who write letters to their dead children; teachers who dare to speak their minds) which might have appeared unconventional to middlebrow Victorian tastes. Others argued, convincingly, that while poems such as ‘No coward soul is mine’ or ‘Remembrance’ might have seemed unattractive in 1846, modern readers are able to appreciate them fully.

Successful candidates:

- engaged with the idea that the Brontës' poetry might seem “unattractive and unconventional”
- explored the Brontës' poetic techniques perceptively
- considered the given view carefully and developed well-informed counter-arguments.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote simple accounts of the poetry
- struggled to engage with the keywords
- displayed little awareness of the Brontës' poetic techniques.

#### **Question 5**

This was by far the more popular Brontë question, attempted by three quarters of the candidates who had studied this text. Clearly, many candidates saw ‘Retrospection’ as a more accessible option than the challenging 1846 critique of the Brontës' poetry – although, of course, this question was not quite as easy as it looked and proved to be something of a trap for the unwary. Successful candidates used ‘Retrospection’ as a springboard for their exploration of key Brontë themes, such as family, imagination and memory, going on to explore the ways in which these themes are handled elsewhere in the selection. Similarly, many of these candidates were able to engage with the stylistic techniques used by Charlotte Brontë in the given poem (including her irregular verse forms and first person voice, as well as the poem's natural imagery and seasonal symbolism), connecting these with the ways in which similar poetic techniques are used in other Brontë poems. Unfortunately, not all candidates understood the importance of making such connections. While many were obviously familiar with ‘Retrospection’ and were able to write about the poem with some assurance, their failure to move beyond the given poem and into the rest of the selection meant that they never properly addressed the question of the poem's effectiveness as

an introduction. Among those candidates who did understand that the question required them to make relevant connections to the rest of the selection, Charlotte Brontë's self-mythologising 'On the Death of Emily Jane Brontë' and 'On the Death of Anne Brontë' were popular choices, as were Anne Brontë's more subtly autobiographical 'Lines Written at Thorpe Green' and 'Memory'.

Successful candidates:

- explored 'Retrospection' with assurance
- established a range of links to other poems in the selection
- developed counter-arguments and suggested alternatives in response to the idea of "an effective introduction".

Less successful candidates:

- wrote straightforward accounts of 'Retrospection'
- linked 'Retrospection' to the Brontës' biography, rather than to their poetry
- displayed little awareness of the Charlotte Brontë's poetic technique.

### ***Selected Poems of Thomas Hardy***

Thomas Hardy remains by far the most popular of the set Victorian poets: two thirds of this summer's LTA1A candidates had studied this text. However, as stated in the report on the January 2011 examination, centres should bear in mind that Hardy will not be available as a set text indefinitely. June 2012 will be the last summer LTA1A paper to feature questions on Norman Page's Hardy selection, after which the text will be replaced by the Everyman's Poetry Tennyson selection (edited by Michael Baron; ISBN 978-0-460-87802-9). Obviously the Hardy selection will remain popular during its final year as a set text (and his poetry will continue to provide a useful Wider Reading resource for candidates from 2013 onwards) but it is now time for centres to begin considering their choice of a replacement text. For those not wishing to move from Hardy to Tennyson, both Clare and the Brontës will remain on this paper until 2014 with replacement texts, yet to be confirmed, first appearing on the 2015 papers. Meanwhile, the responses to Hardy continue to cover the full range of the assessment grid: his poetry can inspire thinking candidates to produce illuminating, conceptual and original responses, while there is a regrettable tendency among those not fully prepared for the examination to fall back on sweeping assertions and simplistic statements of the obvious.

### ***Question 6***

Unfortunately, this popular question was not as easy as it looked and proved to be something of a trap for unwary or complacent candidates. These were the candidates who regarded the question as an invitation to recycle their practice attempts at a previous LTA1A question on the subject of Hardy's pessimism. They were easy to spot because their answers regularly featured the terms "pessimistic" and "optimistic" but seldom used the question's actual keywords "happiness" and "humour". Consequently these candidates always seemed to be responding to a parallel question, rather than the one that was actually on the paper: their answers were oblique and indirect, never entirely relevant but largely implicit or general. Candidates are strongly advised against taking this approach: it is vital that each question is treated in a fresh, spontaneous manner - not seen as an easy option for churning out old material.

Those candidates who did address the question's actual keywords found plenty with which to engage: many agreed that Hardy does have a "capacity" for happiness but chose to dispute just how large that capacity is. Others adopted a similarly evaluative approach to his sense of humour: many disagreed with the idea that this is buoyant ("About as buoyant as the ship in 'The Convergence of the Twain'" as one candidate shrewdly put it) but argued that Hardy's

humour is always tinged with sadness or with the macabre. The most popular poem used as evidence of Hardy's capacity for happiness was 'When I Set Out for Lyonesse', while 'Great Things' and the first verse of 'Weathers' also provided convincing support for the view. 'The Curate's Kindness', 'The Ruined Maid', 'The Levelled Churchyard' (with its comical "maiden elf" / "sturdy strumpet" mix-up) and 'Channel Firing' (which amused many candidates with its presentation of a God who says "for Christ's sake" and, like Nelson from *The Simpsons*, "Ha,ha.") were the most frequently explored examples of Hardy's humour, while more adventurous candidates also teased out the darkly humorous elements of poems such as '1967' ("For I would only ask thereof / That thy worm should be my worm, Love!"). Most candidates understood the need to develop a counter-argument in order to meet the Band 3 requirement for a balanced debate - and there was no shortage of potential material available for their use. Some candidates found quite enough evidence without venturing beyond the first page of the selection: "joy lies slain" and "The smile on your mouth was the deadest thing / Alive enough to have strength to die" hardly seem like the words of a poet with a capacity for happiness and a buoyant sense of humour.

As is often the case, candidates who entered the examination with a limited knowledge of Hardy's poetry often struggled with this question. Some candidates appeared to be familiar only with a very limited range of poems (often just the Emma poems - or some of them) and were thus singularly ill-equipped to deal with the demands of the question. Unable to refer to any happy poems or any funny poems, these candidates tended to dismiss the given view assertively then write a whole essay about what a "negative" poet Hardy is: these responses did not score highly. This approach is not to be encouraged: it is vital that candidates prepare for the examination by developing their knowledge of a wide range of poems and, in structuring their answers, use contrasting poems to develop a balanced response.

Successful candidates:

- engaged with the idea that Hardy has "a capacity for happiness and a buoyant sense of humour"
- explored the effects created by Hardy's use of form, structure and language
- produced effective counter-arguments based on a wide range of Hardy's poetry.

Less successful candidates:

- simply dismissed the given view and wrote about Hardy's "negativity" instead
- struggled to engage with Hardy's language and the effects he creates
- were forced to write general or irrelevant responses because their range of knowledge was so narrow.

### **Question 7**

This was the less popular Hardy question and, oddly, even some of the candidates who chose to attempt it seemed unfamiliar with the question's focal poem, 'The Photograph'. Examiners often chuckled at the frequent, though assertive, claim that "'The Photograph' is a negative poem" - although perhaps this will not seem so funny to those brought up in the age of the digital camera. Of more concern were the candidates who might as well have been writing about Ringo Starr's 'Photograph' rather than Thomas Hardy's: "Every time I see your face / It reminds me of the places we used to go". These candidates asserted that 'The Photograph' is an Emma poem and went on to develop spurious links with poems about the places they used to go: poems such as 'At Castle Boterel' and 'Beeny Cliff'. Unfortunately, by adopting this approach, these candidates betrayed an absence of knowledge and understanding. A straightforward reading of the poem immediately shows that the woman in 'The Photograph' is clearly not Emma: she is "a woman long hid amid packs of years" and Hardy admits that he does not know whether she is "living or dead". (Presumably Hardy did at least know this about Emma, despite their growing estrangement.) It is almost certainly

not Tryphena Sparks, either, since ‘Thoughts of Phena’ (in which Hardy responds to the news of Tryphena’s death) was written in the same year as ‘The Photograph’. It is, of course, possible that Hardy does not name the old flame in the photograph because, in contrast to the poem ‘To Lizbie Browne’, he cannot actually remember the girl’s name.

Successful candidates did not allow themselves to become bogged down in fruitless speculation concerning the identity of the woman in the poem, but focused on the way in which ‘The Photograph’ presents important Hardy themes such as memory, guilt and the afterlife. In this context, a number of Emma poems provided relevant support for those candidates who argued that ‘The Photograph’ can be seen as “the key to the whole collection”: ‘Under the Waterfall’, ‘The Going’ and ‘The Shadow on the Stone’ provide valid links to these key themes. Once again, the better answers also considered possible counter-arguments, usually by citing some of the important elements which are not to be found in ‘The Photograph’, such as Hardy’s presentation of nature - or his buoyant sense of humour. The more thoughtful candidates sometimes concluded these balanced debates by suggesting alternative key poems: this is an acceptable approach, but not when it is adopted in order to avoid the actual question. Unfortunately, some of the candidates who attempted this question dismissed ‘The Photograph’ in just a couple of sentences and then proceeded to churn out the long account of some other poems which they had prepared in advance. This is not an acceptable approach: candidates are expected to consider the given poem in detail and develop comparisons with and contrasts to other Hardy poems as part of their balanced debate. Ignoring the named poem and writing about some other poems instead is not really answering the question: these candidates did not score highly. Similarly, those candidates who only wrote about ‘The Photograph’ did not receive high marks: in answering the question, candidates are expected to show their knowledge of the selection by establishing relevant links to other poems. Writing about only one poem is not really answering the question either.

Successful candidates:

- explored ‘The Photograph’ with confidence
- developed relevant links to a range of other poems
- produced an informed debate in response to the idea of “the key to the whole selection”.

Less successful candidates:

- wrote only a simple account of ‘The Photograph’
- betrayed their lack of close reading by claiming that the poem is about Emma
- quickly dismissed ‘The Photograph’ and wrote about other poems instead.

## **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](http://www.aqa.org.uk/umsconversion).