

Unseen Poetry – An Introduction

In this section, worth 20 marks, you will be asked questions on a poem you have probably never seen before. Remember, the poem has been carefully chosen to be accessible to Leaving Cert students so the chances are that you will understand it fairly easily if you approach it calmly and sensibly.

When you are reading the poem, ask yourself a series of questions:

Approaching the Unseen Poem:

This question is worth 20 marks. It is worth remembering that this is five per cent of your English exam. That could easily mean the difference between an A or a B. Don't forget that is relatively easy to get a high mark here.

- You should spend about fifteen minutes on this section.
- Leave the unseen poem until last.
- Theme – What is the main message of the poem. Love is a very common theme, as are war, childhood, memories, and the beauty of nature.
- Tone – the feelings and attitude of the poet towards the subject of the poem. Think of the tone of voice the poet would use if reading this poem aloud. Would the tone change as the poem progresses? Would some parts be read in a loud, excited voice and some in a quieter manner? The tone can change several times throughout the poem. If you notice changes as you are reading through it, jot them down on the page beside the relevant lines in the poem.
- Rhythm - Is the pace of the poem fast or slow? Does this tell us anything about the theme or the tone? (A slow rhythm is often associated with sadness.) What effect does the rhythm have? Does the rhythm vary? If so, why? Poems can have exciting moments in between calm, reflective ones. Look at the punctuation. Is there end line punctuation? That can slow the rhythm of the poem. Is there enjambment or run-on lines? That can speed up the rhythm of the poem. A full stop at the end of the poem

can suggest closure and can tell us that the poet has come to some sort of understanding/resolution of the issue.

- Tenses. Is the poem in the past, present or conditional tense, for example? Does the tense change? Does this indicate that the poet has reached a conclusion? Or does the switch to the present tense show that the poet has become deeply involved with the issue? Is something unresolved?
- Language– imagery, sounds etc. This is your opportunity to use those key literary terms. It is important that you do so. (See below.) Start with sound: is there any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia etc.? Remember, like drama, poetry is really meant to be read aloud and the sound is very important.
- Does the poet address the subject of the poem directly? "You..." This can create a sense of intimacy. Does the poet address the reader directly? Use of the word "we" can make the reader feel connected with the poet and the poem. Does the poet speak in the poem or does he assume another persona? If so, why?
- Your response to the poem – did you like it? Why? Why not? You must explain yourself fully here.

Key Literary Terms

Remember, this is not a comprehension exercise. You are analysing a poem, so must show an awareness of poetic techniques. Here is a list of basic literary terms with which you should be familiar:

- **Alliteration** – The repetition of initial consonant sounds, e.g. "I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore." - "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" by W.B. Yeats.

Alliteration can help to create a mood; repeated "s" sounds, for example, can make a line sound calm and soothing.

- **Allusion** – A reference to another writer or to something else which is not really part of the main body of the poem. For example, in "Dulce et Decorum est" Wilfred Owen alludes to the work of the poet Horace when he quotes the Latin words in the title and at the end of the poem.

- **Assonance** – The repetition of vowel sounds.

- **Couplet** – Two successive lines of poetry which have the same rhythm and rhyme. These two lines often contain a complete thought. All of Shakespeare's sonnets end with a couplet. Here is an example from Shakespeare's "Shall I Compare Thee":

"So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

- **Enjambment** - When a sentence continues into the next line of the poem without any punctuation mark. Enjambment is often used to suggest fast action or movement.

Enjambment is sometimes called a "run-on line." An example of enjambment can be seen in the following lines from Philip Larkin's

"At Grass".

[...] then the long cry

Hanging unflushed till it subside

To stop-press columns on the street."

- **Imagery** – Words used which create a vivid picture in your mind.
- **Metaphor** – A comparison in which the words "like" or "as" are not used. "My love is a red, red rose."
- **Onomatopoeia** – When a word sounds like its meaning. Examples of onomatopoeia would be:

Squelch

Thud

Slap

Cackle
- **Repetition** – Repeated words or phrases can emphasise the idea which is the poet is exploring. Repetition often occurs near the end of the poem and can help to bring it to a pleasing close. An example of repetition used in this way can be seen in Shakespeare's "Shall I Compare Thee":

"So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

The repetition here stresses the notion that the poet's love will last forever.

- **Simile** – A comparison in which the words 'like' or 'as' are used. 'My love is like a red, red rose.'
- **Symbol** – A word which stands for something more than the object to which it refers. For example, a rose may be a symbol of love and a dove may be a symbol of peace.
- **Theme** – The main message of the poem – what the poem is about. It is not the story of the poem. For example, the theme of Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" is that there is neither honour nor nobility in dying for your country.
- **Tone** – The poet's mood or attitude towards the subject of the poem

Sample Answer

2003 Leaving Certificate Unseen Poetry

The poet, Rosita Boland, reflects on the tragedy of a war-torn region in our world.

BUTTERFLIES

In Bosnia, there are landmines

Decorated with butterflies

And left on the grassy pathways

Of rural villages.

The children come, quivering down

Familiar lanes and fields.

Hands outstretched, they reach triumphant

For these bright, elusive insects -

Themselves becoming winged in the act.

Gaudy and ephemeral.

1. Write a short response to the above poem, highlighting the impact it makes on you.
(20)

This poem affected me strongly. The title, "Butterflies", suggests something beautiful and delicate and lovely, but that expectation was blown away once I read on.

I address the question in the opening lines.

The language is simple and the tone of the poem is almost chatty in the first stanza. It is as if Boland wants to stress the difference between normality and the grotesque reality for the children in Bosnia during the war. The image of the landmines decorated with butterflies is a horrific one. The juxtaposition of fragile beauty and brutal violence is jarring and I found it very disturbing. I was also struck by the emphasis on the innocence of the victims. Of course, no victim of a landmine deserves their fate, but the mention of "grassy pathways" and "rural villages" conjures up an image of a place that should be far removed from the battlefield, and yet the war has been brought even to this idyllic place.

The introduction of the children in the second stanza adds to this impression. They are described as "quivering" - a word which both suggests the gentle movement of butterflies' wings in the breeze and, at the same time, fear or shaking. Yet, in this case, it is the reader who is quivering in horrified anticipation of what must come. I felt oddly helpless as I read of the children's "Hands outstretched", reaching unwittingly for something that would bring them – not the joy they had anticipated – but a violent, bloody death. The link between the children and the butterflies is continued when Boland describes the children becoming "winged" and "ephemeral". The image of the children's bodies flying through the air and the emphasis on the shortness of their lives moved me a great deal.

Boland's understatement in this poem added to the powerful impact it had on me. Her seemingly casual mention of the "familiar lanes and fields" was poignant, as it made me think of the fact that the children had lived here all their lives and undoubtedly felt happy and safe in their home place. Yet the lurking menace of the landmines hangs over them from the first line of the poem.

This poem, while not comfortable reading, is one which I found both haunting and sobering. It seems to me to be a fitting tribute to innocent children everywhere who – much like the baby in Eavan Boland's "Child of Our Times" - are the victims of a violent adult world.

I mention features of style.

This question asked for a personal response, so I keep highlighting the effect the poem made on me. (See underlined sections.)

I quote to support my points. It is surprising how many students fail to do this, even though the poem is printed on the paper.

Brief conclusion ties up my answer and reflects question again. .