

Unseen Poetry – An Introduction

- ❖ This question is worth 20 marks: 5% of your English exam.
- ❖ You should spend about 15 to 20 minutes on this section.
- ❖ Leave the unseen poem until last.
- ❖ Try to write approximately one -quarter to half a page for each question.
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ 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.) 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.
- ❖ 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. Start with sound: is there any alliteration, assonance, etc.?
- ❖ 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.
- ❖ Your response to the poem – did you like it? Why? Why not? Explain yourself fully.

Sample Answers

2010 Leaving Certificate Examination

Read the following poem and the two questions about it at least twice before writing your answers.

Nettles

My son aged three fell in the nettle bed.
'Bed' seemed a curious name for those green spears
It was no place for rest. With sobs and tears
That regiment of spite behind the shed:
The boy came seeking comfort and I
saw White blisters beaded on his tender
skin.
We soothed him till his pain was not so
raw. At last he offered us a watery grin,
And then I took my hook and honed* the blade (*Honed =
sharpened) And went outside and slashed in fury with it
Till not a nettle in that fierce parade
Stood upright anymore. Next task: I lit
A funeral pyre* to burn the fallen dead. (*Funeral pyre = a fire to burn the
dead) But in two weeks the busy sun and rain
Had called up tall recruits behind the shed:
My son would often feel sharp wounds
again.

Vernon
Scannell

1. What impression of the nettles do you get from this poem?
Give a reason for your answer. (10)
2. What do you think the poet means by the last line of the poem? (10)

1. What impression of the nettles do you get from this poem?

Give a reason for your answer.

The impression I get of the nettles from this poem is that they are like soldiers attacking the little boy. The poet seems to feel that the nettles deliberately hurt his son and that it is his job to take revenge and ensure that they cannot injure the three year old again.

The nettles are personified in a number of striking and unusual images which highlight the danger they pose to the small boy. In the opening lines, the poet uses a vivid metaphor comparing the nettles to 'green spears'. This is our first indication that he sees the nettles as an enemy that must be fought. He seems to find it ironic that the nettles grow in a bed, as this would seem to have connotations of comfort and safety, but as the poet says, this bed is 'no place for rest'. Rather, he goes on to suggest, it is a battlefield and the nettles are the enemy soldiers.

Later in the poem, the poet refers to the nettles as 'That regiment of spite'. In the poet's mind, the nettles are not just soldiers, but are motivated by malice and driven by an urge to cause pain. This seems to give the poet a focus for his anger and frustration at seeing his son hurt. If he can take it out on the nettles, so much the better. The idea of the nettles being soldiers is continued when the poet tells us that he took his slash hook and cut down every nettle in that 'fierce parade'. The use of the word 'fierce' reinforces the poet's view of the nettles as being violent and savage.

The final lines of the poem use more military imagery when the poet refers to the nettles that he burns as 'the fallen dead' who will soon be replaced by more 'tall recruits.'

2. What do you think the poet means by the last line of the poem?

I think the poet means that he will not be able to protect his son forever, and that the boy will experience pain and suffering in his life, despite his father's protective love. The nettles are a metaphor for the threats that lurk in the outside world.

At three, the little boy is old enough to wander 'behind the shed' and out of his parents' sight for a brief time. Even in this relatively safe environment, he is hurt and all his parents can do is try to soothe him until his pain is 'not so raw'. But his father knows that, even

though he cut down these nettles so that they could not sting the boy, others will grow in their place. In only two weeks, he predicts, there will be more 'tall recruits behind the shed'. All of the poet's furious slashing and burning is pointless, in the long run, and he knows it. His son will eventually venture much further into the world than merely behind the shed, and his father will not be able to protect him from the inevitable suffering that awaits him as he goes through life. His ability to keep his son safe from harm will lessen as the boy grows older.



This time, the poet has taken his revenge and has managed to eliminate the danger to his son. But he knows that, although he may have won the battle, he will not win the war. His son will 'often feel sharp wounds again.'

2006 Leaving Certificate Examination

Gareth Owen writes a poem in which he imagines a city as if it were a person singing its own song. Read this poem at least twice and then respond to the questions that follow.

SONG OF THE CITY

My brain is stiff with concrete
My limbs are rods of steel
My belly's stuffed with money
My soul was bought in a deal.

They poured metal through my arteries
They choked my lungs with
lead
They churned my blood to
plastic They put murder into
my head.

I'd a face like a map of the weather
Flesh that grew to the bone
But they tore my story out of my eyes
And turned my heart to stone.



Let me wind from my source like a river
Let me grow like wheat from the grain
Let me hold out my arms like a natural tree
Let my children love me again.

Gareth Owen

1. Do you think this is a sad or a happy song? Give reasons for your answer, based on your reading of the poem. (10)
2. What does the City hope for in the final 4 lines? Explain your answer. (10)

1. Do you think this is a sad or a happy song? Give reasons for your answer, based on your reading of the poem.

I think that this is a sad song. The poet personifies the city, and allows it to tell its own story. This is a very effective technique, as it makes the reader empathise with the city. We see that - while it may once have been a vibrant, living thing - it has been dehumanised and destroyed by insensitive development. I was particularly struck by the starkness of the images, and the strength of the language used in the poem. The city has been 'choked' and had its soul 'bought in a deal.' The people who developed the city 'tore my story out of my eyes / And turned my heart to stone.' Again, the harsh language makes the urban over-development seem like a violation of a person. The sadness in these images, and others like them, is evident.

The last stanza is poignant; the city pleads to be allowed to return to the state it was in before the developers ruined and dehumanised it with their 'steel', 'plastic' and 'lead'. The city longs to be close to nature again, and to be loved by its inhabitants. The repetition of the words 'Let me' at the start of each line emphasises the strength of the plea. The city is begging to be allowed to live once more. I don't think anyone could read this poem and not be moved by the sorrow implicit in its lines.

2. What does the City hope for in the final 4 lines? Explain your answer.

In the last four lines, the city hopes to be close to nature again, and to be a place where people will be happy, as they were in the past. We know people loved the city once, because of the use of the word 'again' in the last line. In contrast to the metaphors of death and

destruction in the earlier stanzas, these lines employ similes such as 'like a river', 'like wheat from the grain' and 'like a natural tree' to show the ideal. Even the verbs, 'wind', 'grow', 'hold' and love, are all associated with life. The city simply wants to be allowed to live, love and be loved.

2007 Leaving Certificate Examination

Read this poem at least twice and then respond to the questions that follow.

In this poem, Pat Boran speaks of his attitude to the car in the past, the present and the future.

DRIVING INTO HISTORY

Once in a while, morning sunshine
filtered through the peeling paint and
rust of that old black banger, perched
like a stylite* up on concrete blocks
in our back garden. The seats were torn,
the wooden dashboard was an altar to insect death,
and yet my first boyhood trips into the world
were in that wheel-less, if not quite lifeless wreck.
But since they took the garden to build a bypass
to our once congested, now double-bypassed town, I
dream little of either speed or novelty
and, truth to tell, I scarcely know the names
of all these cars out here. Now all I wish
is time enough for them to age and rust,
to end up up on blocks in some child's life,
twentieth century coins down behind their seats,
their vacant windscreens open to the light.

Pat Boran



*A stylite was a saint or monk in olden times who lived on top of a pillar.

1. How, in your opinion, does the poet convey his attitude/feelings towards “*the old black banger*”?

Explain your answer with reference to the first eight lines of the poem. (10)

2. In what ways has the poet’s attitude to cars changed in the remainder of the poem?

Explain your answer. (10)

1. How, in your opinion, does the poet convey his attitude/feelings towards

“*the old black banger*”?

Explain your answer with reference to the first eight lines of the poem.

The poet clearly feels a certain fondness for the ‘old black banger’. He describes its decrepit state honestly, calling it a ‘wreck’, but he remembers the ‘morning sunshine’ filtering through the ‘peeling paint and rust’. The mention of sunshine suggests warmth and happiness, and this affectionate tone is borne out when the poet tells us that he took imaginary trips in the car when he was a child.

There is something almost reverent about the descriptions in the first eight lines, which seems to indicate that, as a boy at least, the poet held the car in awe. This sense of reverence is conveyed by the use of words associated with religious worship: the car, up on blocks, is compared in an unusual simile to ‘a stylite up on concrete blocks’. This impression is reinforced by the metaphor several lines later in which the poet compares the wooden dashboard to an altar. This is done humorously, because he says it was an ‘altar to insect death’, but still, the feeling I am left with is that the poet wants us to know how much he loved, respected and admired the old car.

2. In what ways has the poet’s attitude to cars changed in the remainder of the poem? Explain your answer.

In the remainder of the poem, the poet has become embittered towards cars. The garden where, as a child, he played in the old car has been taken away to make room for a bypass. Now the poet has lost all interest in cars and ‘scarcely knows the name’ of the different types which speed past his town any more. There is no novelty left in cars, he suggests, and he wishes that they would all ‘age and rust’ so that they could, like his old car,

‘end up on blocks’ and maybe that way bring joy to another child's life.

There is a sense of wistfulness and nostalgia in the last two lines of the poem when the poet describes the way he would like the cars to end up, ‘twentieth century coins down behind their seats, / their vacant windscreens open to the light.’ This reflects back to the earlier section of the poem, in which the poet talked about the sun shining into his ‘old black banger’. He implies that the only way cars can bring joy now is by becoming vehicles for the fantasy journeys of childhood, rather than simply machines built to take us as from one place to the other as quickly as possible.

Folens: Leaving Certificate Examination Sample Question

This is one of several very moving poems that Andrew Motion has written about his mother, who was badly injured in a riding accident and lay in a coma for some years before she died.

Read the poem at least twice and then respond to the two 10 mark questions following it.

IN THE ATTIC

Even though we know
now your clothes will
never
be needed, we keep
them upstairs in a
locked trunk.

Sometimes I kneel there
touching them, trying to
relive time you wore them,
to catch
the actual shape of arm and wrist.

My hands push down
between hollow invisible
sleeves hesitate then take hold
and lift:



a green holiday: a red Christmas;
all your unfinished lives
fading through dark
summers entering my head
as dust.

Andrew Motion

1. Describe the poet's feelings for his mother.
2. Choose two images or sentences from the poem that, in your opinion, best convey this feeling. Write each one down and say, in each case, why you have chosen it.

1. Describe the poet's feelings for his mother.

The poet's feelings for his mother are love mixed with longing, sorrow and regret. His love for his mother is clear in the way he describes looking at her old clothes and remembering the wonderful times they shared as a family when she wore them on holidays or at Christmas, for example. The memories flood back as he sees each garment and he wishes he could relive those days.

Keeping the clothes in the attic, 'Even though we know now / your clothes will never / be needed' tells me that the poet is not ready to let go of his mother just yet and still longs for her. He knows on a practical level that she will never wear these clothes again, but on an emotional level, he is unwilling to dispose of all her belongings as that would be too final.

2. Choose two images or sentences from the poem that, in your opinion, best convey this feeling. Write each one down and say, in each case, why you have chosen it.

'Sometimes I kneel there
touching them, trying to

relive time you wore them,
to catch
the actual shape of arm and wrist.'

There is something almost reverential in the way the poet kneels on the floor, hesitating before picking up the clothes. His desire to be close to his mother again is shown in the way he tries 'to relive / time you wore them, to catch / the actual shape of arm and wrist.' The poignancy of this image affected me deeply. I could see the young man struggling with reason and logic, but still trying desperately to capture the essence of his mother and to somehow bring her physical presence into the attic with him. It is almost as if he believes that if he can remember her clearly enough, he will be able to escape into a happier past.

'all your unfinished lives
fading through dark
summers entering my
head as dust.'

This striking, and rather bleak image captures the poet's sorrow and regret that his mother will never again share time with her family. There is a strong sense of the unfairness and the innate wrongness of his mother's leaving her family. If she were a very elderly woman who had lived a full life, then – although it would be very sad – it might be easier to accept her passing out of their lives. But the word 'unfinished' suggests that this loss is untimely and unnatural. The potential of 'all [her] unfinished lives' will never be fulfilled. The memories of happier times flood the poet's head just as the dust from her clothes does. The word 'dust' starkly reminds of the words from the funeral service: 'Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust', and links the mother's clothes to



death. The poet knows that, no matter how dearly he may wish it, nothing can bring his mother back and he will never be able to relive those happy family times.