Complete Junior Cycle Poetry Guide

Aoife O'Driscoll

2020

NB: It is not expected that students will study all the poems in the booklet.

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The Exam Question

Choosing your question

It's always a good idea to start with the question that you like best. If fiction is your favourite, you may wish to start with that section.

Approaching the question

For each and every question in your exam, you should go through the following checklist:

- ✓ Read the question carefully. Read it again. Paraphrase it (put it into your own words).
- ✓ Underline any key words in the question.
- ✓ Check how many parts there are to the question. For example, are you asked to point out a feature of style AND comment on the impact it had on you.
- ✓ Jot down a quick plan for your answer. This may be as simple as one or two words for each point you intend to make. If you do this, you will be less likely to repeat yourself, write a disorganised answer or forget what you wanted to say.
- ✓ Look through each of the points you plan to make. Can each one be directly linked back to the question you have been asked? It is very easy to wander off the point; if you check this at the planning stage, it won't take you long to correct it.
- ✓ When you are happy with your plan and have decided on the order in which you are going to write your points, begin your answer.
- ✓ Make a point, develop it and support it with a suitable quotation or reference. Don't leave your quotations or references hanging in the middle of the answer, explain them by linking them to the point you are making. 'The word "sigh" here reinforces the idea that the poet is consumed by melancholy…"
- ✓ Avoid simply giving a summary of the poem. It doesn't matter how long your answer is, or how beautifully phrased it is, if you don't give your own analysis and make valid points which answer the question asked, you will not get a passing grade.

- ✓ Do give your own opinion, provided you can justify it and back it up with relevant quotations or references. Remember that the pieces chosen for the Junior Cycle exam are generally thought to be good examples of their genre, so think carefully before saying you dislike them. You may, of course, say you don't like a poem or an extract from a play or novel but it is often much more difficult to explain why something doesn't appeal to you than to say why it does.

Marking your answer

- ✓ **Content**: Obviously, this is the most important aspect of your answer in Paper 2. In order to get high marks here, you need to make strong, relevant points. A very general rule would be one point/well-supported paragraph per 5 marks. In other words, if it is a 15-mark question, you should make at least 3 points. It is a good idea to include a brief introduction and/or conclusion also, if you have time. Show that you are able to evaluate the text and produce a personal response to it. All the points you make must be supported by relevant quotations or references to the text. As I said earlier, these must be linked back to the point you are making. Avoid long quotations: it is far better to use short, meaningful ones.

- ✓ **Structure**: Organise your answer properly. This is where planning is invaluable. At the planning stage, make sure that your points are in a logical order, that one leads to the next and that each paragraph develops the answer.

- ✓ **Expression**: The examiner will be looking for an answer in which the language is varied and interesting. When writing, try to make your paragraphs flow into one another rather than making a series of disjointed, separate points. Again, planning will help here. Avoid repetition and clichés. Try to think of a variety of descriptive words rather than saying 'nice' and 'good' over and over. Keep your sentences short.

- ✓ **Mechanics**: The examiner will mark you down for poor spelling and punctuation. Use your common sense here, many of the words you need to use will be written on the paper for you. Refer back to the unseen texts in particular when you are writing your answer. It will look sloppy and careless if you spell a person's name incorrectly when it is repeated many times in the extract.

Introduction to Unseen Poetry

About the unseen poetry section

In this section, 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 Junior Cert students so the chances are that you will understand it fairly easily if you approach it calmly and sensibly.

Read the poem two or three times before attempting to answer the questions. You may wish to read the questions after the first reading, just to set you on the right track. Re-read the poem again once or twice before putting pen to paper. Think of the poem as a comprehension piece; the answers are there in front of you, all you have to do is pick them out.

It is essential to read the questions very, very carefully. There may be two or three questions and there may be choices within the question.

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

- ✓ Does the title tell us anything? Is there an introduction to the poem? As in the drama section, this can be a great help.

- ✓ Who is speaking in this poem? (It is worth noting the title and the poet's name, these may give you a hint. Remember, however, that a poet may be speaking from the point of view of a person of a different age or sex, or even as themselves when they were a child.)

- ✓ Does the poet address the subject of the poem directly? Look out for use of the word 'You'. If the poet does this, then it creates a sense of intimacy.

- ✓ What is the poem about? In other words, what is the main message (theme) the poet is trying to get across to the reader?

- ✓ What is the tone of the poem? Is it happy or sad, nostalgic or bitter for example? Try to imagine the poet reading the poem aloud. What tone of voice do you think

he or she would use? This can help you work out the mood of the poem. Watch out for irony: the poet saying one thing but meaning another.

- ✓ Does the tone of the poem change at all? Sometimes a poet may be angry at the start of a poem but calm and reflective by the end.

- ✓ 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 images in the poem. Are they effective? Do you like them?

- ✓ Look at the tense or tenses used in the poem. The present tense can suggest immediacy or an unresolved issue. The past tense can indicate that the poet has come to terms with the issue. Does the tense change at all? (Think of the tense change in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'.) What does the tense change tell you?

- ✓ Think about the literary terms you learnt when studying poetry in school. Start with sound, is there any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia etc.? Underline these as you notice them.

- ✓ What other poetic techniques does the poet use? Are there metaphors, similes or symbols used? Are they effective? Do they help to create a picture in your mind?

- ✓ What kind of language is used in the poem? Is it modern? Is it easy to understand? Is there slang? If so, why do you think it is used?

- ✓ Do you like the poem?

This may seem like a lot to think about, and it certainly is, if you wait until the day of the exam to do it for the first time. Get into the habit of doing it well before June. You may not be able to answer all the questions when reading a poem for the first time, but they will steer you along the path to better understanding.

Useful Words and Phrases

Remember, you will never be asked to comment on the poet's style without explaining what effect it had on you. Below is a list of words you may find helpful when planning your answer.

Effective
Gripping
Interesting
Striking
Absorbing (occupies all your attention)
Attention-grabbing
Compelling (demands your attention)
Engrossing (absorbing)
Enjoyable
Exciting
Fascinating
Intriguing (really engages your interest)
Moving
Poignant (deeply and painfully affecting)
Remarkable
Riveting (holds your attention)
Stimulating
Thought-provoking

Think about the following verbs when you are explaining why you find an image effective:

Amuses
Captures
Creates
Emphasises
Engages
Evokes (calls to mind or suggests)

Fascinates

Moves

Personalises

Persuades

Proves

Provokes

Stirs

Suggests

Link words and phrases:

Likewise

Similarly

Also

In the same way

In the same manner

Just as

Both poems/poets

Each poem

Conversely

On the contrary

Whereas

Differs from

However

In contrast

This is different to

While

Comparing the poems

Listed below are some sentence structures you could use when linking poems. In these sentences, P1 and P2 refer to the two poems while Poet X and Poet Y refer to the two poets.

- ✓ We can see in both P1 and P2 that.....
- ✓ I feel that there are many similarities between P1 and P2.
- ✓ Unlike poet X, poet Y.....
- ✓ The same theme is handled completely differently in P2....
- ✓ Poet X uses humour while Poet Y treats the theme more seriously....
- ✓ Both poets deal with....but Poet X handles it very differently to Poet Y....

Key Literary Terms

Listed below are some key poetic terms that you should know. This is a basic list but you can add to them as you study the individual poems. Remember, the examiner will be looking to see if you know what these terms mean, if you can identify them and if you can give examples from the poem.

- ✓ Alliteration – The repetition of initial consonant sounds. 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.

- ✓ 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.

- ✓ Assonance – The repetition of vowel sounds.

- ✓ Enjambment - When a sentence continues into the next line of the poem without any punctuation marks. Enjambment is often used to suggest fast action or movement. It speeds the poem along by eliminating pauses.

- ✓ Imagery – Words used which create a vivid picture in your mind.

- ✓ Metaphor – A comparison in which the words 'like' or 'as' are <u>not</u> used. 'My love is a red, red rose.' Metaphors are stronger than similes.

- ✓ Onomatopoeia – Words which sound like their meaning: slap, squelch, thud, coo. If you find this word difficult to spell, break it up:
  Ono - mat – o – poeia (POE as in 'poem').

- ✓ Personification – Assigning human qualities to things which are not human or are not even alive. 'The wind howled and danced.'

- ✓ 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 as well as adding to the rhythm. 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.

- ✓ Rhyme – Rhyme creates a musical sound and also helps to make poems easier to remember. Poets can also use rhyme to link certain words in a poem to show that their meanings are linked.

- ✓ Sibilance –a type of alliteration in which soft consonant sounds are repeated to create a soft, hissing sound. This can make a piece seem more peaceful. Read this example from Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven' in which 's', 'ch' and soft 'c' sounds are used together. : And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain. (use of the "s," soft "c," and "ch" all together)

- ✓

- ✓ Simile – A comparison in which the words 'like' or 'as' are used. 'My love is like a red, red rose.'

- ✓ 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 attitude towards the subject of the poem. The tone might be bitter, affectionate, nostalgic, loving etc.

Sample Answer 1 - 2019 Exam

Caught Out

Face to face with a lamb
On a Spring evening at twilight
I have nowhere to hide

Black legs, black ears,
White baby-grow,
Two black eyes peer up at me

I feel as guilty
As if caught out by my grand-daughter
Telling her a lie

Question 1

Do you find the poet's reaction to the lamb in this poem surprising? Explain your answer with reference to the poem. **(10 marks)**

Optional Rough Work

-Why does he want to hide? Surely lambs are cute, not frightening?
-Why does he feel guilty? What has he done or what might he do?

Timing: The general rule for the Junior Cycle exam is that you should spend *roughly* three minutes per five marks. Of course, you should first and foremost be guided by the instructions inside the cover of the exam. This will tell you how long to spend on each section. Some will require a little more time than others. This question is worth ten marks so you should spend six or seven minutes answering it.

Sample answer – Question 1

I was very surprised by the poet's reaction to the lamb. Lambs are generally seen as cute and cuddly, yet Durcan said he had 'nowhere to hide' when he came 'Face to face' with the little creature. It seems extraordinary that a grown man should be frightened of such a small, harmless animal.

Make sure you reflect the wording of the question in your first sentence. Answer the question immediately.

Durcan goes on to say that when the lamb looked at him, he felt 'as guilty' as if his granddaughter had caught him out telling a lie. I thought it was astonishing that the poet should feel such a powerful and negative emotion just because the lamb peered up at him. On reflection, I wondered if perhaps Durcan felt guilty because he had eaten lamb before but never really thought about the fact that a young animal had to die to provide him with a meal.

The question asked if you found the poet's reaction surprising. Use synonyms of the word 'surprising' in your answers. I have highlighted those words/phrases in red.

Note: Although this answer is only six sentences in length, it answers the question. Each paragraph contains a point, supported with reference to the poem. The quotes are woven into the fabric of the sentences. There is evidence of personal engagement with the poem.

Question 2

Do you think Paul Durcan uses language effectively in his poem 'Caught Out'? Explain your answer with reference to any two examples chosen from the poem. **(15 marks)**

Optional Rough Work

-Makes lamb seem human - baby grow - peering up

-Links it to his granddaughter - effective simile

I think the poet's use of language is effective because he cleverly helps us to relate to the lamb and his feelings towards it.

Durcan cleverly uses the metaphor of a baby to make the lamb seem like a human child. He describes its woolly coat as a 'White baby-grow'. In this way, he links the lamb to human babies, and this makes us empathise with the little animal and feel affection for it. He also says the lamb's black eyes 'peer up' at him, emphasising how small it is as he looks down at it. By making eye contact, he connects with the lamb.

The use of contrast when describing the lamb creates a clear and vivid picture of the animal with 'Black legs, black ears,' 'Two black eyes' and a coat like a 'White baby-grow'. The contrasting colours -white and black - might also suggest the innocence of the lamb and the poet's guilt.

If the question asks you to comment on the language used in the poem, you must refer to specific poetic techniques.

The poet also uses a powerful simile to show us how uncomfortable he feels, looking at a little creature he knows is most likely being raised for meat. He says he feels as guilty as if he had been 'caught out' by his grand-daughter while 'telling her a lie'. Durcan clearly struggles with finding the lamb cute and, at the same time, knowing that it does not have a long life ahead of it.

Sample Answer 2 – Geograpy Lesson by Brian Patten

Our teacher told us one day he would leave
And sail across a warm blue sea
To places he had only known from maps,
And all his life had longed to be.

The house he lived in was narrow and grey
But in his mind's eye he could see
Sweet-scented jasmine clinging to the walls,
And green leaves burning on an orange tree.

He spoke of the lands he longed to visit,
Where it was never drab or cold.
I couldn't understand why he never left,
And shook off the school's stranglehold.

Then halfway through his final term
He took ill and never returned.
And he never got to that place on the map
Where the green leaves of the orange trees burned.

The maps were redrawn on the classroom wall;
His name was forgotten, it faded away.
But a lesson he never knew he taught
Is with me to this day.

I travel to where the green leaves burn,
To where the ocean's glass-clear and blue,
To all those places my teacher taught me to love
But which he never knew.

Answer the following **three** questions. Each question is worth 10 marks.

1. From your reading of the poem, what impression do you get of the teacher? Base your answer on evidence from the poem. (10)

2. How has the poet been affected by what he has learned from this teacher? Explain your answer with reference to the poem. (10)

3. Do you like the poet's use of imagery in this poem? Give reasons for your answer. (10)

Sample Answer to Question 1:

Note: The word 'impression' is usually a hint that the question is about character. Beware of just saying what the teacher did or said. Instead, focus on what his words and/or actions tell you about him as a person.

Optional Rough Work

Sad - unfulfilled dreams

Enthusiastic about 'lands he longed to visit

The impression I get of the teacher is that he was a man who felt great passion for the subject he taught but whose dreams were unfulfilled.

Your opening sentence should directly address the question.

The teacher in this poem fires up his pupil's imagination. The poet says he brought the two-dimensional world of the maps to life, helping the pupils to see places 'where the green leaves of the orange trees burned' and enabling them to see what he could in his 'mind's eye' when he imagined houses with 'Sweet-scented jasmine clinging to the walls'. These descriptions are wonderfully sensual; not only do we see these places but we feel the heat: 'where green leaves burn', and smell the fragrant jasmine blossom.

In a poetry answer, you should comment on the language and the techniques the poet uses to achieve certain effects.

Sadly, however, the teacher never managed to leave his 'narrow and grey' house or shake off 'the school's stranglehold' and travel to 'the lands he longed to visit'. During his final term, the teacher 'took ill and never returned'. It is heart-breaking to think of the teacher ending his days without ever fulfilling his greatest desire, particularly when it was not something ridiculously out of reach but was just a holiday to a sunny place 'where the ocean's glass-clear and blue'.

Short quotes should be woven into the fabric of the sentences.

Sample Answer to Question 2:

Optional Rough Work

Taught the poet to love these places and to visit them

Taught the poet not to repeat teacher's mistake

I think that the teacher taught the poet to love the places they studied during the geography lessons, and also inspired him to seize the day.

The poet describes the places the teacher 'had only known from maps' in a way which shows that he loves these places as much as the teacher did. To the teacher, these countries were places you could imagine yourself living, in houses where fragrant jasmine was 'clinging to the walls'. His enthusiasm was infectious, and now the poet travels 'to where the green leaves burn / To where the ocean's glass-clear and blue'.

The forward slash / tells the reader that the rest of the quote is on the next line in the original poem.

The other lesson the poet learned from the teacher is that it is important to follow your dreams. Although the teacher did not realise he was teaching the poet this, his unfulfilled desires affected his pupil so strongly that he says that this lesson is 'with me to this day'. It seems he is determined not to repeat his teacher's mistake. As a result, he travels 'to where the green leaves burn' and enjoys the reality of the places his teacher 'had only known from maps'.

Sample Answer to Question 3:

Optional Rough Work

Contrast between reality and longing conveyed through images

Alliteration and assonance make the foreign lands attractive

I find the poet's use of imagery in this poem most effective and it definitely contributes to my enjoyment of the poem.

One aspect of the poem that I particularly like is the way in which the poet uses contrasting images to highlight the difference between the teacher's reality and the places he longs to visit. He dreams of a land in which he might find 'Sweet-scented jasmine clinging to the walls,' but instead of that he has 'the school's stranglehold'. I thought this was powerful as we can imagine the school as a parasitic plant, choking the teacher and draining him of life, as opposed to the beautiful jasmine filling the air with its perfume.

The way in which the poet appeals to our senses in his descriptions also made this poem an enjoyable read. We are transported to these foreign lands because we can not only see the 'glass-clear and blue' sea, but can also smell the fragrance of the jasmine on the walls and feel the heat of the sun in a place where 'the green leaves of the orange trees burn'. The repetition of this description of the burning leaves emphasises the warmth of a land which is 'never drab or cold'.

Whenever you point out a feature of style (repetition in this case) use a verb to say what that feature does in the poem. Here I say that it emphasises the warmth of the foreign lands.

Sample Answer 3 – Poem for Lara, 10 by Michael Hartnett

The following poem by Michael Hartnett was written for his ten year old daughter, Lara. Read the poem and then answer the questions which follow. (30)

Poem for Lara, 10

An ashtree on fire,
the hair of your head
coaxing larks
with your sweet voice
in the green grass,
a crowd of daisies
playing with you,
a crowd of rabbits
dancing with you,
the blackbird
with its gold bill
is a jewel for you,
the goldfinch
with its sweetness
is your music.
You are perfume,
you are honey,
a wild strawberry:
even the bees think you
a flower in the field.
Little queen of the land of books,
may you be always thus,
may you ever be free
from sorrow-chains.
Here's my blessing for you, girl,
it is no petty grace –
may you have your mother's soul
and the beauty of her face.

Answer **two** of the following questions. Each question is worth 15 marks.

1. From the imagery the poet uses, what impression of Lara do you get?

2. From your reading of the poem, what type of person do you think Michael Hartnett was?

3. Did you like or dislike this poem?
Give reasons for your answer based on evidence from the poem.

From the imagery the poet uses, what impression of Lara do you get?

- ✓ When you read this question, underline the words imagery and impression of Lara.
- ✓ As the question is on technique, you will need to use poetic terms.
- ✓ Each point you make will be supported by a quote and explained fully.
- ✓ The quotes should be short, there is no point in quoting lines and lines. A few words or a single line will usually suffice.
- ✓ Quote accurately, the poem is printed out for you so there is no excuse for spelling errors.
- ✓ Planning your answer:- *intro - pretty, well-loved*
  red hair – vibrant, warm
  lover of and loved by nature
  loves books
  sweet – perfume, honey

Sample Answer to Question 1:

This poem is rich in imagery which conveys a clear picture of the poet's daughter. The descriptions of her are very positive and leave me with the impression of a pretty, sweet, charming little girl.

In the opening lines we are given a physical description of Lara. The metaphor describing her hair as 'An ashtree on fire' tells us that she is a red-head. This image also

suggests warmth and vibrancy and links the little girl to nature by comparing her hair to a flaming tree.

This idea of Lara being somehow at one with nature is continued when the poet conjures up the image of flowers and rabbits joining in her fun: 'a crowd of daisies playing with you, a crowd of rabbits dancing with you'. Clearly, Lara loves nature and her father is suggesting that nature cannot help but love her back.

The positive imagery is carried right through the poem with references to Lara's 'sweet voice', 'the goldfinch with its sweetness is your music' and the metaphors which highlight her innocence and goodness, 'You are perfume, you are honey, a wild strawberry'. All the images chosen from nature are ones which are associated with children, which is most appropriate for a poem about a little girl; if she was a grown woman there would possibly be roses and swans mentioned, but as she is a ten year old, the poet chooses daisies, rabbits, strawberries and green grass instead.

It is interesting that the poet compares his daughter to a queen in 'the land of books'; this seems to set the seal on the little girl's perfection. Obviously a poet would value literature and reading and his choice of this image is significant as it tells us that Lara has another, deeper side to her – she is not just interested in the outdoors.

There is a suggestion in the poem that Lara is almost like a fairy, or at least a character from a fairytale. Her father fondly depicts her as dancing with rabbits, playing with daisies and even being loved by the insects: 'the bees think you a flower in the field'. These images conjure up the impression of a little girl who is naturally good and sweet and full of childlike innocence. It seems clear too that she is a happy little girl, her father hopes that she may 'be always thus, may you ever be free from sorrow-chains'.

Overall, my impression of Lara is that of a happy, carefree, sweet little girl who is idolised by her doting father.

Note: This answer is longer than necessary but it is no harm to see what could be written.

2. From your reading of the poem, what type of person do you think Michael Hartnett was?

- ✓ This question is looking for your impression of the poet, based on the language he uses, the images he chooses and the tone of the poem.
- ✓ Because you are asked what type of person the poet is, you should be careful to use words which describe personality.
- ✓ Remember, each of the questions is testing your ability to analyse poetry so show that you know how to do this. Don't be misled by the seeming simplicity of the questions.
- ✓ Planning your answer:- *loving father- caring- whimsical*
  wants the best for his daughter
  worries for her future
  loving husband also – mention of mother

Sample Answer to Question 2:

I believe that Michael Hartnett is a very loving father. He idealises his daughter, portraying her as an almost ethereal *(not quite of this world)*, fairylike creature who is part of nature's beauty. His descriptions of her are of a child who is perfectly attuned to nature and is loved by all the animals and even insects she encounters: 'daisies playing with you, a crowd of rabbits dancing with you'. This shows that he is a sensitive man who notices details that others may not, and also that he is a whimsical man – not many men would think of daisies playing with a child and rabbits dancing with her.

He is obviously someone who sees the best in everything. His description of his ten year old daughter is a caring, adoring one, he sees all that is good in her, 'You are perfume, you are honey, a wild strawberry'. As well as seeing the best in his daughter, the poet wants the best for her. He worries that her childish innocence will be destroyed and hopes that she will 'ever be free from sorrow chains'.

It is clear, from the final lines of the poem, that as well as being a loving father, Michael Hartnett is also a loving husband. In the last four lines, he wishes that his daughter may have all the blessings of her mother: 'may you have your mother's soul and the beauty of her face'. It is significant that he mentions the soul before physical beauty as this tells me that he is not a shallow person who is concerned only with the superficial. To him, clearly, spiritual beauty is the most important thing.

3. Did you like or dislike this poem? Give reasons for your answer based on evidence from the poem.

- ✓ I would strongly advise you to be positive here. You may, of course, say you dislike the poem but it will be much harder to support this answer by reference to the text. It is also important to remember that the poems chosen are generally thought to be good examples of their genre.
- ✓ Whichever approach you decide to take, it will need to be supported by evidence from the poem. A cursory, 'I disliked the poem, I thought it was boring' will not achieve a passing grade.
- ✓ Although the examiners want to see a personal response, they also want to see that it is based on a reasonably detailed analysis and evaluation of the poem.
- ✓ Planning your answer:- *things to consider - senses, language, sound, imagery*

Sample Answer to Question 3:

I enjoyed this poem very much. The images the poet uses to convey his adoration of his daughter are charming: they touch on almost all the senses. The picture I have in my mind is one of a little girl dancing in a sparkling, colourful meadow, filled with 'green grass', 'daisies', a blackbird with a 'gold bill' like a jewel and friendly rabbits and bees. The mention of perfume and honey appeals to my sense of smell and taste and helps to create an image of an almost perfect world. The description of the goldfinch singing sweetly completes the picture.

The whole poem seems to evoke a fairytale world in which Lara is a fairy queen in a magic kingdom, and the rabbits, larks, blackbirds, goldfinches, bees and even daisies do all they can to make her happy. They adore her: 'Even the bees think you / a flower in the field.' I enjoy this element of escapism in the poem.

The part of the poem that I find most attractive, however, is the ending. I really like the way the poet mentions Lara's mother in such a loving way and hopes that the little girl will inherit her mother's beautiful soul as well as 'the beauty of her face.' This makes me think that the family unit is a close and happy one, and it ends the poem on a very positive note.

Introduction to Studied Poetry

While it is not possible to predict exactly what sort of questions will come up on the day of the exam, there are several aspects of each poem which you should think about carefully.

- ✓ **Theme** – the main message of the poem. You may be asked, 'What does the poet think about...? Or, 'Choose a different title for this poem.' Both of these questions are asking you the same thing. What is the poet's main message? If you had to sum it up in a few words, what would those words be?

- ✓ **Comparing the treatment of the same theme in two poems** – You may be asked to explore the way in which different poets deal with the same theme.

- ✓ **Tone** – the attitude of the poet towards the subject of the poem. You may be asked if you think the poem is happy or sad, or you may be asked how the poet feels about the topic dealt with in the poem. Watch out for the words 'feeling', 'attitude' and 'mood' here. They can be a sign that the question is about tone.

  As I said earlier, 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.

- ✓ **Style** – This is a very common question in exams. Watch out for phrases such as, 'How does the poet give the impression that...? or, 'Do you think the poet captures the scene well?' You must refer to the language of the poem in your answer. By that I mean that you must discuss the 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 the drama, poetry is really meant to be read aloud and the sound is very important.

When you comment on a feature of style, be sure to use a verb to say what that feature does. This is vital. You may be asked if the poet describes something effectively. Don't forget to say why the description is effective. Look at my sample answer on the poem 'Cinders' to see how this can be done.

- ✓ **Characters or relationships**: You may be asked what sort of person you think the poet or the subject of the poem is/was, based on what you have read. If you are asked 'What impression do we get of this person?' then you must use words to describe character. Try to use at least one 'character' word per paragraph. Look at my sample answer on the poem 'Poem for Lara, 10' to see how this can be done.

- ✓ **Your response to the poem** – Did you like it? Why? Why not? You must explain yourself fully here. You are quite free to dislike the piece but you must be prepared to back up your viewpoint with plenty of examples and quotations. It is generally far easier to say that you liked the poem and go through your list of literary terms, picking out those that appear in the poem and saying that you found them particularly striking or effective or evocative.

  Bear in mind that this is a question on poetry. Although the examiners want to see a personal response, they also want to see that it is based on a reasonably detailed analysis and evaluation of the poem. Look at my sample answer on the 2002 poem 'Poem for Lara, 10' to see how this can be done.

- ✓ **Favourite image or images**- You may be asked to select one or two images from the poem and explain your choice. Be sure to write out the images in full before explaining why you chose them.

Van Gogh's Yellow Chair by Mark Roper

I would love to sit
in the yellow chair
in the painting

when a shadow lies
like a shy animal
in a corner

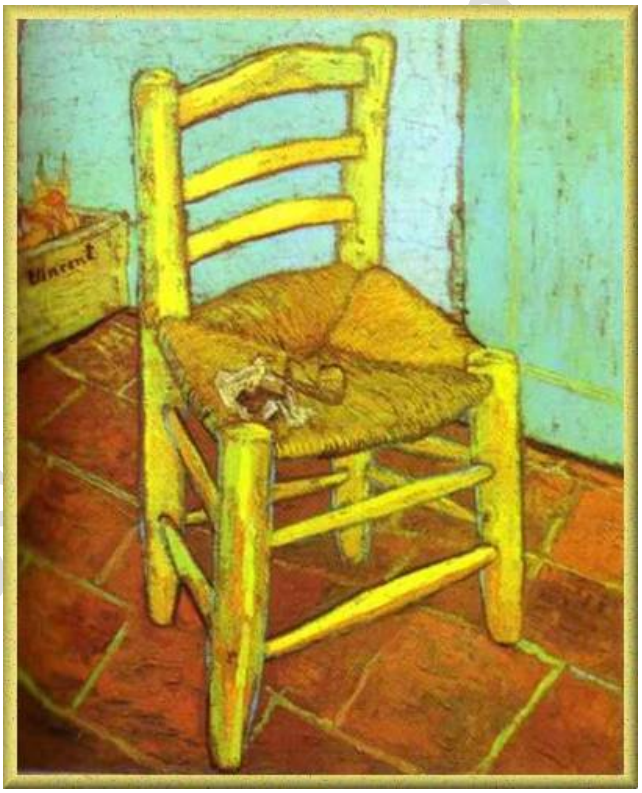
and the day's air
is like water in which
small noises swim

I would sit there
safe from harm
safe from all surprise.

Beyond the frame
on every side
the outside world

would open wide
but I'd have crossed
the great divide

so long as I never
rose from
that yellow chair.



Analysis:

The speaker in this poem is drawn to the yellow chair in Van Gogh's famous painting because it offers him a chance to escape to a more attractive world. Everything about the chair and the room in which it sits in portrayed in a positive way. The yellow colour of the chair evokes feelings of warmth, sun and happiness. If the speaker were to sit in this chair, he could enjoy the calm atmosphere of his surroundings. There, all is peace. A shadow 'lies/ like a small animal in a corner' and the sounds of the outside world are muffled to 'small noises' by air which is 'like water'. This last image seems to say that the speaker imagines that if he were to sit in the yellow chair he would be like someone swimming underwater, and much like such a swimmer, he would be close to but separated from the 'outside world'.

The image of the shadow which 'lies / like a shy animal / in the corner is a particularly intriguing one which brings the poem to life. Others may look at the painting and see it as something inanimate and unchanging, but the speaker sees it as something real and vital. For him, the shadow in the corner is not simply paint on canvas; it is alive and may, like a shy animal, slip away at any moment. Shadows can be frightening as they may hide dangers, but this shadow is like a 'shy animal'. Far from being a threat, it is portrayed as something timid and easily frightened. This rather sweet image adds to the welcoming, comforting atmosphere of the world of 'the yellow chair'. Having an animal curled up at your feet, or in the corner is relaxing and soothing, and the poet's decision to compare the shadow to a 'shy animal' reinforces the notion of this magical place as being somewhere 'safe from harm / safe from all surprise.' It is a very positive image.

By contrast, the 'outside world' seems like somewhere from which the poet would like to flee. He describes it as 'opening wide' and this conjures up an image of a greedy, devouring mouth opening wide. The poet seems to view the real world as a hostile place because, in the fourth stanza, he says that if he were to sit in the yellow chair he would be 'safe from harm'. He would also be 'safe from all surprise.' The repetition of the word 'safe' shows the importance the poet attaches to the chair as an imaginary place of sanctuary.

The idea of being able to see the 'outside world' but not having to be a part of it is, I feel, what the speaker particularly likes about the notion of sitting in the yellow chair. If he were to escape into this world he would be in a better, more peaceful place. It would be the world of art and imagination and from there he would be able to see things from a

different perspective. He would have 'crossed / the great divide.' Nothing would bother him as long as he stayed there. It is easy to see, when you look at it this way, why the poet says that he would 'love / to sit in the yellow chair in the painting'.

The last three stanzas of this poem clearly show the speaker's desire to escape from this world into a very different one. He believes that if he became immersed in the world of art, he would be in a better place and he would be able to look at the world in a new way. He uses his imagination to great effect to show us how we should broaden our minds through art.

The speaker tells us that if he somehow managed to achieve his desire and become part of the painting, then he would be apart from 'the outside world'. He talks of a 'great divide' between the real world and the world of art. The frame of the painting resembles a fence or a wall, separating him from the world and keeping him from harm. The description of the outside world opening wide, like a huge mouth that would devour the speaker, or like a void in which he would be lost forever is a particularly striking one. The idea of his feeling safer in the painting is reinforced by the words 'so long'. Everything would be alright 'so long as I never / rose from / that yellow chair.' If he did rise, then all this security and tranquillity would vanish.

There is also a sense of the world of art allowing us to see our own world in a new way. There is an interesting reversal of the normal order of things in this poem. Usually, we look at paintings, but the speaker wants to become part of the painting, and to look out at the real world from a different perspective. I think he is saying that if we lose ourselves in art; if we allow ourselves to become totally absorbed by it, then we will have a new view of the world 'Beyond the frame'.

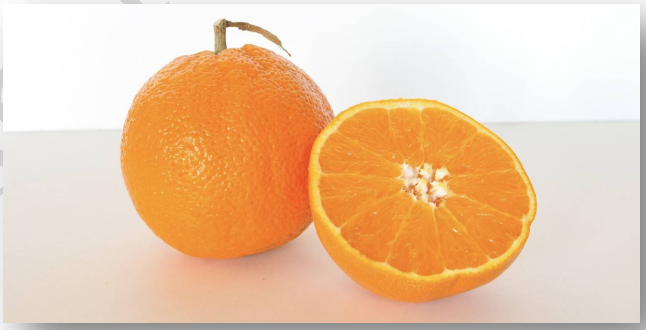
Finally, I believe that the last three stanzas show us how we should not be limited and unimaginative in our thinking. Paintings can offer us doorways into other worlds and open up all sorts of creative and imaginative options. We can lose ourselves in a work of art and in a world of art. We can stretch our minds and visualise ourselves as part of a painting, rather than just standing and admiring it in a practical, down-to-earth way.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Art
- ✓ Escape
- ✓ Seeing the world from a different perspective

Oranges by Gary Soto

The first time I walked
With a girl, I was twelve,
Cold, and weighted down
With two oranges in my jacket.
December. Frost cracking
Beneath my steps, my breath
Before me, then gone,
As I walked toward
Her house, the one whose
Porch light burned yellow
Night and day, in any weather.
A dog barked at me, until
She came out pulling
At her gloves, face bright
With rouge. I smiled,
Touched her shoulder, and led
Her down the street, across
A used car lot and a line
Of newly planted trees,
Until we were breathing
Before a drugstore. We
Entered, the tiny bell
Bringing a saleslady
Down a narrow aisle of goods.
I turned to the candies
Tiered like bleachers,
And asked what she wanted -
Light in her eyes, a smile
Starting at the corners
Of her mouth. I fingered
A nickel in my pocket,
And when she lifted a chocolate
That cost a dime,



I didn't say anything.
I took the nickel from
My pocket, then an orange,
And set them quietly on
The counter. When I looked up,
The lady's eyes met mine,
And held them, knowing
Very well what it was all
About.
Outside,
A few cars hissing past,
Fog hanging like old
Coats between the trees.
I took my girl's hand
in mine for two blocks,
Then released it to let
Her unwrap the chocolate.
I peeled my orange
That was so bright against
The gray of December
That, from some distance, Someone might have thought
I was making a fire in my hands.

Glossary

drugstore: a shop selling medicines and miscellaneous goods
candies: sweets
bleachers: tiered seating at a sportsground
nickel: five US cents
dime: ten US cents

Analysis

The speaker recalls his first date when he 'walked/With a girl'. In the recollection, he is twelve years of age and 'Cold and weighted down' by the two oranges in his pocket. In all likelihood, the oranges are a symbol of how 'weighted down' the young boy is by his thoughts on going on his first date. Will he impress the girl? Will they hit it off? Another possible meaning of the oranges is that they keep the boy from running away from this

momentous occasion. He is 'weighted down' by the oranges and is therefore forced to continue on his way without fleeing. Finally, the oranges may also be a cultural symbol. Soto's parents were agricultural workers for a time and this cultural heritage could well weigh heavily on the young boy as he may fear that his Mexican-American background would tell against him at the time in which the poem is set.

It is December, which seems surprising as the title 'Oranges' brings to mind sunshine and warmth. As the speaker walks, the frost cracks beneath his feet and his breath mists and vanishes in the cold air. The girl's house contrasts with the coldness of the air outside. It is the only place where the porchlight shines brightly day and night and in any weather.

As the speaker approaches the house, the images change to those of lightness and warmth. The porch lights outside the girl's house shine, 'Night and day'. The girl appears, pulling on her gloves for warmth. Her face is 'bright/With rouge'. There is a discordant note in the dog barking as the boy approaches the house. It is the first sign that he may be out of his depth and not completely welcome in the girl's life.

The young boy and girl walk together through a second-hand car lot and then across a line of 'newly-planted trees'. They go into a drugstore and the boy gallantly offers the girl her choice of sweets. Even though he is only twelve years old, he knows how to behave on a date. He has made the right decision. The girl's eyes light up and she smiles at him. The boy does not say anything about the cost of the sweets but he is clearly anxious as he plays with the nickel in his pocket. It is all he has. The girl selects a chocolate that costs twice as much as the boy has but he doesn't say anything. He takes the nickel and an orange from his pocket and places both on the counter. The saleslady's eyes meet him and she understands the situation.

The poet doesn't tell us straight away what happened in the drugstore. At the start of the next stanza, the young couple is outside once more. Cars 'hiss' by and the fog hangs down. Despite the grey, cold and unromantic setting, love is in the air. With a newfound confidence, the boy takes the girl's hand in his. Now she is 'my girl' and they walk hand-in-hand for two blocks before he lets her hand go so she can unwrap her chocolate. The boy takes the remaining orange from his pocket and peels it. The brightness of the orange stands out against the dull grey of the December day, looking from a distance

like a small fire in the boy's hands. This image perfectly captures the boy's inner warmth and joy.

The language in 'Oranges' is simple and conversational which is appropriate for a story told from a child's perspective. The poem is a first-person narrative and told in a straightforward way: 'The first time I walked/With a girl, I was twelve' … 'A dog barked at me'.

Contrast is used to great effect in this poem. The day is cold and foggy, with 'Frost cracking' beneath the boy's steps. In a striking simile, the poet describes 'Fog hanging like old/Coats between the trees'. Against this grey coldness is set the warmth and color associated with the first date. The girl's house has a porch light which burns yellow, her face is 'bright/With rouge' and there is 'Light in her eyes' as she selects her chocolate. At the end of the poem, the boy's joy sets his heart alight and this is reflected in the orange he holds. It is 'so bright against/The gray of December' that it might appear the boy is 'making a fire' in his hands.

The language is sensual and describes the sights, sounds and feelings of the first date. The poet describes the sound of the frost 'cracking' as he walks, his breath 'Before me, then gone', the sound of the dog barking at him as he waits for the girl, her appearance 'bright/With rouge' as she pulls on her gloves, and the young couple 'breathing/Before a drugstore'.

This is a positive, gentle poem centred on an innocent young boy's first date. The joy and positivity is not stated explicitly in the poem but we can see it in the carefully chosen details. The boy wants his young date to have whatever sweet she chooses and doesn't say anything when she lifts a chocolate 'That cost a dime'. He sets his nickel and an orange 'quietly on/The counter' and the saleslady meets his eyes, 'knowing/Very well what it was all/About' but she too makes no comment. Her sensitivity and kindness allow the boy to please his date and she becomes 'my girl' as he takes her hand and they walk away together.

There are two settings in this poem. The first is the cold outdoor setting of winter's day and the second is the interior of the drugstore. Although the speaker is physically cold, he is warmed by love. The young boy and girl walk together through a second-hand car lot and then across a line of 'newly-planted trees'. The image of the rather unromantic

'used car lot' is replaced by the hope and new life symbolised by the 'newly-planted trees'. The details of the drugstore bring it to life for us. The 'tiny bells' rings as they open the door and the candies are 'Tiered like bleachers'. The grey December day is set alight by the boy's happiness as he peels his orange until it appears he is 'making a fire' in his hands.

Theme: This is a simple, beautiful love poem. Most people can remember the importance they attached to their first date. There are few things more universal than first love. The girl is not named in the poem. Her importance centres on her being the boy's first date. He remembers all the details with crystal clarity: 'A dog barked at me, until/She came out pulling/At her gloves, face bright/With rouge'. We can relate to the boy's desire to make the girl happy by buying her any sweet she wants and his anxiety as he fingers the nickel in his pocket. His pride and joy are simply but perfectly conveyed in his description of walking hand-in-hand with 'my girl'.

This poem would fit equally well into a collection about first love or childhood memories. The poet gives us a simple yet moving account of 'The first time' he walked/With a girl'. He remembers all the details of the encounter and the blend of anxiety and joy he felt.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Poems which make us think
- ✓ Youth
- ✓ A poem which appeals to the senses
- ✓ Childhood memories

In Memory of My Mother by Patrick Kavanagh

I do not think of you lying in the wet clay
Of a Monaghan graveyard; I see
You walking down a lane among the poplars
On your way to the station, or happily

Going to second Mass on a summer Sunday--
You meet me and you say:
'Don't forget to see about the cattle--'
Among your earthiest words the angels stray.

And I think of you walking along a headland
Of green oats in June,
So full of repose, so rich with life--
And I see us meeting at the end of a town

On a fair day by accident, after
The bargains are all made and we can walk
Together through the shops and stalls and markets
Free in the oriental streets of thought.

O you are not lying in the wet clay,
For it is harvest evening now and we
Are piling up the ricks against the moonlight
And you smile up at us - eternally.

Analysis:

In Patrick Kavanagh's 'In Memory of My Mother' we are presented with a very vivid, interesting and wonderfully affectionate portrait of the poet's late mother. Although his mother is dead, Kavanagh does not want to focus on the sadness of her loss; rather he wants to celebrate her life and remember her as she was.

This poem is written in the form of an address to the poet's mother, but it is an unusual one in that the person being addressed is no longer alive. However, by calling her 'you' throughout and writing in the present tense rather than the past, Kavanagh ensures that his mother is very much alive in his mind and in his heart. Although she may be 'lying in the wet clay', the poet does not want to imagine her that way and dwells instead on happier thoughts of their time together.

Kavanagh's mother is portrayed as a down-to-earth, sensible, cheerful, spiritual woman. The poet remembers her walking happily to 'second Mass on a summer Sunday' and, when she meets her son on the way, reminding him not to forget about the cattle. All Kavanagh's memories of his mother are positive ones. She is walking along a headland, shopping in the market or 'smiling up' at her son as they work together to bring in the harvest.

In this poem, Kavanagh does not just give us a picture of his own mother, but of all mothers. A line that conjures up the clearest picture of the poet's mother is in the second stanza, when he gives her a voice and remembers her telling him not to 'forget about the cattle'. This is such a practical and sensible thing to say, and so reminiscent of all mothers who seem to be continually reminding their children not to forget to do various chores that the reader can almost hear her speaking the line aloud.

This poem is rich with words and phrases which bring Kavanagh's mother to life for us. In the first and second stanza, the poet describes his mother walking to 'second Mass on a summer Sunday'. The detail – 'second Mass' – makes this description realistic, and the sibilance throughout this line both evokes a sense of peace and reinforces the idea that the poet's mother is going 'happily' on her way. The fact that the poet remembers a summer's day rather than a winter's one again brings his mother to life as that is a time of year connected to growth and new life.

In the third stanza, the poet once again connects his mother to growth and to life as he remembers her walking along a headland near a field of oats on a June day. The line which tells us that he sees her 'so full of repose – so rich with life' is very powerful. The words 'full'

and 'rich' and show just how vividly the poet sees his mother in his mind's eye. This is no vague memory, but one which is so strong that we are enabled to share in it.

In the fourth stanza, Kavanagh describes his conversation with his mother as being like 'oriental streets of thought'. This is an interesting image and makes us think of the Orient: a place considered exotic and exciting as well as a spiritual place where death is not viewed as an ending but rather the start of another life. It seems likely that Kavanagh and his mother discussed interesting and exotic topics as they walked through the market together.

The most moving image in the poem is that in the last line. Kavanagh refuses to think of his mother as a dead body in the wet soil, but instead sees her helping to bring in the harvest and smiling up at him 'eternally'. We are left with a clear picture of a loving mother who watches over her son forever.

Consider the following personal response to link this poem to another you have studied: Although Kavanagh's mother died long before I was born, she will live forever in his poem and will be brought to life as vividly for each new reader as she was for me. I am reminded of the words of William Shakespeare in another poem I studied this year, in which he talks of the power of words to keep a loved one alive:

> 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.'

Theme:

The main message of this poem is that we should appreciate our loved ones and treasure the time we spend with them. This bond is so strong, however, that even when they are gone, we may gain some comfort from seeing them in our mind's eye – as Kavanagh does – smiling up at us 'eternally'.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Relationship
- ✓ Memory
- ✓ People
- ✓ Death and grief

Cinders by Roger McGough

After the pantomime, carrying you back to the car
On the coldest night of the year
My coat, black leather, cracking in the wind.

Through the darkness we are guided by a star
It is the one the Good Fairy gave you
You clutch it tightly, your magic wand.

And I clutch you tightly for fear you blow away
For fear you grow up too soon and - suddenly,
I almost slip, so take it steady down the hill.

Hunched against the wind and hobbling
I could be mistaken for your grandfather
And sensing this, I hold you tighter still.

Knowing that I will never see you dressed for the Ball
Be on hand to warn you against Prince Charmings
And the happy ever afters of pantomime.

On reaching the car I put you into the baby seat
And fumble with straps I have yet to master
Thinking, if only there were more time. More time.

You are crying now. Where is your wand?
Oh no. I can't face going back for it
Let some kid find it in tomorrow's snow.

Waiting in the wings, the witching hour.
Already the car is changing. Smells sweet
Of ripening seed. We must go. Must go.

Analysis:

The title alludes to the fairy tale 'Cinderella'. The heroine had to leave the ball at midnight as her coach would turn back into a pumpkin at that time etc. There are several references to this fairy tale throughout the poem. The father in most versions of 'Cinderella' is an absent figure who is unable to protect his daughter from cruelty and harsh treatment.

Throughout the poem, the poet addresses his daughter directly. This creates a sense of closeness between the father and his child. He also writes in the present tense, which adds to the immediacy and sense of urgency in the poem. The language in the poem is quite simple and straightforward, which is appropriate for a poem about a child.

McGough captures the scene beautifully. The description of a father carrying his young daughter back to the car are both realistic and evocative. The repeated 'ack' sounds in the third line: 'My coat, black leather, cracking in the wind', help us to imagine the sound the coat makes as it snaps in the cold wind. The fact that it is dark and there is a cold wind gives us our first indication that the poem may be somewhat bleak.

The poet goes on to say that he and his daughter are 'guided by a star' as they make their way back to the car. The star is the decoration on top of the wand that the little girl was given by the 'good fairy' in the pantomime they just attended. This is a lovely image and makes us think of other times in history and literature that people have been guided by stars: explorers heading into the great unknown, seafarers journeying home and the three Wise Men travelling to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus. In each case, there is the idea of a journey filled with hope and dreams of a bright future, just as the little girl has hopes and dreams as she heads out on her voyage through life. The father's sorrow, of course, is that he may not be there to guide her along the path and share her sorrows and joys. This is a somewhat sad interpretation of the father and daughter's rather more ordinary and down-to-earth journey back to their car! However, there is great affection in this description too. We imagine the little girl proudly clutching her wand and holding it aloft as she is carried down the hill in the arms of her loving father.

Like most fathers, the poet feels very protective of his little girl. He carries her back to the car and holds her tightly 'for fear you blow away'. The words 'for fear' are repeated in the next line, emphasising the poet's concern for his daughter. His feeling of protectiveness

is not just for the girl's well-being now, but also for her future happiness. He wishes he could protect her always, but life – he suggests – is not really about the 'happy ever afters' of pantomime.

McGough knows he is an older father. He admits that, as he moves 'hunched against the wind and hobbling', he could easily be mistaken for the girl's grandfather. This knowledge makes him clasp his daughter to him even more closely as he reflects on her future without him.

The mood of the poem becomes even sadder as the poet and his daughter reach the car. He struggles to tie the straps of the car seat and admits that he has 'yet to master' them. This could be seen as a symbol of all the things he needs to learn about raising his little girl and the lack of time he has in which to do this. The poet's plaintive wish for 'more time' is emphasised by the repetition of this phrase at the end of the sixth stanza. The child is crying now as she has lost her wand and this adds to the feeling of sadness.

The final stanza of the poem cleverly links the fairytale world of the pantomime and real life. The poet says that 'the witching hour' is 'waiting in the wings'. 'Waiting in the wings' is a theatrical expression meaning that an actor is waiting for his cue to appear on stage. In the poet's life, it is time that is 'waiting in the wings'. Just as Cinderella's fairytale night came to an end at midnight, so the poet fears that his joy will end too soon. Cinderella's coach turned back into a pumpkin and he smells 'ripening seed'. Although the poem ends on a melancholy note, the poet's love for his daughter and his concern for her future are constant throughout this poem.

Theme:

The theme of this poem is a father's fear that he may not be around to see his child grow up. He loves her very much and worries that he will not be able to protect her from the disappointments she may encounter in life. He is also saddened at the thought of missing out on her happiest moments.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Parents and children
- ✓ Wishes or thoughts
- ✓ Relationship

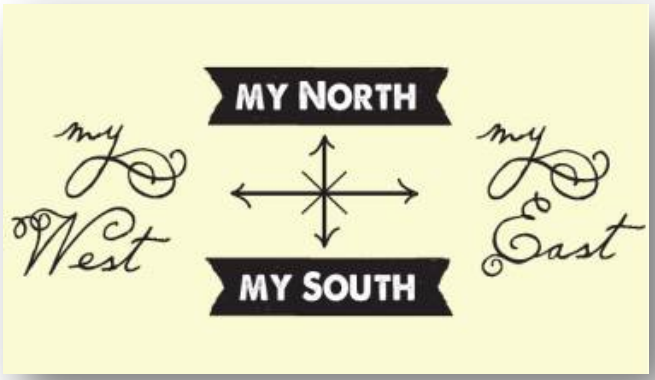
Funeral Blues by W.H. Auden

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message 'He is Dead'.
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now; put out every one,
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun,
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood;
For nothing now can ever come to any good.



Vocabulary

- muffled drum: a drum that has been fixed so the sound it generates is quieter than normal
- crêpe: a lightweight, thin fabric with a ridged surface
- dismantle: take apart and prevent from working

Analysis

The poem became famous in the 1994 romantic comedy *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, when one of the characters, played by John Hannah, read it at the funeral of his partner. The clip of this moving reading can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDXWclpGhcg

The poem opens with a series of commands. The speaker's loved one has died and in his grief, he wants the world to mourn with him and to observe a respectful silence. He orders 'all the clocks' be stopped and the telephone cut off. It is interesting to note that clocks and phones are the first items mentioned. Does the stopping of the clocks mean that time has stopped with the death of the speaker's lover? Similarly, the cutting off of the telephone could symbolise the speaker's reluctance or inability to communicate with others in this time of intense grief. What is clear is that the speaker wants complete silence; even the dog is to be given a 'juicy bone' to prevent it from barking. Pianos are to be silenced too and their music replaced with the more appropriate funereal, solemn sound of a muffled drum. The final line of the first stanza instructs that the coffin be brought out and the mourners invited to attend the funeral. The full stop at the end of the fourth line emphasises the ending of a life.

The second stanza begins with a request to have aeroplanes skywrite the message 'He Is Dead'. The sound of the plane flying overhead is described as 'moaning', an onomatopoeic word (a word which sounds like its meaning) with a long vowel sound that emphasises the speaker's deep sorrow. The speaker has moved on from private expressions of grief to a desire to have his loved one mourned in public. He asks that the 'public doves' wear black ribbons around their necks and that traffic policemen wear black gloves to mark the occasion and to honour the speaker's dead lover. These demands are examples of hyperbole (deliberate

exaggeration). It is neither practical nor reasonable to expect the man's death to be so publicly acknowledged but the commands show us how deeply the speaker feels.

In the third stanza the speaker shares with us the intimate description of his pain and loss. The dead man was everything to him and filled his life: 'My North, my South, my East and West'. By using the points of the compass as a metaphor for the dead man's effect on his life, the speaker also suggests that it was his lover who gave his life direction. He was there for the ordinary moments in life as well as for the more special: 'My working week and my Sunday rest' and he filled the speaker's life with joy: 'my talk, my song'. The raw grief in the bleak final line of this stanza - 'I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong' - is utterly heart-breaking.

The last stanza of the poem expresses the speaker's belief that life is not worth living now that his lover is dead. He goes so far as to say that the universe itself should vanish. The stars should be put out as they are 'not wanted now' and the moon and sun should also be removed. The speaker's grief has consumed him. The dead man was the light in his life and he wants all other light to be extinguished too as there can be no more joy in his life. In his agony and despair, the speaker wants the ocean drained and the forests swept away 'For nothing now can come to any good'. There is no point to life without his lover and there can be no hope of any future happiness or meaning in life.

This language in the poem is simple and straightforward but no less powerful for that. It contains a number of commands which range from the reasonable to the irrational and exaggerated, showing the depth of the speaker's emotion. The imperatives or commands at the start of the poem show that the poet wants the world around him to observe a respectful silence because his loved one is dead: 'Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone'. There is a powerful simplicity in the intimate admission that the dead

man was 'my North, my South, my East and West', and hyperbole (deliberate exaggeration) in the command to 'Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun'.

Unlike most elegies (laments for the dead), which offer some hope for the future or celebrate the life of the deceased, 'Funeral Blues' offers no consolation or comfort. This is a poem about the terrible intensity of grief and loss. There is a terrible bleakness in the final line: 'For nothing now can ever come to any good'.

Themes: Love and loss

The speaker's great love is captured in the description of the deceased as 'My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song'. Anyone who has lost a loved one knows just how devastating it can be. This poem addresses the overwhelming sorrow which can make the mourner feel that there is no joy left in the world. Sadly, this is an experience that most of us will go through at some stage in our lives which gives the poem its universal appeal. The statement 'I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong' reminds that all things come to an end in this world.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Death/Loss

Nettles by Vernon Scannell

My son aged three fell in the nettle bed.
'Bed' seemed a curious name for those green spears,
That regiment of spite behind the shed:
It was no place for rest. With sobs and tears
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 billhook, honed the blade
And went outside and slashed in fury with it
Till not a nettle in that fierce parade
Stood upright any more. And then I lit
A funeral pyre to burn the fallen 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.

Analysis:

The poem is a simple narrative which tells of an accident the poet's son had one day. The impression given is that the nettles are like enemy 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 hurt the three-year-old child 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 a hostile force that must be fought. He finds 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.

The description of the son's injuries shows how much the father sympathises with the little boy. The alliterative 'blisters beaded' suggests the bumpy swellings left by the nettles on the boy's

'tender skin'. Unlike the spiteful, fierce nettles, the boy is 'tender'. The loving parents soothe the boy as best they can and are finally rewarded with a 'watery grin'.

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'. His reaction to the nettles' 'attack' is just as violent as the nettles were when they stung the boy. The use of the word 'fierce' reinforces the poet's view of the nettles as being dangerous 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'.

The final line of the poem seems to indicate that the poet knows that he will not be able to protect his son forever, and that he 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. 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 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. 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.'

Theme: A father's protective love for his child and his realization that he will not always be able to spare his son life's hurts.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Parents and children
- ✓ Wishes or thoughts
- ✓ Relationships

Tich Miller by Wendy Cope

Tich Miller wore glasses
with elastoplast-pink frames
and had one foot three sizes larger than the other.

When they picked teams for outdoor games
she and I were always the last two
left standing by the wire-mesh fence.

We avoided one another's eyes
stooping, perhaps, to re-tie a shoe-lace
or affecting interest in the flight

of some fortunate bird, and pretended
not to hear the urgent conference:
'Have Tubby!' 'No, no, have Tich!'

Usually they chose me, the lesser dud
and she lolloped, unselected,
to the back of the other team.

At eleven we went to different schools.
In time I learned to get my own back,
sneering at hockey players who couldn't spell.

Tich died when she was twelve.

Analysis

This poem deals with the cruelty of schoolchildren and the way in which young people can feel isolated from their peers.

The opening lines introduce Tich immediately. The use of her name, as opposed to simply calling her 'A girl in my class' makes us feel connected with the subject of the poem and brings a note of reality to the topic. We know the girl's name, and this brings her to life for us, in a way. She is not just a statistic or an anonymous sufferer of bullying or isolation: she is a real girl.

Tich is described as wearing glasses in a sickly colour of pink: the colour of elastoplast. There is nothing attractive about this image and we may well wonder at this stage about the poet's intentions. Is she setting out to mock Tich? She is not, although others do. Tich's unfortunate appearance is highlighted again in the third line when we learn that one of her feet was three sizes larger than the other. There is something almost humorous about this image, but not quite. The poet's language is simple and stark and we are faced with the tragicomedy of a young girl who is almost clownish, but whose plight arouses our sympathy rather than our laughter. The simplicity of the language throughout the poem reflects the simplicity of the language and thought process of young children, while also forcing us to face the issues being dealt with. There is no flowery language, no euphemisms to hide the harsh reality.

In the second stanza, the poet links herself to Tich. When it came time to choose team members for games, the poet and Tich were always left until last. The mention of the 'wire-mesh fence' makes us think of prison, or a cage. The pair are trapped in their bodies and trapped in their shared plight. They cannot escape the embarrassment which befalls them week in, week out. The use of the word 'always' suggests that this ritual humiliation was a common occurrence.

Although Tich and the poet were united in their distress, they were not closer because of it. They avoided making eye-contact with one another and pretended to tie a shoelace which did not need to be re-tied rather than talk to one another. Perhaps they wanted to avoid facing the fact that they were both rejected by their classmates, or perhaps they did not want to be seen to be connected in any way.

The poet says that another avoidance tactic was to pretend to be interested in the flight of a bird overhead. The bird is described as 'fortunate'. It can fly away; it can escape any tormentors. The girls cannot. Also, the bird is graceful, unlike Tich and the poet. By looking at the bird, they can also fool themselves and others into believing that they can't hear the 'urgent conference' of the other girls deciding which of the pair is the lesser of two evils. Neither is wanted, but one must be chosen. We learn for the first time that the poet was a fat child: the others call her 'Tubby'. Nobody seems to want either and they argue amongst themselves, within earshot of the rejected girls.

The poet tells us that 'usually' she was chosen, not because she was wanted, but because she was not quite as bad as Tich. The word 'usually' again reinforces the idea that this humiliation was ongoing during the girls' early schooldays. Tich, being the last one left,

had no choice but to 'lollop' to the back of the other team, even though they had not selected her. She had to join their team simply by dint of being the final girl left. The onomatopoeic word 'lolloped' suggests Tich's graceless way of moving. Again, it might be humorous in another context, but it is not here. We can visualise her slow progress to the back of the group all too clearly and imagine the tortuous slowness of her gait. It does not require a lot of imagination to picture the expressions on the other girls' faces as they watched her ungainly run.

For the poet, things changed. She moved on to a different secondary school and she learned to use her academic ability to get her own revenge on the sporty types who had sneered at her in earlier days. It is interesting to note that the poet found a different way to bully but did not learn that mockery is cruel and should be avoided. Like so many people who are picked on, she found her own way to do that to others.

There is a complete stop and a break before the last line, which stands alone. This adds dramatic effect and makes us concentrate on what is about to be said. What follows is a simple statement. 'Tich died when she was twelve.' There is no comment on this but we are struck by the fact that although the poet found her own way to cope, Tich never did. Her short life ended without her ever managing to be respected or liked by the other girls. The simplicity of the final line adds to the sadness. Just as Tich could not avoid her fate, we cannot avoid the tragedy of this ending. There is no attempt to soften the blow or to make sense of what happened. The fact that the last line stands alone symbolises Tich's standing alone, unwanted and unselected to the end of her brief, lonely life.

Themes:

Alienation – Neither Tich nor Tubby fits in and they are isolated from their classmates as a result of their physical shortcomings. Though they are both made miserable by the situation, they are not united in their sadness. They are even alienated from one another.

Childhood / schooldays / difficulties of being young - Tich and Tubby's experience is one which is, unfortunately, shared by many schoolchildren. The other girls are cruel, albeit unwittingly. They want the best team members, but they don't consider the hurt caused by their behaviour.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Youth
- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue

Shall I compare thee? by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And Summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And oft' is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd:
But thy eternal Summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Analysis

In the opening line of this sonnet, Shakespeare asks if he should compare his loved one to a summer's day. The obvious answer would seem to be that he should, but in fact he does not. He goes on to say that his beloved is more lovely and more temperate (less extreme/milder) than such a beautiful day. This sets the tone for the first two quatrains (four lines) in which the poet explains why summer does not match up to his beloved. Note that the poet is speaking directly to his beloved in the sonnet. This adds a sense of intimacy to the poem.

The poet tells us that even in May, the buds can be shaken by 'rough winds'. He also points out that summer does not last long. It has 'all too short a date'. Sometimes the sun burns too brightly and it is too hot, and at other times the 'gold complexion' of the sun is 'dimm'd' or hidden by clouds. Everything that is fair or beautiful can fade, either by accident 'chance' or the changing seasons: 'nature's changing course'. The beauty of summer fades into autumn each year. For this reason, the poet does not want to compare his loved one to something so transient and imperfect as a summer's day. This is an

interesting reversal of the normal expectations which might be raised by the question the poet asks in the first line. We could reasonably expect the poet, having asked such a question, to justify why he might say that his beloved is every bit as lovely as a summer's day. But this is not the case. Instead, he holds the summer's day up to the harsh light of criticism, and finds it wanting – compared to the object of his affections. This shows us the strength of feeling Shakespeare has for his beloved. Normally, when a poet uses metaphors, similes or analogies, the purpose is to show how the subject of the poem matches up to the object to which they are compared. Here, it is the other way around. Such a reversal makes us sit up and take notice in a way we might not in a more clichéed praise of an adored object.

In the third quatrain, Shakespeare addresses his beloved again. He has told us why the summer cannot compare to his loved one, and now he explains why his beloved's beauty is more long-lasting. The use of the word 'But' signals this change in the poem. The poet says that the loved one's beauty will not fade or be forgotten because it will be immortalised in this poem. Even when his loved one dies, Death will not be able to boast that he has control now. Shakespeare's beloved will live on in the lines he has written and will not fade in death but will continue to grow because of his sonnet. The lines will be 'eternal' and in them the loveliness which Shakespeare treasures will be preserved for all time.

The sonnet ends with a couplet (two lines) in which Shakespeare makes the claim that as long as there are people on earth, his loved one's beauty will live. He says that the poem will live as long as there are people to read it, and because of that, his beloved will live on too and will be given eternal life by the sonnet. The repetition of the words 'So long' and 'this' in both lines emphasise the theme of the poem as well as giving a pleasing end to the sonnet.

A Shakespearean sonnet consists of fourteen lines, each containing ten syllables and written in iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter means that the poem has a fixed rhythm in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. This is repeated five times in each line, giving a total of ten syllables per line.

If we look at the final couplet of this sonnet, for example, we can see this rhythm clearly. I have underlined the stressed syllables only.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

The iambic pentameter makes the poem easier to remember, but also makes the sentiments expressed seem more definite and convincing than they might appear in a poem with a looser rhythm or rhyme-scheme.

Themes

Love:

The love expressed in this poem is simply, yet movingly expressed. The language is quite straightforward and each line is quite self-contained. This can be seen in the number of punctuation marks: most lines end with one.

The passing of time / fleeting nature of beauty:

This poem is about the transience of life and of beauty. As long as both are linked to physical beings, they will pass away. However, if they are captured in poetry, they can live forever.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Interesting imagery

Conquerors by Henry Treece

By sundown we came to a hidden village
Where all the air was still
And no sound met our tired ears, save
For the sorry drip of rain from blackened trees
And the melancholy song of swinging gates.

Then through a broken pane some of us saw
A dead bird in a rusting cage, still
Pressing his thin tattered breast against the bars,
His beak wide open. And
As we hurried through the weed-grown street,
A gaunt dog started up from some dark place
And shambled off on legs as thin as sticks

Into the wood, to die at least in peace.
No one had told us victory was like this;
Not one amongst us would have eaten bread
Before he'd filled the mouth of the grey child
That sprawled, stiff as stone, before the shattered door.
There was not one who did not think of home.

Notes:

The title of the poem brings to mind conquering heroes and parades in which the victors are cheered and hailed for their achievements. They have succeeded. They have won.

The poem opens almost mid-story, as if we have been hearing about the soldiers' journey: 'By sundown we came to a hidden village'. This creates a sense of immediacy as we are drawn straight into the narrative. As the village is 'hidden', readers may feel hopeful that it has escaped the ravages of war. However, this hope is soon dashed. The air is 'still', so there is no sign of life. The tone here is ominous. The imagery in this first stanza is bleak and mournful as the exhausted soldiers' 'tired ears' hear nothing but the 'sorry drip of rain from blackened trees' and the 'melancholy' creaking of swinging gates. Note the adjectives: 'still', 'tired', 'sorry', 'blackened' and 'melancholy'. All of these

contribute to an air of emptiness and loss. The fact that it is 'sundown' adds to the dreary feeling and the sense of things ending.

A good exercise at this stage in the poem is to underline the adjectives. Look at some of those in the second stanza: 'broken', dead', 'rusting', 'thin', 'tattered', 'weed-grown', 'gaunt' and 'dark'. It is easy to see how they convey an atmosphere of depression and despair. The bird in the cage is a metaphor for all of those innocents who are trapped by war, unable to escape. The bird dies with his 'thin tattered breast' pressed against the bars of the cage as his efforts to free himself came to nothing. His beak is wide open, which makes us think of both a cry for help and begging for food. There is no note of comfort here and we cannot believe death came quickly or easily. Similarly, the emaciated dog hiding 'in some dark place' is frightened enough by the sound of the approaching men to leave his hiding place and walk unsteadily into the woods where he can 'at least' die in peace. There is something very telling about the phrase 'die in peace'. It reminds us that the missing inhabitants of the town did not 'die in peace'. The juxtaposition of the words 'die' and 'peace' also highlights the fact that it is war that caused these deaths and that in times of peace no such horrors would have taken place. The fact that the deaths were horrific is driven home by the simple words 'at least'. If the dog can 'die at least in peace', he is luckier than his lost owners, and that is a dreadful thought.

The final stanza of the poem is the horror to which the other stanzas have been building. We learned of the dead bird, the dying dog, and now we are told of the 'grey child' who lies 'stiff as stone' before the 'shattered door' of his home. The soldiers are shocked. Victory should have been a time of glory and honour; they never thought it 'was like this'. The harsh reality of war has been revealed to them: in order for one side to win, the other must be conquered. Now the title of the poem comes to mind as we compare our original idea of conquerors to this dreadful scene. The speaker tells us that 'No one' had told the soldiers the true price of victory and that 'Not one' of them would have denied the child any food they had. The repetition in 'No one', 'not one' and the 'not one' in the final line drives home the speaker's message with great force. Each of the men, as he looks at the body of the child and the ruined, deserted village, thinks of his own home and how easily this situation could have been reversed, has his side not been the 'Conquerors'.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ War
- ✓ Seeing things from a different perspective

But You Didn't by Merrill Glass

Remember the time you lent me your car and I dented it?
I thought you'd kill me...
But you didn't.

Remember the time I forgot to tell you the dance was formal
and you came in jeans?
I thought you'd hate me...
But you didn't

Remember the times I'd flirt with other boys
just to make you jealous, and you were?
I thought you'd drop me...
But you didn't.

There were plenty of things you did to put up with me,
to keep me happy, to love me and there are so many things
I wanted to tell you when you returned from Vietnam...
But you didn't.

Analysis

The poem opens on a conversational note. The poet addresses the subject of the poem directly, which adds a sense of intimacy and makes us, the reader, feel as if we are listening in to a private chat between two lovers.

The first three stanzas begin with questions in which the poet asks her boyfriend if he remembers certain ordinary events in their lives and in their relationship. Through the use of these questions, Merrill Glass builds up a portrait of the unknown, unseen boy. He is portrayed as being tolerant, loyal and loving. He put up with his girlfriend when she crashed his car, forgot to tell him that the dress code for a dance was formal and he even loved her when she flirted with other boys to make him jealous. Nothing she did was truly terrible; all of it was relatively normal behaviour and indicative of the high spirits and naivety of youth. Still, much of it would have tried the patience of a less tolerant

boyfriend and we feel that the narrator in this poem was lucky to have someone who stayed with her and loved her despite her youthful indiscretions.

On closer reading of these first three stanzas, we can see words which hint at a darker side to the poem: 'kill' and 'hate'. It is only when we read the last stanza that the significance of these words is made clear. There are a number of other features of these first stanzas which also make sense to us when we learn that the young man didn't return from Vietnam, such as the use of the past tense and the ellipses (…) at the end of the sentences. Ellipses are used to indicate an omission: that something is missing or has been left out. On one level, we could interpret them to mean that the young man is missing, which of course he is, but on another level we could deduce that the poet herself left something out, as is also the case. She tells us that:

' there are so many things I wanted to tell you when you returned from Vietnam...'

Note the use of the present tense here in the word 'are'. The things remain unsaid because the poet's boyfriend was killed in the war and she never got the chance to tell him how much she loved him, presumably.

The ellipses also indicate melancholy longing and tell us that the poet is filled with regret for the things she never got to say to her lover. Her questions remain unanswered and the ellipses show that the sentences trail off into silence as the young man will never be able to respond to her again or discuss their shared history.

There is a strong contrast in this poem between the ordinary, everyday concerns of teens - driving, partying, flirting – and the fact that this particular young man died fighting a war overseas. By discussing the mundane matters, Merrill Glass focuses our attention on the sort of things the boy should have been doing and also makes us realise how shockingly and abruptly he and his girlfriend were drawn into the adult world. The girl's previous concerns now seem trivial, yet we feel that it would be more appropriate for her world to revolve around cars, clothes and flirting rather than her regret and sadness at the violent, untimely death of her boyfriend.

The language in this poem is simple and straightforward and reflects the narrator's youth. We would not expect a teenager to use overly complex language or imagery and the chatty, conversational tone is what we would expect of a young girl chatting casually but

affectionately with her boyfriend. The simplicity of the language also adds to the starkness of the message in the final lines. The repetition of 'But you didn't' at the end of the first three stanzas lulls us into a false sense of security as each time it is said, it is connected to a happy ending when the young man turned the narrator's expectations on their head by not being angry each time she did something wrong. The final time 'But you didn't' is used, therefore, is all the more shocking because the same line which had been used to highlight the boy's kindness, tolerance and love is now used to tell us that he is dead. Like the narrator, our expectations have been shattered, but there is no happiness here. In the first three stanzas the narrator tells us of times she acted badly but was forgiven by her boyfriend, but in the last stanza her only desire was to behave lovingly towards him, but she never got the chance. There is no complex imagery in this poem, nor is there the need for any.

Themes:

Regret: The poet is filled with sadness and regret because of all the things she never got a chance to tell her boyfriend. It makes us think about the fact that we never know what the future will hold and encourages us to seize the day, because tragedies happen and we may not get a chance to tell someone how much we love them.

The effect of war: Unlike the other poems you may have studied such as 'Base Details' and 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', 'But You Didn't' concentrates on the pain felt by those left behind when a soldier is killed overseas.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Love
- ✓ Death
- ✓ War
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Wishes or thoughts
- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue

Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Glossary

Ozymandias: the Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh (king) Rameses II, also known as Rameses the Great, who ruled from 1279 to 1213 BC.

antique land: an ancient land; Egypt

trunkless: having no torso or body

visage: face

pedestal: the base or support on which a statue rests

boundless: having no limit; immense; immeasurable

Analysis

'Ozymandias' is a sonnet: a fourteen line poem divided into an octet (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines).

The narrator says he met a traveller from an ancient land who told him a story. The rest of the poem consists of that tale.

The traveller describes the ruins of an enormous statue in the Egyptian desert. All that remains standing on the pedestal now are two enormous legs. The rest of the statue has fallen or crumbled away. On the sand nearby lies the statue's shattered head. The face is frowning and the lips curled slightly in the arrogant, contemptuous expression of a man who rules with 'cold command' and looks down on those less powerful than he. The facial expression shows that the sculptor knew what sort of man the pharaoh -or king -was and carved his likeness in such a way that his attitude lives on, 'stamped' or marked out on the lifeless stone.

The eighth line can be interpreted in different ways. 'Mocked' can mean imitated, so the phrase 'The hand that mocked them' may simply mean 'The sculptor's hands copied the king's attitude and carved it into the stone'. However, 'mocked' can also mean 'made fun of', so the sculptor could have deliberately made the statue look cruel and cold in a silent, subtle protest against a hated ruler. The second part of the line – 'the heart that fed' – can also be read two ways. It could be the king's heart feeding his passions and making him the man he was, or it could be the sculptor's passion being invested into or 'feeding' his work. There is no right and wrong here and the complexity of the line may make the poem more interesting to you as it offers alternative ways of thinking about the king and the sculptor.

In the sestet (last six lines), the focus shifts from the king's face to the words on the pedestal. They are, as one might expect from such a man, arrogant and haughty. The king gives his name – Ozymandias - and tells all other great men who look at his kingdom to despair as they can never equal his greatness. However, there is no kingdom around the statue any more. It has crumbled into nothingness and stone has returned to sand. The statue is a decaying wreck standing in the middle of an empty desert.

The setting is the Egyptian desert. This was home to one of the greatest early civilisations, but it is also one of the most lifeless places on earth. The poet describes Egypt as 'an antique land'. In other words, it has historical interest to him but no real place in the modern world. (Shelley was focusing on Egypt as a great kingdom in the era of the pharaohs compared to its place on the world stage in the 1800s.) The lifeless, barren desert is ideal for Shelley's comment on the passage of time and the fading of fame and glory. 'Nothing remains' of Ozymandias' kingdom. Around the 'colossal wreck' of his statue the 'lone and level sands stretch far away'. His attitude may be 'stamped on these lifeless things' but there is nothing to show for all his power and 'sneer of cold command'. Those who chance upon his ruined statue may well despair on reading his inscription on the pedestal, but not for the reasons he imagined when he commissioned it. Instead, they cannot help but be depressed to see that all things pass and the most famous and powerful of men are eventually reduced to nothing more than 'a shattered visage' sinking in the empty desert sands.

The most striking feature of the language in this poem is the contrast between the way Ozymandias wanted to be remembered and the way he is actually remembered. The language on the pedestal is ironic, given the present state of the kingdom, and Ozymandias is a symbol of the transience of political power.

Ozymandias thought his statue would be an everlasting testament to his power. He believed that those who saw it would look on his works 'and despair', no matter how powerful they were. The irony is that nothing of Ozymandias' achievements remains. Instead, the 'lone and level sands stretch far away' where once his kingdom stood. The harsh alliterative 'b' sounds in 'boundless and bare' in the second-last line of the poem emphasise the harshness and bleakness of the desert landscape. Ozymandias wanted to be remembered as 'king of kings', but the poet's choice of words to describe his statue indicate that he was deluding himself if he believed his name would live on. Shelley calls the statue 'vast and trunkless' with a 'shattered visage' lying nearby. It is 'lifeless' and 'Round the decay/Of that colossal wreck' the empty sands 'stretch far away'.

There is a sense of sadness and futility in this poem. Ozymandias believed himself to be a great king and commissioned a statue to say as much. However, all that remains is 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone' with 'a shattered visage' half sunk into the sand nearby. All that the king was is nothing.

The ending of the poem is solemn, quiet and bleak. The simple declaration, 'Nothing beside remains' at the start of the twelfth line contrasts sharply with Ozymandias' proud command in the previous lines. By beginning the short sentence with the word 'Nothing', Shelley focuses our attention on the utter emptiness of the desert and the king's arrogant boast. The bleakness and silence of the land around the 'decay/Of that colossal wreck' is captured in the long vowel sounds of the final line: 'The lone and level sands stretch far away'.

Themes:

Time: The poem deals with the passage of time and the insignificance of all our lives in the greater scheme of things, no matter how famous or rich or powerful we may be. In an era of instantly-created celebrities and in which almost anyone can have their two minutes of fame on the internet, we would do well to heed Shelley's warning. Everything passes. We may be remembered for the sort of person we were rather than what we achieved.

The most famous line in the poem is undoubtedly, 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!' There are three layers of meaning to this. First, when the king commissioned these words to be carved into the pedestal, he imagined other kings reading them and then raising their eyes to look in awestruck wonder and envy at his great kingdom. They would despair then because they could never hope to be as powerful as Ozymandias.

Secondly, we may reflect on how ironic Ozymandias' words seem now as there is no kingdom to see, only the 'lone and level sands' stretching into the distance. There is no reason now for anyone to despair or envy this long-dead king.

Finally, there is a note of warning in the line 'Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair'. The 'Mighty' of every generation would do well to look carefully on Ozymandias' works and see how everything comes to nothing in the end. That knowledge may well make them despair, but perhaps it may also make them reconsider doing whatever it takes to win power, glory and fame in the short term. Ozymandias is not portrayed as a likeable man in any sense of the word; his 'frown/And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command' tell of a ruler who thought little of his people and was disliked by them in turn. This,

ultimately, is his legacy. Shelley's message is that those who ruthlessly seek power at the expense of others should take note.

The power of art: This poem also shows that art outlives deeds. The statue of Ozymandias was carved by a sculptor who 'stamped on these lifeless things' the nature of the king. His 'frown/And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command' were captured by a man who 'well those passions read'. This testament to the king's nature, along with the words on the pedestal, form the basis of our judgement of him now.

Pride: Ozymandias could scarcely have believed that his name and his kingdom would be reduced to nothing. All that remains of him is 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone'. The head is 'Half sunk' in the desert sand and it depicts the face of an arrogant and cruel man whose 'sneer of cold command' shows how distant he was from his people in his lifetime. Despite Ozymandias' pride and certainty that all would be awestruck by his achievements, 'Nothing remains' of all that he established.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Time
- ✓ Art
- ✓ Pride
- ✓ Power
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue

Dulce et Decorum Est by Wilfred Owen

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.
Gas! Gas! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime . . .
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.
If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Glossary

The words 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' are from a Latin ode written by the poet Horace around two thousand years ago. The poem ends with the full saying: 'Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.' This means: 'It is sweet and right to die for your country.'

Flares – rockets which were sent up to burn brightly and light up any soldiers or other targets.

Distant rest – the exhausted soldiers were heading for a camp away from the front line where they would be allowed to rest for a few days.

Hoots – the noise made by shells flying overhead.

Outstripped – the men have managed to march beyond the reach of the shells which are now falling behind them.

Five-Nines – explosive shells

Gas – poison gas which destroys the lungs within seconds.

Helmets – gas masks.

Flound'ring – floundering. Stumbling and struggling to stay upright. This word is often used to describe somebody who is struggling to stay afloat in the water, so it ties in with the idea of the soldier drowning in the poison gas.

Lime – a chalky substance which burns flesh.

Panes – the glass part of the gas masks.

Guttering – gurgling and choking. Guttering is also used to refer to a dying candle flame as it flickers. Owen probably meant to evoke both images in his use of this word.

Cud – regurgitated grass chewed by cows. The green froth bubbling from the dying man's lips reminded Owen of the cud.

Zest – enthusiasm.

Ardent – very keen.

Background

Wilfred Owen wrote this poem as a response to the pro-war poetry that was popular before and during the First World War. He wanted people to read about the realities of war and to realise that it was not a noble and exciting game full of opportunities for honour and glory.

Wilfred Owen was killed in action just one week before WWI ended. He was twenty five years old.

Analysis

In the first stanza, Owen sets the scene. The soldiers are trudging wearily back to camp where they may get a brief rest from the horrors of the front line. The soldiers, although they are young, are 'Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,/Knock-kneed, coughing like hags'. This image is in sharp contrast to what many people at the time would have associated with fighting men. There is no glamour or glory in Owen's description: some soldiers are barefoot, all are exhausted and lame as they stumble towards their 'distant rest'. Behind them, shells fall, but the men are deaf to the sound, so focused are they on getting to the camp.

The broad vowel sounds and the alliteration ensure that the pace of this first stanza is slow, reflecting the pace of the weary men who are 'Drunk with fatigue'.

In the first stanza, Owen tells us that 'Men marched asleep'. In the second staza they are awoken, but it is to a living nightmare. The soldiers are attacked with poison gas and they suddenly spring into action. The capital letters and the exclamation marks add to the sense of urgency: 'Gas! GAS!'. The use of internal rhyme in this stanza: 'fumbling', 'clumsy' and 'stumbling' focuses our attention on the men's awkward movements. In their desperate haste to put on the gas masks, the men are clumsy. In this 'ecstasy of fumbling' one soldier does not get his mask on in time. Helplessly, Owen watches as the man stumbles and chokes on the poison gas. Owen is watching through the glass eyepiece of his own gas mask and it appears to him as if the other man is drowning 'under a green sea'. This simile, in which Owen compares the clouds of green gas to a green sea, is a powerful one. It adds a sense of unreality to the scene, almost as if Owen momentarily cannot take in the reality of what he is seeing. A man is dying in front of his eyes and he can do nothing but watch.

The third stanza is only two lines long but it is no less powerful for that. The dreamlike, unreal quality of the last stanza is continued here when Owen tells us that his dreams are haunted by the image of the dying man he could not save.

The imagery in the fourth stanza is chilling and horrific. The dying man is 'flung' into a wagon as he can no longer walk. The word 'flung' shows how cheap life has become and how there is no dignity afforded to the dying. This is understandable, of course, as the soldiers can do next to nothing to help their comrade. He is just another victim of the senseless waste of life that marked WorldWar One. There is little time for compassion.

As Owen paces behind the wagon, he sees the soldier's death throes. The man is writhing in agony, and every jolt of the wagon brings blood bubbling up from his ruined lungs.

Owen addresses the reader directly in this stanza, saying that if those who read his words could see the appalling reality of war, they would not be so quick to tell children 'the old Lie' that dying for your country is a sweet and noble end. There is nothing sweet or right about a man choking slowly to death in the back of a wagon.

Theme:

The horror and futility of war

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ War
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Interesting imagery

W. B. Yeats – Brief Biography

Born in Dublin in 1865, William Butler Yeats was the son of a well-known Irish painter, John Butler Yeats. He spent his childhood in County Sligo, where his parents were raised, and in London. He returned to Dublin at the age of fifteen to continue his education and study painting, but quickly discovered he preferred poetry. Born into the Anglo-Irish landowning class, Yeats became involved with the Celtic Revival, a movement against the cultural influences of English rule in Ireland during the Victorian period, which sought to promote the spirit of Ireland's native heritage. Though Yeats never learned Gaelic himself, his writing at the turn of the century drew extensively from sources in Irish mythology and folklore. Also a potent influence on his poetry was the Irish revolutionary Maud Gonne, whom he met in 1889, a woman equally famous for her passionate nationalist politics and her beauty. Though she married another man in 1903 and grew apart from Yeats (and Yeats himself was eventually married to another woman, Georgie Hyde Lees), she remained a powerful figure in his poetry.

Yeats was deeply involved in politics in Ireland, and in the twenties, despite Irish independence from England, his verse reflected a pessimism about the political situation in his country and the rest of Europe. He had a life-long interest in mysticism and the occult, which was off-putting to some readers, and his poetry continued to grow stronger as he grew older. Appointed a senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, he is remembered as an important cultural leader, as a major playwright (he was one of the founders of the famous Abbey Theatre in Dublin), and as one of the very greatest poets—in any language—of the century. W. B. Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1923 and died in 1939 at the age of 73.

Source: www.poets.org

The Lake Isle of Innisfree by W.B. Yeats

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a-glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

Glossary

Wattles – Wooden poles, intertwined with thin branches to form a wall or roof.

Glimmer – flicker of light (here used to mean the twinkle of stars).

Linnet – a small song bird, once commonly kept as a cage bird because of its beautiful singing.

Background

Yeats wrote this poem in 1888 when he was a young man, living in London. He was lonely and homesick for Ireland at the time. Looking in a shop window, he saw a toy fountain and the sound of the water reminded him of lake water. Inspired by this, he wrote 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'.

Analysis

Stanza One

The poem opens very formally with the words 'I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree.' It has been pointed out that these words echo those of the prodigal son in the Bible when he says, 'I will arise and go to my father.' These biblical overtones reinforce the idea of Innisfree being an almost holy place and bring to mind the prodigal son's sense of relief when he resolved to leave his chaotic, unhappy life and return to his childhood home – a place of serenity and simplicity.

The poet goes on to describe the life he will lead on the island. He will be completely self-sufficient, having 'nine bean rows' and 'a hive for the honey-bee'. The poet's vision is of a romantic, idyllic, timeless way of life. Yeats imagines living in peace and solitude; he says he will 'live alone in the bee-loud glade.' The only sounds will be of nature. It seems that Yeats is rejecting the hustle and bustle of the modern world. The details in the poem give it a timeless quality; there is no hint of the modern world in Yeats' vision.

Stanza Two

In this stanza, Yeats becomes so involved with the idea of this peaceful paradise that the future tense is abandoned and he uses the present tense instead. It is almost as if, by thinking and writing about Inisfree, he imagines himself there at that moment. He tells us that 'peace comes dropping slow,' and 'midnight's all a glimmer'. He moves through each stage of the day, bringing his vision to life for us with his vivid descriptions and beautiful imagery. In the morning, the mist is like veils thrown over the lake; at noon, the purple heather blazes under the sun; the evening is full of the whirr of the linnet's wings (the linnet is a small songbird) and at night, the stars fill the sky: 'midnight's all a glimmer'. The sounds in this stanza are soft and slow, creating a sense of peace and calm.

Stanza Three

Yeats brings us back to the opening lines in this stanza, beginning again with the words 'I will arise and go'. The solemnity is reinforced and emphasised by this repetition, as is the strength of his longing. The alliteration and assonance in the line, 'I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;' emphasise the tranquillity of the scene Yeats is describing. The broad vowels in this line slow the movement of the poem. In contrast to

this timeless, magical, colourful place, we are reminded of Yeats' reality at the time of writing: 'While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey'. The colourless grey of the pavements seems dreary and depressing and we can empathise with Yeats' yearning for the lake isle of Innisfree, a yearning he feels in 'the deep heart's core.' The last line is monosyllabic, which drives home the simple strength of the message.

Themes

The poet's discontent, which leads him to imagine this perfect place.

A longing to go back to nature and live a self-sufficient life.

The search for peace, wisdom and truth.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Wishes or thoughts
- ✓ An interesting place
- ✓ Sound effects or musical qualities
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ A poem which captures the imagination
- ✓ Interesting imagery

The Wild Swans at Coole by W. B. Yeats

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty Swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool

Delight men's eyes when I awake some day

To find they have flown away?

Background

Yeats wrote this poem in 1916, when he was fifty one years of age. Coole Park, in Co. Galway was the home of Lady Augusta Gregory, Yeats' friend and patron. (Patron – a wealthy or influential supporter of an artist or writer.) In the poem, he reflects on how his life has changed since he was a younger man and walked 'with a lighter tread'.

In 1916, Yeats' love, Maud Gonne was widowed. Her husband, Major John McBride, had been executed by the British for his part in the Easter Rising. Maud Gonne went to France to work as a nurse with the war wounded, and Yeats followed her, to propose marriage once again. Once again she refused. In 1917, Yeats married Georgiana Hyde-Lees and moved into Thoor Ballylee, a house near Coole Park.

Analysis

Stanza One

Yeats begins the poem by describing the beauty of Coole Park in the autumn. Details, such as the brimming water and the dry woodland paths bring this peaceful scene to life. The brimming water of the lake contrasts with the dry paths. It is as if the lake and its occupants represent life and growth, while the land – where Yeats stands – is barren. Autumn is linked with slowing down and dying. Does Yeats feel that, at fifty one, he is reaching the autumn years of his life? The swans are counted; there are 'nine-and-fifty' of them. Swans mate for life, so why is there an odd number? Is one of them, like Yeats, alone? The repeated 'm', 's' and 'l' sounds in this stanza emphasise the sense of peace and quiet. The tone of this stanza is quite detached. The descriptions are given without any obvious emotion.

Stanza Two

In the second stanza, Yeats becomes far more personal as he recalls that it is nineteen years since he first counted these swans. Although logic tells us that these are unlikely to be the same swans, we suspend disbelief and accept that this is just an artistic construct. Suddenly, before Yeats can finish his counting, all the swans rise into the air. The run-on lines suggest movement and reflect the swans' flight. The onomatopoeic word 'clamorous' effectively captures the clapping and beating of the swans' wings as they oar into the air. They form a ring – a symbol of eternity – and perhaps this reminds Yeats that

while he might change, the swans remain the same, and even make identical patterns in the sky every year.

Stanza Three

The poet reflects how everything in his life has changed since he first looked at the swans on this lake. He is not as young or as carefree as he was when he 'Trod with a lighter tread'. His 'heart is sore' as he thinks of the loss of his youth and of his failed romances. The description of the swans' wings in flight, 'The bell-beat of their wings' is particularly effective here. The alliteration in 'bell-beat' captures and reinforces the steady beat of the birds' huge wings as they fly above his head.

Stanza Four

There is a note of envy in the fourth stanza as Yeats watches the bird 'Unwearied still, lover by lover,' paddling together in the 'Companionable streams'. The streams may be cold, but the swans have one another. They are united, and time does not seem to touch them. 'Their hearts have not grown old'. Wherever they go, 'Passion or conquest' are with them. This seems to be in contrast to Yeats' own life. He implies that he is old and tired and heartbroken. The swans can swim in the 'brimming' water and fly in the air, but Yeats is limited to the dry woodland paths.

Stanza Five

The poem ends with Yeats wondering where the swans will go next to 'Delight men's eyes'. Perhaps he means that they, unchanged, will continue to bring pleasure to others who stand as he does now, watching them glide once more on the still water. The poem is set in autumn, and winter will inevitably follow, for the poet. The swans seem untouched by everything and will continue to 'drift on the still water'. Yeats may be thinking of his creative life or his love life, or both, when he reflects on the changes that time has wrought. The swans are unchanging, content, almost immortal. He is none of these things.

Theme: The passage of time and the loss of youth, creative vision and love.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Old age
- ✓ A poem which captures the imagination
- ✓ Sound effects or musical qualities
- ✓ Interesting imagery
- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue (see 'Theme')

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death by W. B. Yeats

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Background

The Irish airman in this poem is Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son. He was one of many Irishmen who fought and died for Britain in the First World War. He was shot down and killed while in Northern Italy. He was thirty seven years of age.

Yeats saw Gregory as a Renaissance man - a soldier, an artist, a horseman, a hunter, an educated aristocrat – and he admired him greatly. His death affected Yeats profoundly, and he wrote several poems for him.

Summary and analysis

This poem is an elegy in memory of Robert Gregory, who was killed during the First World War, but it is also more than that. It explores the state of mind of men who volunteered, as Gregory did, to fight in that war and examines their motivation.

The poem is structured unusually, in that it is the dead man himself who is speaking to us. Typically, an elegy would mourn the loss of the subject of the poem and list his good qualities, but this poem is different. The tone is not one of sorrow so much as fatalism. (Fatalism = acceptance that events are predetermined by fate and, therefore, unchangeable. What will happen will happen.) The speaker is aware that he will die, yet chooses to fight, regardless of the fact. This fatalism is obvious from the opening lines:

> I know that I shall meet my fate
> Somewhere in the clouds above;

The airman goes on to say that he is not motivated to fight by love of his fellow countrymen or hatred of the enemy. The tone is bleak, with no sense of passion. He has chosen to go to his death for reasons other than patriotism. There is no sense that he even supports the war effort. He feels it will not make any difference to his fellow countrymen:

No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.

In lines nine and ten, the airman makes it clear that he was not forced to fight, nor did he feel he had a duty to do so. It wasn't the 'cheering crowds' which carried him away; he was not swept up in the emotion of the enlistment meetings. There is a sense of cynicism in the mention of the 'public men' and the 'cheering crowds'. He has seen the realities of war and is not impressed or moved by politicians or public opinion. The repeated negatives 'nor – nor' emphasise the deliberate nature of his choice. He knows the reasons others may have chosen to fight, but they were not his reasons. His decision was a rational, calm one. He chose to go to war, knowing that by doing so, he had chosen his fate. He thought about it logically and intelligently: 'I balanced all, brought all to mind,' and made his decision. The balance of this line and the following two mirrors the balanced decision. He looked with detachment at his life to date, and at the possible future. His disenchantment with both is obvious:

> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind...

In contrast, the 'tumult in the clouds' seemed to Gregory to be an adventure, an 'impulse of delight'. Ironically, it seems that he only felt truly alive when flying towards his inevitable death. The repetition of the words 'waste of breath' emphasises Gregory's contempt for the

dull security of life at home. He would rather die a heroic death than stay safely on his estate.

Is there a sense in which the poet and the airman are alike? Both are driven by a passion for a different way of life. Both are solitary figures. The difference is that the airman chooses a life of action, of adventure.

Theme

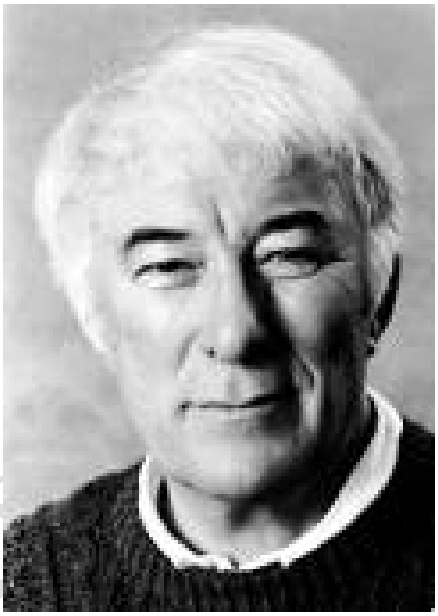
Some see this poem as a championing of war and risk-taking; others see it as an exploration of the motivation and psychological state of those who chose to fight in the war. They were not conscripted, and they did not have any great patriotic feelings. So why did they fight and die for a country they did not love against an enemy they did not hate? Yeats seems to say that it is the excitement, the thrill of the 'tumult' which led to so many Anglo-Irishmen losing their lives during the war. The impulse which drove them was a 'lonely' one. They were doing this for themselves, not for anyone else.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ War
- ✓ Death
- ✓ Loneliness
- ✓ Wishes / Thoughts / Feelings

Seamus Heaney – Brief Biography

Seamus Justin Heaney was born on April 13, 1939, on a farm in the Castledawson, County Derry the first of nine children in a Catholic family. He received a scholarship to attend the boarding school St. Columb's College in Derry and went on to Queens University in Belfast, studying English and graduating in 1961.



Heaney worked as a schoolteacher for a time before becoming a college lecturer and eventually working as a freelance scribe by the early '70s. In 1965, he married Marie Devlin, a fellow writer who would figure prominently in Heaney's work. The couple went on to have three children.

Seamus Heaney had his poetry collection debut in 1966 with *Death of a Naturalist*, and went on to publish many more lauded books of poems that included *North* (1974), *Station Island* (1984), *The Spirit Level* (1996) and *District and Circle* (2006). Over the years, he also became known for his prose writing and work as an editor, as well as serving as a professor at Harvard and Oxford universities.

Heaney's work is often a paean (a creative work expressing enthusiastic praise) to the beauty and depth of nature, and he achieved great popularity among both general readers and the literary establishment, garnering a massive following. He wrote eloquently about love, mythology, memory (particularly on his own rural upbringing) and various forms of human relationships.

Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1995 and later received England's T.S. Eliot and David Cohen prizes, among a wide array of accolades. He was known for his speaking engagements as well, and, as such, travelled across the world to share his art and ideas.

Heaney published his last book of poetry, *Human Chain*, in 2010. He died in Dublin on August 30, 2013, at the age of 74.

Source: www.biography.com

When all the others were away at Mass

When all the others were away at Mass

I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.

They broke the silence, let fall one by one

Like solder weeping off the soldering iron:

Cold comforts set between us, things to share

Gleaming in a bucket of clean water.

And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes

From each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside

Went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying

And some were responding and some crying

I remembered her head bent towards my head,

Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives–

Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Background:

This is a sonnet from Heaney's 'The Haw Lantern' collection, published in 1987. It is the third in a series of eight sonnets Heaney wrote in memory of his mother, Margaret Kathleeen Heaney. The series of sonnets is called 'Clearances in memoriam M.K.H., 1911 – 1984'.

Notes:

The octet (eight lines) describes Heaney's childhood. We are brought straight into a comfortable, familiar, domestic setting. The young Heaney and his mother are sitting at the kitchen table, engaged in the routine task of peeling potatoes. The imagery here is unsentimental and realistic but still powerful. Mother and son work in silence broken

only by the splashing of peeled potatoes as they fall into the bucket of water. The potatoes falling are like molten metal falling from a soldering iron. A soldering iron joins things together and creates an incredibly strong bond, just as the mother and son are joined by their shared work. The simile which compares the falling potatoes to 'solder weeping off the soldering iron' foreshadows the weeping that will take place around the poet's mother's deathbed.

There is no need for talk because the other and son are lost in a companionable silence which is only interrupted by the 'Little pleasant splashes' of the potatoes falling into the bucket. The word 'pleasant' expresses the sense of contentment without being overly sentimental.

In the sestet (six lines), the companionable silence is gone. In its place we have the noise of the priest who goes 'hammer and tongs' at the prayers for the dying. Those gathered around the dying woman's bedside either respond to the prayers or weep.

Heaney distances himself from those around the deathbed and remembers a time when he was closest to his mother. The word 'our' was used in the last line of the octet and it is used twice in the final lines of the sestet, emphasising the bond between the poet and his mother, as if they are the only two people who matter. The rest of the family seem distanced somehow by being referred to as 'the others' or the 'some' who cry and pray at the bedside. At the moment of his mother's death, the poet's grief brings him to a time and place when he and she were alone together and were never closer.

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Death
- ✓ Love
- ✓ Childhood and growing up
- ✓ Comparison between this poem and Patrick Kavanagh's 'In Memory of My Mother'

Mid-Term Break

I sat all morning in the college sick bay
Counting bells knelling classes to a close.
At two o'clock our neighbours drove me home.

In the porch I met my father crying -
He had always taken funerals in his stride -
And Big Jim Evans saying it was a hard blow.

The baby cooed and laughed and rocked the pram
When I came in, and I was embarrassed
By old men standing up to shake my hand

And tell me they were "sorry for my trouble,"
Whispers informed strangers I was the eldest,
Away at school, as my mother held my hand

In hers and coughed out angry tearless sighs.
At ten o'clock the ambulance arrived
With the corpse, stanched and bandaged by the nurses.

Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
For the first time in six weeks. Paler now,

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.

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Glossary

Sick bay – a place in schools (usually in boarding schools) where those students who are suffering from minor ailments can be treated.

Knelling – this describes the slow, solemn ringing of a bell, usually for funerals.

Stanched – any bleeding has been stopped.

Background

This poem is about a real event in Heaney's childhood. When he was away in boarding school in Derry, his younger brother Christopher was killed in a road accident.

Stanza One

The poem opens with the image of the boy sitting in the schoolsick-bay, waiting to be brought home by his neighbours. At this stage we do not know why he is being taken out of school and on first reading the poem we may be misled by the title and the opening lines. After all, mid-term break is something most students look forward to, a welcome break from classes and schoolwork. However, the sombre tone of this stanza is our first indication that the subject of the poem may be more serious than we first supposed.We may also wonder why the boy's neighbours and not his parents are bringing him home.

Young Heaney has nothing to do but sit and wait, and note the passing of time as bells ring 'classes to a close'. The school bells are described as 'knelling', a word more usually associated with church bells ringing at a funeral. We can easily imagine how difficult it must have been for the boy to wait alone, and the fact that the passing of time is mentioned, as well as the exact time – two o'clock – that he was taken home shows how interminably long the wait must have seemed.

Stanzas Two to Five

We realise immediately that something dreadful has happened. The boy meets his f father crying in the porch, he who had 'always taken funerals in his stride'. In the pram, Heaney's baby sister laughs and coos, unaware of the tragedy that hasbefallen the family. This brief description of carefree happiness contrasts starkly with the terrible sadness in the rest of the poem.

The poet is still only a boy himself and he is embarrassed to be treated like a man by the neighbours who condole with him and whisper to strangers that he is 'the eldest/Away at school'. This tragedy marks a transition from child to adult for the boy. His mother is too shocked to cry and instead coughs out 'angry tearless sighs' as she holds his hand for support. The parents' vulnerability in their time of grief means that young Heaney must grow up quickly and assume a more adult role in the family.

The ambulance arrives with 'the corpse'. If we are reading the poem for the first time, we still do not know who has died.

Stanzas Six and Seven

Next morning, the poet goes up to the room where the corpse of his little brother is laid out. The images of the 'Snowdrops/and candles' around the bedside, and the use of the word 'soothe' create a calm, peaceful mood.

The bruise on the little boy's temple is compared to a flower: 'a poppy bruise' and it contrasts with the white of the snowdrops.

In heartbreakingly simple words, Heaney describes his dead brother lying in his coffin 'as if in a cot'. We are reminded of the contrast between the small, still body in the coffin and his baby sister who 'rocked the pram'.

In the last line, we discover the age of the dead boy. He was only four when he was knocked down and killed. The last two lines are the only lines of the poem in which we find full rhyme. This brings a sense of closure to the poem, reinforcing the end of the small boy's life.

Themes: Death, particularly sudden or tragic death

Growing up

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ A poem which deals with an important issue
- ✓ A poem I would recommend
- ✓ Death

The Early Purges

I was six when I first saw kittens drown.
Dan Taggart pitched them, 'the scraggy wee shits',
Into a bucket; a frail metal sound,

Soft paws scraping like mad. But their tiny din
Was soon soused. They were slung on the snout
Of the pump and the water pumped in.

'Sure, isn't it better for them now?' Dan said.
Like wet gloves they bobbed and shone till he sluiced
Them out on the dunghill, glossy and dead.

Suddenly frightened, for days I sadly hung
Round the yard, watching the three sogged remains
Turn mealy and crisp as old summer dung

Until I forgot them. But the fear came back
When Dan trapped big rats, snared rabbits, shot crows
Or, with a sickening tug, pulled old hens' necks.

Still, living displaces false sentiments
And now, when shrill pups are prodded to drown
I just shrug, 'Bloody pups'. It makes sense:

'Prevention of cruelty' talk cuts ice in town
Where they consider death unnatural
But on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.

Analysis:

Early Purges' is a difficult poem to read, but its powerful imagery means that it is a poem which stays with the reader even though, or because, the subject matter is so upestting.

'Early Purges' tells us of the young Heaney's first experience of the killing of unwanted baby animals on his family's farm. A litter of kittens is placed in a metal bucket and drowned.

The title of the poem captures our attention immediately. To 'purge' something is to get rid of it because it is unwanted and the word 'early' suggests that this purge is taking place sooner than it should. It could also be a way of saying that this event happened early in the poet's life and that it was the first step in his being purged of sentimental feelings which have no place on a farm.

The opening line of the poem is deliberately shocking yet compelling. We are told that not only was the poet merely six years of age when he saw kittens drowned, but that this was only the 'first' time. The implication is that this was just one in a long list of purges he witnessed on the farm.

The description of the drowning is very upsetting. Dan Taggart's language when he refers to the kittens as 'scraggy wee shits' is callous and unpleasant and shows his lack of any sentiment towards creatures that would widely be regarded as rather sweet. That he should use such language in front of a little boy again shows us how harsh life on the farm is. There is no room for consideration of finer feelings. The fact that the farm hand is named and his words given to us as direct speech adds to the reality of the scene and also shows us how much of an impact it had on the little boy as he remembers every detail even after all these years. The other possible effect of putting Dan Taggert's words in inverted commas is to distance the boy from the older man's opinion. These are his words, not the young Heaney's.

What makes the description of death in 'Early Purges' most distressing is that, unlike 'Mid-Term Break', this is no accident. The suffering is deliberately caused by adults. Dan Taggart is merely a representative of those who believe that 'on well-run farms pests have to be kept down'. The verbs 'pitched', 'slung' and 'pumped' show us the deliberate nature of the act and the lack of care with which the kittens are handled from start to finish. The description of the kittens' 'soft paws scraping like mad' to escape the bucket,

and their 'tiny din' which is 'soon soused' by the flow of water is very upsetting but also very haunting. The kittens' helplessness is emphasised by the word 'frail' when describing the sound they made as they hit the metal bucket.

In the third stanza, Dan Taggart speaks again, this time making the extraordinary claim that it is 'better' for the kittens to have been killed so young. This once again draws our attention to the harsh realities of life on the farm: the kittens are not likely to be fed or cared for when they leave their mother and have to fend for themselves as adult cats, so Dan Taggart believes that he has spared them greater suffering down the line.

The kittens' bodies are throw on the dung heap, showing that in death – as in life – they are treated with no respect whatsoever. They are merely waste matter. The little animals are both 'glossy' and 'dead' as they lie on the heap. This juxtaposition of words is interesting: normally when we think of an animal being glossy it is because its coat is shining with health but in this case the kittens are only glossy because their fur is soaked through.

In the fourth and fifth stanza, we learn of the emotional impact this killing has had on the young boy. He is frightened because he realises now how quickly life can be extinguished and how helpless young creatures are in the face of casual and callous violence from the adult world. He is only six, so he is likely to feel vulnerable and scared on facing such an unpleasant truth. He watches the kittens' bodies in the days that follow until they dry up and blend in with the rest of the manure on the heap. However, his fear returns each time Dan Taggart disposes of other 'pests' on the farm. He sees now that anything that does not serve a useful purpose is killed off quickly and brutally. Even the old hens who are no longer laying have their necks pulled with 'a sickening tug'. Life on the farm is harsh.

The sixth stanza begins with the word 'still', which indicates a change of mood. The poet is a grown man now and he has come to understand that 'false sentiments' are replaced

by the no-nonsense approach to the running of a farm. Now he seems to share Dan Taggart's views and is unmoved by the drowning of puppies. His description of them as 'Bloody pups' echoes Dan Taggart's coarse language in the opening stanza. Death, the poet says, is a natural part of life and his scorn for those who talk about 'Prevention of cruelty' is shown in his putting that phrase inside inverted commas.

However, although the poet may claim to now ally himself with those who think sentiment has no place on a farm, there is something about the language in the final stanzas that says this is not really how he feels. His use of clichéd phrases such as 'cuts ice' and 'pests have to be kept down' seems to be more like a repetition of stock phrases he has learned from others over the years rather than his own views. These lines lack the power and emotion of those in the earlier stanzas when the poet describes the fear he felt at the drowning of the kittens and the disposal of the other 'pests'. Also, the fact that he wrote this poem so many years after the event and was able to recall the details with such clarity proves that it had a lasting impact on him.

Themes:

Childhood

Loss of Innocence

Death

This poem could be used to answer a question on:

- ✓ Death
- ✓ Childhood
- ✓ Growing up
- ✓ An experience which had a lasting effect on the poet

Don't Forget...

- You are always asked to give the name of the poem(s) and the name of the poet.

- It looks very bad if you spell the name of the poet or the poem incorrectly. There is really no excuse whatsoever for doing this.

- If there are two questions, you only need to give the name of the poet and the poem in the first question.

- Always check the marks allotted to each part of each question. These can vary.

- You will almost certainly be asked to comment on the language used in the poem. Even if you are not overtly asked to do so, it would be appropriate to devote at least one paragraph of your answer to the language, or mention it in each point if possible.

- Learn and use your key literary terms.

- You cannot use the unseen poem as your studied poem. However, examiners are well aware of the poems frequently chosen for study in the Junior Cycle, so are unlikely to choose one of those as an unseen poem. If it should happen that the unseen poem is one you have studied, then you must choose another poem to use in your Studied Poetry answer.