

Sample Answer – Favourite Poet

2002. From the poetry you have studied choose the poet you liked best of all. Explain why you liked this poet's work and support your answer by reference to his/her poetry. (30)

Note: This question requires you to know two or more poems by your chosen poet. The questions might be on the same theme – death in Heaney's 'Mid-Term Break' and 'The Early Purges' – or they might be linked because of the poet's use of powerful imagery, for example. Remember, you must have a **thesis** here. Why do you like this poet? List the reasons and link each one to a poem or poems. This will help you to organise your answer.

Plan:

1. Poet: Heaney. Poems: MTB and TEP (*Keep your plan as brief as possible. It only has to make sense to you. Don't waste time on a neat plan or full sentences.*)
Like – personal, sincere & powerful imagery
2. MTB - Death of brother – moving. Relate to his age, school etc.
3. Family's distress – parents vulnerable
4. Reality of death dawning – sees brother – tender and touching
5. Like MTB, boy has to grow up fast (Link)
6. TEP – much more graphic – upsetting
7. Death in this case is deliberately caused. No accident.
8. In both poems, boy has had to face harsh realities.

Sample Answer:

The poet whose work I like best is undoubtedly Seamus Heaney. I enjoy his poetry because he deals with difficult themes such as death and loss in a sincere way, using language that is both rich in imagery and at the same time accessible and easy for me to understand.

This is your thesis statement and outlines your reasons for linking Seamus Heaney's poetry.

The poem which made the strongest impression on me was undoubtedly 'Mid-Term Break'. The title of the poem and the setting of the opening lines

You should deal with the poet's style as well as the theme of his poems.

in a school helped me to identify with the boy the poem. The ominous, funereal word 'knelling' to describe the ringing of the school bell struck a chilling note and made me empathise with the young Heaney sitting alone 'all morning', waiting to be brought home. I could imagine clearly how

agonising this wait must have been and how the time must have dragged. The harsh alliteration at the end of the line when Heaney talks of the bell 'knelling classes to a close' emphasises the misery he must have felt as time wore on.

The description of the scene when the poet arrives home is no less affecting. His father, a man who 'had always taken funerals in his stride' is in tears; and his mother's impotent anger at the loss of her little boy is effectively captured with the use of adjectives to describe her frustration: 'angry tearless sighs'. Neighbours treat the poet like an adult, and all of these role reversals in his home must add to the sense of unreality and wrongness associated with Heaney's brother's untimely death. The language here is simple but no less powerful for that. I can imagine how lonely and isolated Heaney must have felt in a situation in which those from whom he would normally seek comfort were in need of comfort themselves.

Personal response is essential when answering a question like this.

It is the final section of the poem which invariably moves me the most. Finally, the poet goes to see his little brother's corpse. As at the start of the poem, he is alone. The whiteness of his dead brother's face: 'paler now' and the snowdrops in the room contrast

with the vivid red of the 'poppy bruise on his left temple'. It is the final two lines of the poem which I – and I think everyone who has read the poem – remember most clearly. We finally learn that the little boy was knocked down by a car, and we hear how heartbreakingly young he was.

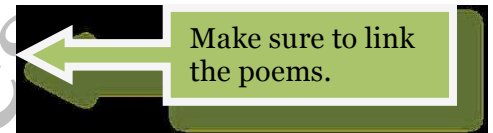
'No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.

A four foot box, a foot for every year.'

That these last, unforgettable lines are the only ones in which we find full rhyme brings a sense of closure to the poem, reinforcing the end of this small boy's life.

The second of Heaney's poems which I have chosen also deals with death, and it too shows how harsh realities can shape our attitudes and force us to grow up quickly. Like

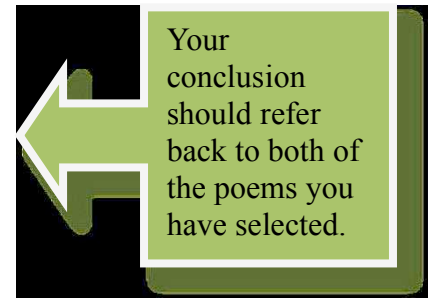
'Mid-Term Break', 'Early Purges' is a difficult poem to read, but its powerful imagery means it has stayed with me when I have struggled to remember other poems I have studied.



'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. If this sounds harsh, it is nothing compared to the graphic description of it in the poem. 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.

What made 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'. His callous words in describing the newborn kittens as 'scraggy wee shits' adds to the emotional impact of the poem. I noticed, however, that Heaney distances himself from Dan Taggart's opinion by placing his description of the kittens in quotation marks. This distancing struck me as I read the later part of the poem in which the poet appears to ally himself with those who think the killing of young animals is a purely practical matter. Heaney may claim to have nothing in common with the 'false sentiments' of city people who decry animal cruelty, but his writing of this poem so long after the event proves that it has had an emotional impact on him.

Although neither poem is comfortable reading, both 'Mid-Term Break' and 'The Early Purges' made a deep and lasting impression on me and showed me the power poetry can have to recreate intensely personal experiences and the harsh realities of growing up.



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