

Unseen Poetry – 2008 ‘There Came A Day’ by Ted Hughes

There came a day that caught the summer
Wrung its neck
Plucked it
And ate it.

Now what shall I do with the trees?
The day said, the day said.
Strip them bare, strip them bare.
Let's see what is really there.

And what shall I do with the sun?
The day said, the day said.
Roll him away till he's cold and small.
He'll come back rested if he comes back at all.

And what shall I do with the birds?
The day said, the day said.
The birds I've frightened, let them flit,
I'll hang out pork for the brave tomtit.

And what shall I do with the seed?
The day said, the day said.
Bury it deep, see what it's worth.
See if it can stand the earth.

What shall I do with the people?
The day said, the day said.
Stuff them with apple and blackberry pie –
They'll love me then till the day they die.

There came this day and he was autumn.
His mouth was wide
And red as a sunset.
His tail was an icicle.



Answer (a), (b) and (c) below.

- (a) At what time of year is this poem set? Give a reason for your answer. (5)
- (b) This poem has some striking images. Choose two images which appeal to you and explain why you think they are effective. Refer to the poem in support of your answer. (10)
- (c) Choose any other feature of the poem (apart from imagery) which appealed to you and explain why it appealed to you. You might consider one of the following: the language, the structure, the mood, the tone etc. (15)

Notes, plan and sample answer

- (a) At what time of year is this poem set? Give a reason for your answer. (5)

Notes:

The most important thing you should note here is that this question is worth **five marks only**. Therefore, a short, simple answer will suffice. One paragraph in which you make your point, develop it and support it with a few short quotations from the poem will suffice. Don't waste too much time here. You are asked to give 'a reason' for your answer but this does not mean that you should only have one piece of evidence from the poem.

NB!

The sample answer on the following page is only five sentences long, yet it contains all you need to get a high grade. It makes the point, moves quickly through the poem and sums up evidence to support the point. Short quotes are used and they are a part of each sentence rather than standing on their own, unexplained.

Plan: *(As always, if I were writing this plan in the exam, it would be a couple of hastily-scribbled abbreviations that would make sense only to me! This applies to all the plans for all the sample answers.)*

- Summer killed, bare trees, sun rolled away, birds gone, fruit harvest, colour red like leaves on trees.



Sample Answer:



This is my point.

Note the way short quotes are woven into the fabric of the sentences.

I believe this poem is set at the start of autumn. We learn that at

this time, summer ends, the trees lose their leaves, the sun's

warmth ebbs as it is rolled away 'until he's cold and

small', the birds leave, seeds are buried deep in the earth

and the fruits ripen and are harvested. The final stanza

tells us directly what season it is: 'There came this day

and he was autumn'. Autumn is **personified** as a creature with a red mouth, which makes me think of the red leaves on trees at the start of autumn. For these reasons, I believe the poem is set in early September.

You should try to use your key literary terms whenever possible. Show the examiner that you know you are analysing a poem and that you are aware of poetic techniques. Here it is the word 'personified'.

Notes, plan and sample answer

- (b) This poem has some striking images. Choose two images which appeal to you and explain why you think they are effective. Refer to the poem in support of your answer. (10)

Notes:

This question is worth ten marks and you are asked to choose two **striking** images, so you should write one paragraph on each image.

NB!

The most important thing to bear in mind here is the part of the question which asks you **why you think your chosen images are effective**. You must address this in your answer.

Plan:

- Autumn killing summer: brutal and shocking but captures harsh reality of season
- People stuffed with pies, sounds nice at first but could be quite sinister





Sample Answer:

The first image that struck me is contained in the first stanza. We are told that autumn 'caught the summer / Wrung its neck / Plucked it / And ate it'. This is a very brutal image in which both seasons are personified but one is prey - maybe a plump hen - and the other is a predator. I thought this was quite shocking when I read it first, but then I realised that it is appropriate for the harsh reality of nature when all traces of summer are devoured by autumn. Another reason I find the image effective is because it brings to mind the bare branches of trees that have been plucked of their leaves by the autumn just as a bird's feathers are plucked before it is eaten.

You must make it clear which image you have chosen.

By saying I found the image appropriate and effective, I ensure that I have answered the question.

The second image I found striking and appealing is in the second-last stanza, when autumn announces his intention to 'stuff' people with 'apple and blackberry pie' so that they will love him 'till the day they die'. What I found most interesting about this idea is that I think it is a little more sinister than it might first appear. At first I thought it was just a way of saying that autumn is a time for harvesting fruit and making delicious pies. However, the words 'stuff' and 'die' make me think back to the image in the first stanza in which summer is killed and eaten much like a domestic fowl. Such a bird would be stuffed with food before slaughter to make it nice and plump, and after it's dead it may be stuffed again, but this time with breadcrumbs and herbs! Therefore, I think this powerful image is an effective reminder that autumn is a time of death as well as a time of plenty.

The highlighted words refer back to the question. This is essential if you want to get a high grade.



Notes, plan and sample answer

- (c) Choose any other feature of the poem (apart from imagery) which appealed to you and explain why it appealed to you. You might consider one of the following: the language, the structure, the mood, the tone etc. (15)

Notes:

You are only asked to talk about **one** other feature of the poem, so don't worry if your answer is shorter than you would usually write for a fifteen mark question. However, if you choose a broad topic like language or structure, then you can probably write quite a lot about it. The rhythm and the repetition, for example, could be seen to be aspects of the structure.

NB!

Remember that you were told **not** to talk about imagery again as it has been addressed in the second question.

Plan:

- Structure – questions are engaging
- Structure – easy to remember because of all the repetition
- Structure reminds me of a nursery rhyme. Appropriate – sense of things happening over and over like the seasons



Sample Answer:

One of the aspects of the poem that I find most appealing is its structure. From the second to the sixth stanza the poem is written as a series of questions and answers, and I think this engages the reader from the outset. Questions like 'what shall I do with the sun?' are fascinating as it makes it seem as if autumn is choosing to deliberately make changes.



Another aspect of the structure that I like is the rhythm. The second line of stanzas two to six each read 'The day said, the day said' and this, combined with the repeated questions and answers, give the poem a sing-song, nursery rhyme feel. Not only does this make the poem easy to remember, but I think it fits in with the idea of the seasons being an unchanging part of life. Nursery rhymes are usually very old and have been passed

down from generation to generation, unchanged. There is a pleasing sense of continuity in the idea of something happening over and over and the rhythm of the poem captures this aspect of the seasons very well, I think.

The repetition in the poem serves another purpose, and that is to make the poem very easy to remember. Along with the sing-song rhythm, the fact that most of the stanzas are in the simple question-answer format with the line 'The day said, the day said' in the middle means that this poem is one that is likely to stay with me long after I have read it.

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