

Van Gogh's Yellow Chair by Mark Roper

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

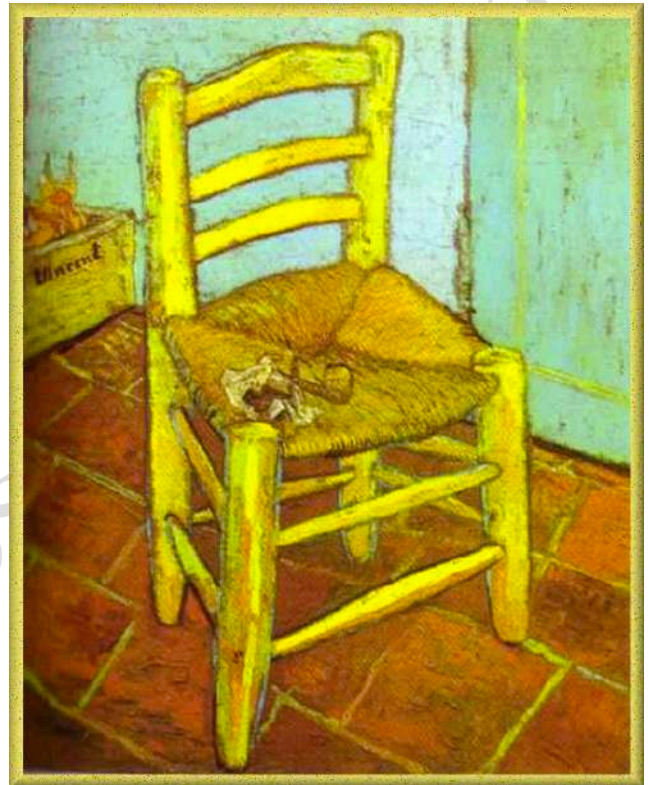
and the day's air
is like water in which
small noises swim

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.



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

1. "I would love to sit
in the yellow chair
in the painting..."

What is so appealing about Van Gogh's yellow chair, according to the speaker? Explain your answer with reference to the poem.

2. In your own words explain what is being said in the last three stanzas.

3. What is your favourite image from the poem? Explain your choice.

Sample Answer to Question 1:

I think that the speaker is drawn to the yellow chair because it offers him a chance to escape to a more attractive world.

The main point is made in the opening sentence

Everything about the chair and the room in which it sits is 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

This question asked what is appealing about the yellow chair, so words like 'positive', 'happiness' and 'peace' are used to reinforce the idea that each point proves how appealing the chair is.

which is 'like water'. This last image leads me to believe 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'.

This '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.

It is always a good idea to comment on the language in the poem. For example, in the second paragraph of this answer, the repetition of the word 'safe' is highlighted.

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'.

Sample Answer to Question 2:

The last three stanzas of this poem 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 key word in this question is "explain". If you just paraphrase the last three stanzas, you will get a very low grade.

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. When I read this poem, I was struck by 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. 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.

As this is a fifteen-mark question, try to make three separate points. Give each point its own paragraph.

Make sure to support your points with quotation from the poem.

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".

Personal response is appropriate here. You are required to explore the meaning behind the words and give your explanation of each stanza.

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.

Sample Answer to Question 3:

My favourite image in the poem is "a shadow lies / like a shy animal / in the corner". I like this simile because it seems to bring the painting 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.

Make sure to quote the image in full.

Define the image. It is a simile.

The image also appeals to me because it seemed to give the poem a friendly feeling. 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 and very evocative of an idyllic place. I think this charming and unusual simile will stay with me for a long time to come.

Use verbs to say what the image does: 'brings the painting to life', 'adds to the welcoming, comforting atmosphere', etc.

Comment: It can be difficult to write more than a couple of paragraphs on a question about one image. Don't write more just for the sake of it. Quality is more important than quantity, and if you ramble or introduce irrelevant points, you will lose marks.