

UNSEEN POETRY

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH UNFAMILIAR POETRY: SOME GUIDELINES

WHY IS THERE AN UNSEEN POETRY QUESTION IN THE EXAMINATION?

The ‘unseen’ poetry component in an examination assesses whether you can produce a reasonably coherent explanation of a poem without the help of your teacher or other source of information. Its aim is to test your analytical and interpretive skills when you are faced with a text you have never seen before. Your task is to decode the words, explain the subtext, examine the images and get to the underlying meaning as far as possible. This ability – to make sense of, interpret and elucidate unfamiliar, complex and sometimes cryptic language – is a skill you will use in various different contexts and situations throughout your life.

LOOK FOR CLUES

- The title of the poem will often point you to the purpose the poet had in mind when writing it. Titles may be satirical or ironic, so be alert to this possibility; for example, Wilfred Owen’s poem “Dulce et Decorum est” (“It is sweet and fitting to die for one’s fatherland”) has an ironic title, as the poem actually deals with the horrors young soldiers faced in the trenches in the First World War.
- If the unseen poem has a companion piece –perhaps one of the set poems, a popular song, a visual – then use it for clues to the theme(s) of the unseen poem.
- Be aware of poetic genres. If the word ‘ode’ appears in the title, then the poem will praise someone or something; if the title contains the word ‘ballad’, then there will be a story element to consider.



This guide to tackling unseen poetry should be used in conjunction with the notes on pages 9-14, the guides to ‘Reading and understanding poetry’ and to ‘Answering contextual poetry questions’.

TACKLING THE TEXT

- Read the poem through slowly and thoroughly, remembering that the examiner will have set something well within your range, understanding or culture, and that it will probably deal with one of the common themes found in poetry, such as love, grief or anger.
- Read the footnotes (if there are any), as they will clear up any obscure words or phrases.
- Read the poem through again. Underline curious or difficult words, phrases and Figures of Speech. Jot down thoughts as they come to you.
- Read the poem a third time. Each time you read it you will notice more details and perhaps have new insights.
- Write a short paraphrase of the poem. Try to decide on its central idea or theme and the poet’s reason for writing it.

AIDS TO FINDING MEANING

- As you read, be alert to the way the mechanics of the poem work: punctuation and line breaks indicate thought groupings.
- If unusual phrasing or syntax is proving difficult for you to decipher, find the subject of a sentence and its verb to help clarify meaning.
- Read through the set questions. These are often illuminating: a point you may not have understood is sometimes made clearer by the questions and may help you see the poem in a different light.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Remember that a poet does not use words randomly. He or she chooses them for their primary and possibly for their secondary meanings and connotations, for their sounds and for the pictures they paint. It is your task to be sensitive to the possibilities of the text and to create a coherent narrative from it.
- Also remember to explain images and Figures of Speech in clear and simple language so that the examiner knows that you have understood their full range of possibilities.

WRITING YOUR RESPONSE

- When answering the questions, first do rough work. Re-read the sections of the poem on which the question indicates you should focus, asking yourself whether your interpretation works when the poem is considered as a whole. If it does, then you are ready to write your final answers.
- Individual interpretation is acceptable provided you can prove your point by quoting from the text, and that you can make all the parts work to form a consistent and meaningful whole.

INTERTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

- It is likely that you will be asked an intertextual question in the examination – that is, you will be asked to compare the poem to another text, which might be a different poem, an image or visual, even a cartoon. The companion text will not have been randomly chosen. There will be some relationship or similarities between the two texts, which you will be asked to explore.
- Often, the two texts will feature two different or even opposing views on a similar subject or theme. Be aware of the tone of each text, or of any particular viewpoints or opinions that are being expressed.
- When answering intertextual questions, make sure that you draw on both texts for evidence to support your answer.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Misinterpretation:** You may misinterpret a poem because you have not considered all the evidence with which the words and images are presenting you carefully enough. The poet provides pointers that will position you to share his or her perspective and meaning – be sure that you don't ignore these pointers.
- **Arbitrary answers:** The poet had a clear idea of where he or she was going. The poem does not present the reader with a set of disconnected or aimless concepts. Your answers must indicate that you have understood the central ideas of the poem. If they do not fit the context, rethink them or discard them, no matter how clever they seem in isolation.
- **Careless oversights:** Pay attention to key Figures of Speech and obvious mechanical features like the use of monosyllables, run-on lines, the isolation of a word on a line, and the use of rhyme or the lack of it. Everything that you learned when you analysed seen poetry will apply here, too.
- **Try to answer all of the questions:** A good percentage of them will be within your capabilities, while a few will be 'discriminators' that will require a little more thought. The questions that seem tougher, however, will present you with an opportunity to be creative. So write down that answer – the examiner may like your ideas and give you credit for them.
- **Don't panic:** Approach the poem positively, with an 'I can do this' attitude. Think laterally and creatively and let the poem speak to you – resist trying to force a particular interpretation or meaning on to it.