

Subject: English

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English

Higher

2026/2027

THE UNSEEN POEM



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THE UNSEEN POEM-AN OVERVIEW.

ALWAYS THINK OF THE FOUR POETIC INGREDIENTS when tackling any poem:

SOUND; IMAGERY; THEME; TONE/MOOD!

In this section of Paper II, you are presented with a poem which you will not have studied before and which you may not have seen before. The Unseen Poem is worth 20 marks or 10% of Paper II.

Sometimes an introduction to the poem is provided. **Don't ignore or disregard this. It can provide valuable insights and valuable material for answering the questions.** You may be set questions on: the **language** of the poem, either in the poem as a whole or in selected lines or phrases; the **imagery** of the poem; the **moods** and **emotions** of the poem, particularly as expressed through **sound**; and the **theme**, **experience** or **content** of the poem. You can choose between

- (1) two separate questions dealing with specific aspects of the poem, for 10 marks each.
- (2) a single question on the entire poem, for 20 marks.

Your answers do not have to be long, 300 to 450 words on average but the key thing is to work around the idea of **what the poem says to you** and to concentrate on content but **more importantly the technical (sound and imagery) aspects of the poem.**

NB! There is no 'correct' reading of any poem-only your own interpretation.

In its annual guidelines to examiners correcting Leaving Certificate English scripts, the State Examinations Commission offers the following general observations on the Unseen Poem.

'Students should be able to... read poetry conscious of its specific mode of using language as an artistic medium.' (DES English Syllabus, 4. 5. 1)

Note that responding to the unseen poem is an exercise in aesthetic reading. It is especially important, in assessing the responses of the candidates, to guard against the temptation to assume a 'correct' reading of the poem.

Reward the candidates' awareness of the patterned nature of the language of poetry, its imagery, its sensuous qualities, and its suggestiveness.

Pay particular attention to 'the patterned nature of the language of poetry'.

In discussing the patterns of **sound**, keep in mind that sounds can be hard, harsh, jarring, and cacophonous or soft, sweet, and melodious. To achieve either effect, poets might use



assonance, alliteration, metre, and rhyme. The word **tone**, which has an emotional content, may be used when discussing the 'feel' of a particular sound. All the sounds together create the **rhythm** of a poem, and rhythm, as in music, may be fast or slow, but more precisely, a million things in between, such as excited, intense, frantic, languorous, seductive, reflective A technique very often used to control rhythm is the **caesura**, a pause inside a line, mostly because it gives the rhythm the movement of informal speech, which many modern poets strive to achieve.

In discussing the patterns of **imagery**, keep in mind that the term refers to the images stimulated in the imagination by language and has its origins in the essential human activity of comparing one thing to another. We use images all the time in everyday speech, usually without thinking about them. When we call someone a clown, for instance, we don't mean that they're a clown, literally. Imagery is therefore **figurative language**, not **literal language**.

In poetry, images are selected very carefully and used very precisely, usually in patterns, where one image is linked to another to enrich the effect and the meaning. Think of the imagery of predatory animals in *King Lear*, the association of vicious animals with the morally ugly sisters, Goneril and Regan is a pattern throughout the play. The sisters are linked to the ferocity of these animals. That's what comparison allows writers to do.

The main technical terms for discussing imagery are **simile** – an indirect comparison, using 'as' or 'like', eg. 'She's *like* lightning on the race track' – and **metaphor** – a direct comparison, 'She *is* lightning on the race track'. Where a metaphor is developed and recurs in a poem it becomes an extended metaphor or a controlling metaphor. The preserved body of the Tollund Man in Heaney's poem of the same name, for instance.



Sample Answers

UNSEEN POEM (20 MARKS) 2024

Read the following poem by Jonathan Edwards, where he, in a playful manner, imagines an encounter with his grandfather. Answer either Question 1 or Question 2 which follow.

Building my Grandfather

He comes flat-pack, a gift for my eighteenth.
We tip the bits out on the living room carpet:
nuts and bolts, a spanner, an Allen key,
tubes halfway between telescopes and weapons.
At first he goes together easily:
slipper left foot clicks into the ankle,
shin joins at a perfect right angle.
We have more of a problem with the right knee,
but my father remembers it was always gammy
from twelve-hour shifts, labouring in tight seams.
I fit the lungs, pumping in mustard gas
which filled each breath he took from 1918.
Something seems to be missing from the heart
and for a while we search beneath the sideboard,
but then my father says it's probably
for the old man's brother, who joined up when he did
and didn't make it back. The cheek and neck
and nose slot in and soon, we've almost got him:
my father holds the lips, the final bit
before he opens his eyes and I meet him.
A glance in the mirror at what he's going to see:
a pale-faced boy by an electric fire,
Nike swoosh like a medal on my chest.



It's then I say Stop. What will he make of me?

Jonathan Edwards

1. (a) Do you think the poet uses tone in an effective way in this poem?

Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)

(b) In your view, what characteristics of the grandfather emerge during the course of this poem? Support your answer with reference to the poem. (10)

OR

2. To what extent do you believe that the poet's use of language is clever and creative in this poem? Make detailed reference to the poem in support of your answer. (20)

Sample Answer

Building My Grandfather-Jonathan Edwards. (LC 2024)

Question 1.

1. (a)

I strongly agree with the statement. The poet uses tone effectively throughout the poem. Initially the tone is playful. The opening lines of the poem describe how it is as if they are building the grandfather from an Ikea flatpack: "He comes flat-pack, a gift for my eighteenth." Because it is a birthday gift the tone is light and suggests the fun of opening a present. The following lines remind me of metal tools being taken out of a metal toolbox, adding to the upbeat, if strange tone of the opening sequence: "nuts and bolts, a spanner, an Allen key, tubes halfway between telescopes and weapons."

I think the tone becomes more melancholy as the poem progresses. We learn via the father that the grandfather fought in the first World War: "pumping in mustard gas which filled each breath he took from 1918." In the next lines the tone becomes one of grief and pain when it is revealed that the grandfather lost his brother in the same war.

Finally, at the end of the poem I detect a tone of anxiety in the final line: "It's then I say Stop. What will he make of me?" The use of the capitalised "Stop" and the question mark at the end of the poem suggests to me that the birthday boy is somewhat anxious at the idea of what the grandfather



would make of the 18 year old in his Nike top. Maybe he feels inadequate in some way; that he will not live up to his grandfather's expectations.

The poet uses tone as an effective emotional map throughout the poem which allows us to experience the poem more fully.

1. (b)

Two main characteristics emerge for me: the grandfather's hardworking, stoic determination in the face of adversity and his sensitive, grieving nature.

His stoic determination is seen in the description of his arduous working life. I think he worked as a miner: "twelve-hour shifts, labouring in tight seams." He must have damaged his right knee as it is described as "gammy" but I imagine that he kept working despite the injury which shows him to have been a determined and hardworking man.

We learn that he fought in the WWI and that he lost his brother in the war. We're told the brother "didn't make it back." The idea that a piece of the grandfather's heart is missing suggests a man who felt the loss of his brother every day and shows to me a sensitive side to the grandfather.

I also think the grandfather was courageous as we learn that he fought in the First World War and survived a gas attack which seems to have affected his lungs for the rest of his life: "pumping in mustard gas /which filled each breath he took from 1918." I think it is safe to say that anyone who fought in that war must have been courageous. (420 words-18 minutes)

Question 2.

I found the poet's use of language really imaginative and, at times surreal. I was struck initially by the very original and fresh idea of the poet's idea of rebuilding his grandfather as if he were a flatpack IKEA piece of furniture, an effective controlling metaphor that informs the rest of the language used in the poem.

I was struck by the repetition of the metallic "t" sounds in the opening lines: "tip...bits...nuts...bolts...tubes...telescopes...". These sounds in combination help to establish the pleasing rhythm of the opening lines and remind me of the sound of metal tools being taken out of a metal toolbox and being used in a workshop. This amplifies effectively the idea of the building of the grandfather from a kit.

The poet uses historical allusion and significant dates in a very clever way when he describes what I think is the idea that his grandfather fought in the First World War: "I fit the lungs, pumping in mustard gas/which filled each breath he took from 1918." In a couple of pithy lines the effective and creative use of language informs me that the grandfather of the poem was at one time a soldier.

"Something seems to be missing from the heart..." uses sibilance to slow the line down and bring a sense of gravitas to the following lines as we are told that the speaker's grandfather went to war with his brother in World War 1 but never came back. This sound pattern is very clever as it creates a



feeling of melancholy as the poem's tone moves from one of playfulness in the opening to a more sombre, melancholy one.

Alliteration is used cleverly to establish a regular rhythm in the lines:

"The cheek and neck

and nose slot in and soon, we've almost got him:"

This prepares me for the climax of the poem where once more interesting and fresh language techniques are in play. The poem's last line is striking: "It's then I say Stop. What will he make of me?" The capitalisation of "Stop" suggests to me a strident shout of some kind...is it that he doesn't want to meet his grandad? Is he unprepared? I think this creates a sort of tension in the last line and this, coupled with the question mark at the end of the poem suggests to me that the speaker in some way feels unready or inadequate as he is about to meet his grandfather.

Overall I thought the poet's use of language was original and fresh and I enjoyed the slightly surreal experience of reading this poem.

(431 words-19 minutes.)



UNSEEN POEM (20 MARKS) 2023

Read the following poem by Victoria Kennefick and answer either Question 1 or Question 2 which follow.

Guest Room

I change the duvet cover like she showed me,
inside-out, corner-to-corner; lift it over
my head, seams must be flush.
I fold a pyramid of towels jewelled
with tiny soaps, body lotions borrowed
from hotels, the red hot-water-bottle
I'll fill later – her rubber husband.
I Shake n' Vac the carpet forest fresh; suck
spiders' webs from each corner, grey
and fuzzy, thick as pelts.
My mother's perfume sniffs out
that I did not iron the sheets.
Her nightdress pressed into a perfect square,
a village of potions on the bedside locker.
My heart sags, an empty hammock
yawning for the cradle of her arms,
the animal comfort of her wolf-fur
coat. I hear her pottering in my kitchen,
tidying. I turn out the light; night
cracks its knuckles.

Victoria Kennefick

1. (a) What impression do you form of the daughter in this poem? (10)



(b) Did the poet's use of language in the above poem add to its impact on you?

Develop two points with reference to the poem in your response. (10)

OR

2. "Guest Room is a fascinating exploration of the complex relationship between mother and daughter." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Develop your response with reference to both the subject matter and style of the poem. (20)

Sample Answer

Guest Room-Victoria Kennefick. (LC 2023)

Question 1.

1. (a)

The impression I get of the daughter is that she is dutiful, perhaps fearful and that she is in deep grief at the loss of her mother.

Evidence for the daughter's sense of duty is seen in the poem in the way that she seems to be preparing the guest room for her mum. Throughout the opening sequence of the poem I get the feeling that she is under pressure to do things 'the right way'. In other words, the way her mum taught her to do it. "I change the duvet cover like she showed me". The poet talks about the ritual of the hot water bottle "her rubber husband" and says that she will fill it later. I think the poet feels guilty because she has not ironed the sheets: "My mother's perfume sniffs out/That I did not iron the sheets." The combination of the long list of 'duties' that the daughter is expected to carry out for her mum suggests to me that she is a bit fearful of her mum. I think she feels that everything has to be perfect for her mum otherwise she feels that she has failed her mum.

The last six lines lead me to believe that the poem is about a daughter's grief. The use of the words "hammock...yawning...cradle...comfort", the combination of the balanced "night; light" rhyme and the cacophonous sound created by "night/cracks its knuckles" combine to leave me thinking that the daughter has prepared the guest room for a guest who will never visit. She prepares the room as a sort of grief ritual. Overall I feel that the daughter was dutiful to a fault but that she misses her mum deeply despite their seemingly complicated relationship.

1. (b)

The poet's use of language was very impactful.

Throughout the poem the repeated use of the first person; "I change...I fold...I'll fill...I shake...I did not..." succeed in making this an extraordinarily personal poem about mother daughter relationships. The repetition also succeeds in creating an almost exhausting sound pattern, perhaps indicating the exhausting nature of this relationship where everything has to be perfect.

The fact that we are landed 'in media res' and the fact that the present tense is used "I hear her...I turn out the light" as she describes in detail the ritual of the preparation of the guest bedroom adds



a drama and an immediacy to the story of the poem, as if we too are preparing for the arrival of the mother.

The use of listing builds momentum and indicates the exhaustive attention to detail that the daughter practises. She describes in forensic detail using ordinary everyday objects the ritual of preparation; changing the duvet, folding the towels; "I fold a pyramid of towels...". She lists the "soaps" and "lotions", "perfume" etc. This listing emphasises the pressure that seems to be on the daughter to perform for her mum, in a way.

The tone of the poem shifts into darkness at the conclusion, I think as she mourns the void left for her mother's passing; longing to feel the cradle of her arms once more, maybe as she did when she was a young girl; "My heart sags, an empty hammock/yawning for the cradle of her arms."

Other ideas:

Effective use of metaphor: "a village of potions" etc

Deprecating humour "her rubber husband" etc

(542 words-21 minutes)

Question 2.

I am in agreement with this statement. I think this poem explores what is or was a very complex dynamic between mother and daughter.

The first fourteen lines of the poem describe an almost pseudo-religious ritual of preparation for the guest, presumably her mum. It is a long list of duties which suggests to me that the mother was a perfectionist who had very high expectations of her daughter. For example, the speaker in the poem uses the imperative in line three: "the seams must be flush." The daughter seems to have a long list of chores, small parts of the ritual which seem to be important parts of the whole process: a "pyramid of towels" is folded; "tiny soaps, body lotions" are provided in the room. The carpet is cleaned with "Shake 'n' vac...forest fresh". I think we get a sense of the daughter's guilt at not ironing the sheets in the lines:

"My mother's perfume sniffs out

That I did not iron the sheets."

This amplifies, for me the idea that the daughter fears not living up to her mum's exacting standards. It seems to have been a difficult relationship, therefore.

In the last six lines of the poem I sense a shift in tone. The tone moves from the busyness of preparation to the loneliness and complicated grief of a daughter mourning a mother she loved but with whom she had a challenging relationship. To me it is as if the speaker almost breaks down, knowing that the bed and room she has prepared for her mum in some comfort ritual will never again be slept in by her mum. Key phrases/words such as: "My heart sags...empty hammock...the cradle of her arms...animal comfort..." combined with the brutal sound of "night/cracks its knuckles"



reveal to me an ocean of grief and pain compounded by the fraught relationship the daughter may have had with her mum. I think she really loved her mum; it's just that their relationship was imbalanced and maybe this amplifies the speaker's grief; the feeling that she was never good enough. It is obvious to me that she really misses her mum.

(360 words-19 minutes.)

