

GCSE English Literature: Unseen Poetry

Gaining a Higher Grade

If you are taking the Welsh examination board (WJEC), your exam question will always be like this...

Write about the following poem and its effect on you. You might wish to include some or all of the following points:

- the poem's content - what it is about;
- the ideas the poet may have wanted us to think about;
- the mood or atmosphere of the poem;
- how it is written – words or phrases you find interesting, the way it is structured or organised, and so on;
- your response to the poem.

Your exam answer could be tackled like this...

1. First, consider the poem **as a whole**. Read it *very carefully*. **Try to read it in a way that you feel captures the poet's intended tone of voice**. Work out the general sense, circumstance or 'story' of the poem (i.e. what it is generally about).
 - **Ask yourself "what, where, when" – this will allow you to create an OVERVIEW with which to begin your answer. E.g. "This is a poem about war and is set in the trenches of World War One. The poet writes about life for ordinary soldiers during a terrible battle. As it opens the poet tells of... .. but as the poem proceeds we learn about... .. and finally... .."**
2. Now, still dealing with the poem **as a whole**, *interpret* its meaning (i.e. why it was written - its **theme**).
 - **Answering this will allow you to round off your OVERVIEW with a summary of the poem's theme, e.g. "At a deeper level, Owen's poem works to help even a modern reader reflect on what this awful war had come to mean... and to realise some important issues concerning war as a way of solving conflicts and disagreements between nations."**
 - **Opening your answer with an overview of this kind shows the examiner you have a good understanding of the poem.**
 - **An overview of this kind will then allow you fluently to move on and discuss HOW the poet has built up this meaning through a series of ideas and images (i.e. the STRUCTURE) of the poem.**

TOP TIP

Each paragraph in a successful answer starts with a sentence that clearly attempts directly to answer the question; and each paragraph contains a short and apt quotation that supports its main point; this quotation is then ALWAYS followed by an attempt to explain the effects of its language and the likely purpose the poet had in using it.

3. Now consider the various elements at work within the poem.

- **Starting with the title, work logically through the poem (e.g. its sequence of ideas, images or stanzas): look for interesting and vivid or emotional uses of language: any words, phrases, lines and stanzas that add in important ways to the poem's effects and meanings.**
- **Consider especially the mood or tone created by the language as this will guide you to an understanding of the poet's attitude to his or her subject matter.**
 - o Work out how the poem attracts and holds your attention; how it absorbs you and makes clear its themes.
 - o Think about how the developing stanzas and their ideas and images are working to support the whole poem.

4. Look closely at the ways the poet has used the **content** of language (i.e. the **meaning** words contain):

- **Some choices of language in the poem will strike you as interesting and unusual. This language often "suggests" or "connotes" more than a surface level of meaning: it is this language that hints at the themes.**
- **Be on the lookout for the way the poet has created and used **IMAGERY** and **IRONY**. Imagery is created by vivid description, metaphors and similes that suggest sounds, sights, tastes, feelings, etc. that deepen our understanding of the poem's themes; irony is a tone of voice that hints at meanings other than the surface meaning.**
- **Consider "**oppositions**" at work in the poem – these are contrasting ideas that deepen our understanding of what the poet wants to achieve: country vs. city; male vs. female; age vs. youth; rich vs. poor; cruelty vs. kindness, etc.**

5. And also look closely at the way the poet has used the **form** of language (its **sounds** and **shapes**):

- **Poets always use both the sounds and shapes of language to create effects and patterns that work to create or emphasise tone, mood or meaning; this can deepen the meanings of the poem or make them more interesting.**
- **Look for the way sound and shape are used to make... repetition, rhyme, unusual line endings, rhythm, alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia; to create enforced pauses (called a "caesura"); unusual punctuation and capitalisation; lines that end suddenly with a full stop (called "end-stopped"); lines that "run on" into the next line or stanza (called "enjambment"); the juxtaposition of images... .. and so on!**