



Section 1: Poetry

Introduction:

Examinations involving unseen texts can be a daunting prospect and, to be successful, learners need to change focus from a memory-driven test to one involving the creative application of skills and knowledge developed in the course of studying other texts.

As with any physical journey into the unknown, the process starts with preparation, planning and the right equipment. The following guide offers an approach to work on unseen texts and extracts designed to help learners establish a productive, confidence-boosting routine which will apply whatever materials are chosen for comment and appreciation.

In addition, there is the opportunity to examine and evaluate responses from other students of English Literature and to develop critical analytical skills using the subject's "toolbox".

It is helpful to divide your approach to the analysis of unseen poetry texts into three stages:

Stage 1: Reading

Stage 2: Reflecting

Stage 3: Responding

Each of these stages requires the application of a specific set of skills which eventually combine to produce a successful essay.

Reading

At the beginning of the examination, the priority is **careful, open-minded** reading of the unseen poem. The main skills involved here are:

- **Timing** (you must understand your personal reading speeds well in advance of any examination.)
- **Focusing** (It is vital to be mentally uncluttered and single-minded: keep your attention firmly focused upon the text and don't worry about how you will eventually be writing.)
- **Interpretation** (This is where you engage with the main shaping characteristics of the poem such as form, surface meaning, tone, sound, language, rhyme, imagery, structure, ideas, and understand them in the light of your whole experience of reading poetry.)



Timing

Don't rush the process here. There will be a temptation to just choose the first poem or the shortest poem or the one you feel is easiest. It is better to spend time making the decision at the start of the examination rather than changing your mind during your written response.

Test Yourself

If you have 45 minutes to answer on this section, consider how will you divide the time in order to:

- choose the poem;
- read closely and annotate;
- write up your response.

Here are two poems which you could choose. Time how long it takes you to make an informed decision which will enable you to write thoughtfully about your chosen poem.



Temporarily in Oxford

Where they will bury me
I don't know.
Many places might not be
sorry to store me.

The Midwest has right of origin.
Already it has welcomed my mother
to its flat sheets.

The English fens that bore me
have been close curiously often.
It seems I can't get away from
dampness and learning.

If I stay where I am
I could sleep in this educated earth.

But if they are kind, they'll burn me
and send me to Vermont.

I'd be an education for the trees
and would relish, really,
flaring into maple each October—
my scarlet letter to you.

Your stormy north is possible.
You will be there, engrossed in its peat.

It would be handy not
to have to cross the whole Atlantic
each time I wanted to
lift up the turf and slip in beside you.

Anne Stevenson

Urban Pastoral

More domestic than elegant, leaves and pigeons
Hedge the dazzle beyond. Green, dust,
A purple strutting, screen the river's march.
The walks are for pigeons and ladies
Like parched pigeons, avoiding the bench where a tramp
Rustily sleeps. The carriages in the park
Are babies' now; children make all the traffic.
Spring brightly traveling, summer half awake,
Here the afternoon city plays at being
A dream of summer's: gaiety in repose,
Lazily festive as poster holidays,
A dream. Crossed by the tramp, rousing.
On paths where sparrows edge to snatch the bread
Crumbed for the humbled pigeons, the holiday
Is broken and scattered. Yet a strong green still
Throgs the boughs; and the river, preened, goes twinkling
Past all these birds, on to the salt sea.

Babette Deutsch



By the time you sit the exam, this initial process should take you about 5 minutes. That should be enough time to read the poems twice and to jot down initial impressions. It is essential that you do this exercise often. The more time you spend practising this process of choosing, the less time it will take in the exam.

At this stage, you're not involved in detailed analysis. However, you should be considering some of these questions:

- What's the effect of the title?
- What's happening?
- Who's speaking?
- What type of poem is it?
- What's the tone?
- Are there any striking images being used?
- Is there a specific structure/form being used?
- What are some of the ideas considered in the poem?

It's important here that you don't merely search for and spot poetic techniques. Finding a simile will get you nowhere on its own. You need to know why the poet has used it. First of all, try to get the main ideas the poet wanted us to consider and then reflect on how the simile (or other poetic techniques) might be being used to explore that idea further.

Let's say that you chose the second poem, 'Urban Pastoral' by Babette Deutsch. Some of your initial impressions might be the:

- incongruity of the title linking two different ideas: 'urban' and 'pastoral';
- strong sense of description;
- recurring use of birds, particularly pigeons;
- ideas of spring;
- use of repetition;
- mixture of disparaging and complimentary comments.

Stage 2: Reflection and Annotation

In Stage 1 you identified WHAT is in the poem. You now have to address HOW Deutsch has achieved what your reading has revealed to you.

The work you do now will dictate the quality of what you write at Stage 3 where the emphasis will have to be upon ANALYSIS rather than description or commentary.

The following is not an exhaustive list but an indication of the approach needed:

- The title should be an excellent starting point. By the exam, you should have an understanding of the different forms and genres of poetry. The word 'pastoral' should alert you immediately to the type of poem you're reading. What is the effect of the title here?



- The opening line and the first sentence should also build on the effect of the title. You should now be looking closely at language. How are the types of words used here complementing the title?
- You might see that there are patterns of words being used. Look at the words highlighted in red. How do these add to the ones in the title/opening lines?
- What about Deutsch's use of birds (highlighted in blue)? Why this focus on them?
- There are other characters here. How are they being used?
- There are other repeated phrases. What are they? What difference do they make?
- What's the tone? Does the tone change? Where and why? How is it adding to our understanding of the poem?
- What about the sound the words make? Do they add to the ideas at any point?
- There is no rhyme but there are other structural points you could make. What could you say?
- How does the poem end? What does the poet want to leave us with?

As you reflect upon the poem in this way, you will generate purposeful annotation which will help you to spot patterns in the work and, at the next stage, allow you to organize your response in a way that is not tied to a chronological treatment. By noting the relationships between words and images you will be able to offer much more authoritative observations about Deutsch's technique which do not rely upon list making. This is one of the markers of a sophisticated approach which is expected to be found in very good quality responses.

Hint: A simple, bulleted list or basic flow diagram should be all that you need in addition to judicious annotation to launch the final stage of your work.

Annotated Version of Poem

Urban Pastoral

More **domestic** than **elegant**, leaves and **pigeons**
Hedge the **dazzle** beyond. **Green**, **dust**,
A **purple strutting**, **screen** the river's march.
The walks are for **pigeons and ladies**
Like **parched pigeons**, avoiding the bench where a **tramp**
Rustily sleeps. The carriages in the park
Are babies' now; children make all the **traffic**.
Spring brightly traveling, summer half awake,
Here the afternoon city plays at being
A dream of summer's: **gaiety** in **repose**,
Lazily festive as poster holidays,
A dream. Crossed by the tramp, rousing.
On paths where **sparrows** edge to snatch the bread
Crumbed for the **humbled pigeons**, the **holiday**
Is **broken** and **scattered**. Yet a **strong green** still
Throngs the boughs; and the river, **preened**, goes **twinkling**
Past **all these birds**, on to the **salt sea**.

Babette Deutsch

Task

Take the same approach with Stevenson's poem.



Stage 3: Written Response

Having clarified your thinking and designed the shape of your response, for the remainder of the examination you should be focused exclusively upon expressing your ideas analytically. In order to do this successfully, you must be quite sure that you recognize the differences between 3 kinds of writing:

- **Descriptive**
- **Commentary on meaning**
- **Critical analysis and evaluation**

Some examples:

Descriptive:

This poem by Babette Deutsch is a description of a city in spring. The poem doesn't rhyme and is written in free verse. The start of the poem describes that the city is 'more domestic than elegant'. It says that the ladies are 'Like parched pigeons' which is a simile. Pigeons are often referred to in the poem.

Note: This is a rather weak opening. It struggles to go beyond the surface of the poem and although the candidate has picked up on some of the main points - city in spring, use of pigeons - there is very little analysis. Comments on poetic techniques - rhyme, free verse, repetition, similes - without any consideration of how they're used to create meaning are superfluous.

Commentary on Meaning:

From the opening line of the poem 'Urban Pastoral', Babette Deutsch clearly doesn't like the city. Instead of being 'elegant' it is 'domestic', which shows that it's not a beautiful, romantic place. This is confirmed when the poet describes 'pigeons', hardly the most elegant of birds. The fact that they block what I presume is the river or sea in the distance, 'Hedge the dazzle beyond' adds to this feeling.

Note: This is better. It's going through the poem a little laboriously but the candidate is making some points, noticing some ideas the poet might have considered and building on it through looking at the language used. There is some awareness here of implied meaning.

Critical Analysis and Evaluation:

The poem 'Urban Pastoral' begins with a seemingly derogatory comment regarding the urban landscape, which is 'More domestic than elegant'. Deutsch avoids the romanticised idyll of the traditional pastoral and plays with the idea as she explores the urban landscape in a deliberately unromantic register and tone. Instead of 'melodious birds' there are pigeons, described haughtily, 'strutting' and obstructing true beauty, 'Hedge the dazzle beyond'. The 'dazzle' seems out of bounds, out of



reach and the repetition of the pigeons throughout the poem suggests that they are everywhere, spoiling any beauty that might be enjoyed. However, despite the deprecating tone of the opening, Deutsch also recognises that there is beauty even in this urban world as at the end there is a sense of energy in the verb 'Throngs' and romance in the 'twinkling' of the 'salt sea'

Note: This response has a good sense of overview from the outset. There is also an awareness of the poetic tradition being used by the poet and the way this is played with in the opening lines and in the title. As a result, there is also a confident understanding of ideas which will be beneficial as they seek to explore how those ideas have been created as they proceed with the analysis and evaluation. There is a clear sense of the poet's craft being at the centre of the poem rather than a passive description of a scene. The analysis may not be fully developed at this point but there's also some close analysis of language and poetic techniques and the way they've been used to create meaning.

Task

Write your opening paragraph in response to Stevenson's 'Temporarily in Oxford'.

Get your classmate to assess it in the light of the paragraphs on 'Urban Pastoral'.



Section 2: Developing AO2

Following Blake's poem, there are a number of extracts from candidates' responses.

A Poison Tree

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night.
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine.

And into my garden stole,
When the night had veild the pole;
In the morning glad I see;
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

William Blake

Response A

William Blake's poem 'A Poison Tree' uses simple language and structure to create powerful meaning. The metaphor of the title, together with verbs like 'grow', 'waterd' and 'sunned' suggests the growth of the narrator's wrath as an external object, supported by the placement of 'grow' at the end of the first stanza, rhyming with 'foe', which gives an ominous tone. The narrator creates a feeling of his wrath constantly growing through the repetition of similar phrases, 'Night & morning' and 'day and night' which supports the contrast between the couplets of the second stanza, 'fears' and 'tears' and 'smiles' and 'wiles'.

Comment: There's some good analysis here but too often it's left undeveloped. Comments on the metaphor of the title, the wrath as an external object, the ominous rhyme and the use of contrast could all be developed further. Some more unpacking of those points is needed. The comments are relevant, the use of textual support is good and there's some grasp here of implicit meaning.



Response B

The assonance of 'sunned', 'smiles' and 'soft' makes the wording seem – when isolated – very positive. However, in its context this notion is perhaps ominous in its contribution to something so negative. In this way, the reader observes elements of the complexity of meaning beneath the language. This notion is repeated as he says, 'In the morning glad I see', in reference to his foe. The simplicity of the wording creates a connotation of innocence. However, as this is linked to happiness at the foe's death, akin to a child's enjoyment at killing insects, it seems wrong, even chilling. What is most chilling perhaps is that there appears to be no morality within it. Blake merely depicts how the 'wrath did grow', resulting in the 'foe outstretched beneath the tree' but the narrator depicts none of the remorse one might expect from the tale he tells.

Comment: This is better than A's response. An idea is considered – the way the language and ideas in the poem are often in conflict – and develops it across the poem as a whole. The candidate focuses closely on language and patterns of language, including the sound of words, and develops the original point into a deeper exploration of the 'chilling' nature of the poem. There is evaluation here rather than merely commenting on words and phrases. It doesn't have the close attention to language which we might see in the best candidates' work, but this paragraph is a sound response.

Response C

Blake uses simple rhymes all the way through his poem, using an AABB rhyme scheme to get his ideas across which makes it sound a bit like a nursery rhyme. Blake is obviously enjoying feeding his wrath as he,

'waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears:
and I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles'

These verbs suggest that he's working hard on building up his feelings towards his foe and shows how much he hates him.

Note: The candidate clearly notices some patterns with the use of the verbs and the way the rhyme creates the feeling of it being like a nursery rhyme. The fact that they notice that Blake is 'enjoying feeding his wrath' shows some understanding of implicit meanings and this is linked to the use of verbs. However, the verbs aren't noted in the quotation (which is also too long) and there isn't enough close reading of the text. There is little sense of an overview either. This would be a typical Band 2 response.

Task

Can you improve examples A and C?

Work on an unseen poem. Write the opening two paragraphs of your response. Mark each other's work in the light of the assessment grid.



Section 3: More Poems/Comparing Poems

In this section you will find some more poems which can be used for exam practice. Use the questions from the first exercise on 'Urban Pastoral' to help you as well as the extra questions at the end of the poems.

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part

Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part.
Nay, I have done, you get no more of me;
And I am glad, yea glad with all my heart,
That thus so cleanly I myself can free.
Shake hands for ever, cancel all our vows,
And when we meet at any time again,
Be it not seen in either of our brows
That we one jot of former love retain.
Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies;
When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
And Innocence is closing up his eyes—
Now, if thou wouldst, when all have given him over,
From death to life thou might'st him yet recover!

Michael Drayton

1. What difference does the sonnet form make to your analysis of this poem?



from *Absalom and Achitophel*

In pious times, ere priest-craft did begin,
Before polygamy was made a sin;
When man, on many, multipl'd his kind,
Ere one to one was cursedly confin'd:
When Nature prompted, and no Law deni'd
Promiscuous use of concubine and bride;
Then, Israel's monarch, after Heaven's own heart,
His vigorous warmth did variously impart
To wives and slaves: and, wide as his command,
Scatter'd his Maker's image through the land.
Michal, of royal blood, the crown did wear;
A soil ungrateful to the tiller's care:
Not so the rest; for several mothers bore
To god-like David, several sons before.
But since like slaves his bed they did ascend,
No true succession could their seed attend.
Of all this numerous progeny was none
So beautiful, so brave, as Absalom:
Whether, inspir'd by some diviner lust,
His father got him with a greater gust;
Or that his conscious destiny made way,
By manly beauty to imperial sway.
Early in foreign fields he won renown,
With kings and states alli'd to Israel's crown:
In peace the thoughts of war he could remove,
And seem'd as he were only born for love.
Whate'er he did, was done with so much ease,
In him alone, 'twas natural to please:
His motions all accompani'd with grace;
And Paradise was open'd in his face.

John Dryden

This is a difficult poem at first glance, partly because of the language.

1. What strategies can you use in order to work through some of the difficulties the poem offers at first reading?
2. One way into the poem might be to try to find patterns of language. Which patterns can you find here?



The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove,
That Valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

And we will sit upon the Rocks,
Seeing the Shepherds feed their flocks,
By shallow Rivers to whose falls
Melodious birds sing Madrigals.

And I will make thee beds of Roses
And a thousand fragrant posies,
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
Embroidered all with leaves of Myrtle;

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty Lambs we pull;
Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and Ivy buds,
With Coral clasps and Amber studs:
And if these pleasures may thee move,
Come live with me, and be my love.

The Shepherds' Swains shall dance and sing
For thy delight each May-morning:
If these delights thy mind may move,
Then live with me, and be my love.

Christopher Marlowe

Urban Pastoral

More domestic than elegant, leaves and pigeons
Hedge the dazzle beyond. Green, dust,
A purple strutting, screen the river's march.
The walks are for pigeons and ladies
Like parched pigeons, avoiding the bench where a tramp
Rustily sleeps. The carriages in the park
Are babies' now; children make all the traffic.
Spring brightly traveling, summer half awake,
Here the afternoon city plays at being
A dream of summer's: gaiety in repose,
Lazily festive as poster holidays,
A dream. Crossed by the tramp, rousing.
On paths where sparrows edge to snatch the bread
Crumbed for the humbled pigeons, the holiday
Is broken and scattered. Yet a strong green still
Throngs the boughs; and the river, preened, goes twinkling
Past all these birds, on to the salt sea.

Babette Deutsch

1. Both these poems are in the pastoral tradition. How do the poets use that tradition in order to convey their ideas?
2. How is repetition used in the poems? What are the similarities and differences?
3. The way the poems have been structured are very different. How does that reveal some differences in the ideas the poets wanted us to consider?



Walking in Moonlight

'Dirty old town, dirty old town' – the song reminds me of our walk, with moonlight never so bright on sullied scruffiness, the streets of home. My mind skimmed forward to unbelievable old age, to looking back. And here it is, just as I thought, or nothing like it.

Here am I, having leapt so many chasms, clawed back from some, sauntered or struggled along so many roads, stony, slushy, grassy-smooth, crazily steep, finding nothing as unexpected as the loves along the way, nothing as predictable as tonight, this moonlight, this magical sameness, this surprise, back again, everlasting.

Ruth Bidgood

Return to Cardiff

'Hometown'; well, most admit an affection for a city: grey, tangled streets I cycled on to school, my first cigarette in the back lane, and, fool, my first botched love affair. First everything. Faded torments; self-indulgent pity.

The journey to Cardiff seemed less a return than a raid on mislaid identities. Of course the whole locus smaller; the mile-wide Taff now a stream, the castle not as in some black, gothic dream, but a decent sprawl, a joker's toy façade.

Unfocused voices in the wind, associations, clues, odds and ends, fringes caught, as when, after the doctor quit, a door opened and I glimpsed the white, enormous face of my grandfather, suddenly aghast with certain news.

Unable to define anything I can hardly speak, and still I love the place for what I wanted it to be as much as for what it unashamedly is now for me, a city of strangers, alien and bleak.

Unable to communicate I'm easily betrayed, uneasily diverted by mere sense reflections like those anchored waterscapes that wander, alter, in the Taff, hour by hour, as light slants down a different shade.

Illusory, too, that lost dark playground after rain, the noise of trains, gunshots in what they once called Tiger Bay. Only real this smell of ripe, damp earth when the sun comes out, a mixture of pungencies, half exquisite and half plain.

No sooner than I'd arrived the other Cardiff had gone, smoke in the memory, these but tinned resemblances, where the boy I was not and the man I am not met, hesitated, left double footsteps, then walked on.

Dannie Abse

1. Find ideas connected to past, present and future in these poems. Why is the poem using them?
2. What is the tone in each poem? Does it change at all?
3. Some subtle imagery is used by both poets. Are they similar/different? How do they add to the ideas the poets consider?



Rain

I love all films that start with rain:
rain, braiding a windowpane
or darkening a hung-out dress
or streaming down her upturned face;

one big thundering downpour
right through the empty script and score
before the act, before the blame,
before the lens pulls through the frame

to where the woman sits alone
beside a silent telephone
or the dress lies ruined on the grass
or the girl walks off the overpass,

and all things flow out from that source
along their fatal watercourse.
However bad or overlong
such a film can do no wrong,

so when his native twang shows through
or when the boom dips into view
or when her speech starts to betray
its adaptation from the play,

I think to when we opened cold
on a starlit gutter, running gold
with the neon of a drugstore sign
and I'd read into its blazing line:

forget the ink, the milk, the blood -
all was washed clean with the flood
we rose up from the falling waters
the fallen rain's own sons and daughters

and none of this, none of this matters.

Don Paterson

The Rain Poured Down

My mother weeping
in the dark hallway, in the arms of a man,
not my father,
as I sat at the top of the stairs unnoticed—
my mother weeping and pleading for what I didn't know
then and can still only imagine—
for things to be somehow other than they were,
not knowing what I would change,
for, or to, or why,
only that my mother was weeping
in the arms of a man not me,
and the rain brought down the winter sky
and hid me in the walls that looked on,
indifferent to my mother's weeping,
or mine,
in the rain that brought down the dark afternoon.

Dan Gerber



Analysis of Unseen Texts

1. How do the titles compare? What do they suggest about the poems?
2. Both these poems make use of a striking central image. How is that image used differently? Is there any similarity in the way it's used?
3. How do the poets' choices of form affect the reading of the poems?
4. How do the poems end? Are there similarities/differences here?