

Unseen Poetry 2006

Van Gogh's Yellow Chair

Questions

- ▶ How would you describe the poet's tone in the opening stanza?
- ▶ How would you describe his language?



Possible Answers

- ▶ The poet's longing is clear from the opening line in which he says he would 'love to' sit in the chair.
- ▶ The language is simple and conversational.



Discussion

- ▶ Would you like to be part of a painting?
- ▶ Do you think that the world of the painting the poet is looking at would be an exciting world? Why might he want to go there?



Questions

- ▶ When we think of shadows, what comes to mind?
- ▶ Look carefully at the simile the poet uses to describe the shadow. Does it create the sort of mood you would normally associate with shadows?
- ▶ What sort of animal do you imagine the shadow to be?



Possible Answers

- ▶ Shadows are usually associated with fear, sadness, worry or gloom.
- ▶ The poet likens the shadow to a 'shy animal' which creates a very different kind of mood to that we might have expected. There is no sense of threat or danger at all.
- ▶ I imagine the poet is thinking about a cat, lying curled up on the floor in the corner. This makes the room in the painting seem even more peaceful and welcoming. There is a sense of comfort.



Questions

- ▶ Have you ever swum underwater and listened to the muffled sounds of the world above?
- ▶ How do you feel, or how do you think you would feel, in such a situation?
- ▶ Would you feel removed from the noise and the hustle and bustle of the world?



Questions

- ▶ What two things does the poet want to escape?
- ▶ Did either of them surprise you?
- ▶ What does the word 'safe' suggest about the world he lives in? Do you think there is any significance to the fact that this word appears twice in this short stanza?



Possible Answers

- ▶ The poet wants to escape harm and surprise.
- ▶ I was surprised that he should find surprise so unpleasant!
- ▶ The word 'safe' suggests that the poet feels unsafe or uneasy in his own world. He clearly longs for a calm, unruffled existence in which he does not have to cope with the unexpected, even if it is something pleasant.



Questions

- ▶ What do you think the poet means when he says the outside world would 'open wide'?
- ▶ What is the difference between the outside world and the world of the painting?
- ▶ Do you think there is any significance to the repetition of 'so long'?



Possible Answers

- ▶ I think the outside world could be like a large mouth waiting to devour him if he ever rises from the yellow chair.
- ▶ The outside world seems somehow menacing compared to the peaceful world of the painting.
- ▶ The word 'so long' is repeated, which reinforces the idea that the poet would be safe 'so long' as he stayed in the world of the painting.



Discussion

- ▶ How do we normally experience art, particularly paintings?
- ▶ Do you think that if we totally immersed ourselves in a work of art, we might see the world a different way?
- ▶ Can you find a painting in which you would like to live? Bring in a link to an online image of it and be prepared to explain what it is about the world of the painting that attracts you.

