

Geography Lesson by Brian Patten

Our teacher told us one day he would leave
And sail across a warm blue sea
To places he had only known from maps,
And all his life had longed to be.

The house he lived in was narrow and grey
But in his mind's eye he could see
Sweet-scented jasmine clinging to the walls,
And green leaves burning on an orange tree.

He spoke of the lands he longed to visit,
Where it was never drab or cold.
I couldn't understand why he never left,
And shook off the school's stranglehold.

Then halfway through his final term
He took ill and never returned.
And he never got to that place on the map
Where the green leaves of the orange trees burned.

The maps were redrawn on the classroom wall;
His name was forgotten, it faded away.
But a lesson he never knew he taught
Is with me to this day.

I travel to where the green leaves burn,
To where the ocean's glass-clear and blue,
To all those places my teacher taught me to love
But which he never knew.



Answer the following **three** questions. Each question is worth 10 marks.

1. From your reading of the poem, what impression do you get of the teacher?
Base your answer on evidence from the poem. (10)
2. How has the poet been affected by what he has learned from this teacher?
Explain your answer with reference to the poem. (10)
3. Do you like the poet's use of imagery in this poem?
Give reasons for your answer. (10)

Sample Answer to Question 1:

Note: The word 'impression' is usually a hint that the question is about character. Beware of just saying what the teacher did or said, but focus on what his words and/or actions tell you about him as a person.

Plan:-

Sad – unfulfilled dreams

Enthusiastic about 'lands he longed to visit'

The impression I get of the teacher is that he was a man who felt great passion for the subject he taught but whose dreams were unfulfilled.

Your opening sentence should directly address the question.

The teacher's enthusiasm and love for his subject was clearly communicated to his students, and the positive, descriptive language the poet uses when talking about these places reflects that. The teacher brought the two-dimensional world of the maps to life, helping the pupils to see places 'where the green leaves of the orange trees burned' and

In a poetry answer, you should comment on the language and the techniques the poet uses to achieve certain effects.

enabling them to see what he could in his 'mind's eye' when he imagined houses with 'Sweet-scented jasmine clinging to the walls'. These descriptions are wonderfully sensual; not only do we see these places but we feel the heat: 'where green leaves burn', and

smell the fragrant jasmine blossom. I think the that the ability to fire up his pupils' imagination in this way is part of what makes the subject of the poem such a great teacher.

Sadly, however, the teacher never managed to leave his 'narrow and grey' house or shake off 'the school's stranglehold' and travel to 'the lands he longed to visit'. During his final term, the teacher 'took ill and never returned'. His dreams were never realised and he faded from the collective memory of the school; even his name was forgotten. It is heart-breaking to think of the teacher ending his days without ever fulfilling his greatest desire, particularly when it was not something ridiculously out of reach but was just a holiday to a sunny place 'where the ocean's glass-clear and blue'. The contrast between the descriptions of the 'narrow and grey' house and the vivid, colourful places 'Where it was never drab or cold' heightens the reader's pity for this man who died without achieving his rather modest goal.

Short quotes should be woven into the fabric of the sentences.

Sample Answer to Question 2:

Plan:-

Taught the poet to love these places and to visit them

Taught the poet not to repeat teacher's mistake

I think that the teacher taught the poet to love the places they studied during the geography lessons, and also inspired him to travel and not just to live in a world of longing and dreams, as the teacher did.

The poet describes the places the teacher 'had only known from maps' in a way which shows that he loves these places as much as the teacher did. To the teacher, these countries were places you could imagine yourself living, in houses where fragrant jasmine was 'clinging to the walls' and the heat of the day caused leaves to burn on the tree. His enthusiasm was infectious, and now the poet travels 'to where the green leaves burn / To where the ocean's glass-clear and blue'.

The forward slash / tells the reader that the rest of the quote is on the next line in the original poem.

The other lesson the poet learned from the teacher is that it is important to follow your dreams and not to live for tomorrow. Although the teacher did not realise he was teaching the poet this, his lack of action and his unfulfilled desires affected his pupil so strongly that he says that this lesson is 'with me to this day'. It seems he is determined not to repeat his teacher's mistake. As a result, he travels 'to where the green leaves burn' and enjoys the reality of the places his teacher 'had only known from maps'.

Sample Answer to Question 3:

Plan:-

Contrast between reality and longing conveyed through images

Alliteration and assonance make the foreign lands attractive

I find the poet's use of imagery in this poem most effective and it definitely contributes to my enjoyment of the poem.

One aspect of the poem that I particularly like is the way in which the poet uses contrasting images to highlight the difference between the teacher's reality and the places he longs to visit. He dreams of a land in which he might find 'Sweet-scented jasmine clinging to the walls,' but instead of that he has 'the school's stranglehold'. I thought this was powerful as we can imagine the school as a parasitic plant, choking the teacher and draining him of life, as opposed to the beautiful jasmine filling the air with its perfume. Similarly, the teacher's 'narrow and grey house' is in stark contrast to the wide oceans which are 'glass-clear and blue'.

The way in which the poet appeals to our senses in his descriptions also made this poem an enjoyable read. Much as the young poet must have been, we are transported to these foreign lands because they are brought to life in such a way that we can not only see the 'glass-clear and blue' sea, but can also smell the fragrance of the jasmine on the walls and feel the heat of the sun in a place where 'the green leaves of the orange trees burn'. The repetition of this description of the burning leaves emphasises the warmth of a land which is 'never drab or cold'.

Whenever you point out a feature of style (repetition in this case) use a verb to say what that feature does in the poem. Here I say that it emphasises the warmth of the foreign lands.

