

Examcraft 2025 – Tracy K. Smith Question and Essay

“Tracy K. Smith uses evocative imagery to create poetry that reveals the powerful role of memory in life.”

Discuss this statement, developing your response with reference to the poetry by Tracy K. Smith on your Leaving Certificate English course.

Essay Plan: Evocative Imagery and Memory in Smith’s Poetry

Introduction

- Smith explores memory through vivid, emotionally resonant imagery.
- Memory reveals trauma, tenderness, identity and loss.
- Include Erskine Clarke’s quote: Smith gives ‘voice to the long dead’.

‘The Searchers’

Paragraph 1

- Memory as trauma and survival (‘He wants to kill her for surviving’).
- Physical imagery (‘life pools there’) shows internalised fear.

Paragraph 2

- Community’s desire to forget (‘the impossible wish, to forget’).
- Rhetorical question invites universal reflection on memory.

'Joy'

Paragraph 3

- Memory of final days (tubes and 'dumplings and kale').
- Physical and sensory imagery makes loss intimate.

Paragraph 4

- Childhood moment gains power in hindsight ('These will be my medicine').
- Ending links memory to belief ('What do you believe in?').

'Ghazal'

Paragraph 5

- Memory as resistance and naming ('crop: our name').
- Refrain reinforces identity and cultural loss.

Paragraph 6

- Nature as memory's vessel ('blown from tree to tree').
- Repetition creates emotional weight ('fraught, fraught name').

'The Museum of Obsolescence'

Paragraph 7

- Forgotten power ('green money') shows memory as spectacle.
- Visitor reactions ('titter') reveal detachment.

Paragraph 8

- Final image (planet, mirror) warns of erased memory.
- Understatement highlights need for active remembering.

Conclusion

- Smith's imagery preserves and reclaims memory.
- Memory is personal, cultural and historical.
- Restate Clarke's idea: poetry restores dignity through remembrance.

Sample Essay: Tracy K. Smith explores the role of memory with clarity and emotional depth, using vivid imagery to examine personal loss, cultural identity and historical trauma. Her poems are often shaped by experience but extend into philosophical reflection, questioning what it means to survive, to belong and to remember. In 'The Searchers', 'Joy', 'Ghazal' and 'The Museum of Obsolescence', Smith uses memory to illuminate both the inner lives of individuals and the broader forces that shape identity. As Toi Derricotte observes, while Smith's surfaces are "beautiful and serene", her poems contain "a sense of the unknown vastness" beneath. Her work demonstrates that memory is never neutral. It can be painful, distorted or comforting, but it is always powerful.

Smith's 'The Searchers' uses disturbing and often uncomfortable imagery to show memory as both trauma and endurance. The line 'He wants to kill her for surviving' opens the poem with a brutal contradiction. Survival is not met with relief but with violence, and memory becomes something threatening. The girl, Debbie, is described 'clutching / Her skirt as if life pools there', an image that evokes vulnerability and instinctive self-protection. Her survival

is physical, but her experience has marked her. Memory resides not in storytelling but in gesture and fear. The poem does not reconstruct her past but presents the moment she is forced to re-enter a society that sees her as damaged.

Later in the poem, Smith reflects on what it means to carry memory that others wish to erase. The speaker describes her return 'Into town where faces / She barely remembers // Smile into her fear / With questions and the wish, / The impossible wish, to forget.' These lines, broken by enjambment, reflect the unease of reintegration. The town's politeness masks discomfort. Their wish for her to forget is termed 'impossible', suggesting that memory persists even when painful. The rhetorical question 'What does living do to any of us?' expands the poem's focus from one person to all of us. The poem shows that memory is not always something we choose; it is something we live with.

A more intimate portrayal of memory appears in 'Joy', where Smith recalls the final days of her mother's life. The poem opens with an image of medical intervention: 'There will be a traffic / Of transparent tubes striking / Their compromise with the body.' The word 'compromise' implies a reluctant negotiation between life and death. The clear imagery of tubes and the body situates memory in the realm of the physical and the real. The speaker remembers small details, like her mother's love for 'dumplings and kale', anchoring memory in food, routine and care. These personal markers make loss bearable and remembrance tender.

The second half of the poem turns to a childhood moment that gains meaning through memory. The speaker recalls her mother 'Playing hospital with your sisters', offering raisins as medicine. This innocent act becomes powerful when viewed through the lens of illness and loss. Smith closes the poem with

the metaphor ‘a dark chamber // Around a chord of light’, suggesting the nearness of death but also a lingering presence. The final question, ‘What do you believe in?’, connects memory to belief. The poem implies that memory, shaped by love and attention, forms the foundation of what we trust in others and ourselves.

The poem ‘Ghazal’ explores how collective memory is passed down through generations, especially among those whose names, identities and histories were stolen. Using the traditional structure of a ghazal, Smith repeats the phrase ‘our name’ at the end of each couplet. This refrain becomes a call to remembrance, resistance and mourning. She begins with a stark image of forced labour and deprivation: ‘The wide rows stretch on into death / Like famished birds, my hands strip each stalk of its stolen / crop: our name.’ The metaphor of ‘famished birds’ evokes both the hunger of the workers and the brutality of the work. The image of a ‘stolen crop’ speaks not only to theft of goods but to the theft of people’s labour, lives and lineage.

As the poem progresses, the tone becomes more reflective. Smith writes, ‘Our name is blown from tree to tree’, suggesting that memory, though scattered, endures in nature and the landscape. The couplet that refers to ‘a tribe of goats / On a mountain above a lake’ introduces a quieter, symbolic note. Here, memory seems to live outside of language, carried by things that remain untouched. The final line—‘Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name’—intensifies the emotional impact. Repetition mimics chant, insistence and grief. Through this structure and these images, Smith suggests that memory can be painful but must still be preserved.

A more speculative treatment of memory appears in ‘The Museum of Obsolescence’, where Smith imagines a future in which once-powerful

symbols—‘green money, and oil in drums’—have been reduced to exhibits. Memory is framed as spectacle, and the inclusion of ‘a living man’ as part of the collection blurs the line between object and person. Visitors ‘titter’, and the word hints at discomfort and detachment. The museum becomes a metaphor for how societies distance themselves from difficult truths. Smith invites readers to question who decides what is remembered, and what is left behind.

The closing image is bleak but striking: ‘an image of the old planet taken from space’, followed by a mirror described as ‘someone’s idea of a joke’. The placement of the mirror suggests the need for reflection, yet the dismissive phrasing implies that this opportunity may be wasted. The idea that Earth itself is now an artefact shows how memory, if not actively preserved, may fade into irrelevance. The poem uses understatement and irony to highlight the dangers of forgetting. Memory, here, must be intentional or it risks being turned into decoration.

Across these four poems, Smith explores the emotional, political and cultural weight of memory. Whether shaped by personal grief, historical trauma or imagined futures, her poems insist that memory is central to human experience. Her poetic images are detailed and precise, but they always gesture beyond themselves—to what is hidden, difficult or lost. As Erskine Clarke notes, Smith’s work gives “voice to the long dead”, allowing their stories to echo in the present. Through her careful, lyrical attention to detail, Smith reminds us that to remember is to honour, and to forget is to risk repeating what should have been left behind.