

Examcraft 2025 – Sample Essay on Tracy K. Smith

The Question:

“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.

Plan:

Introduction

- Smith explores memory as personal, historical, and cultural.
- Her imagery is precise, layered, and emotionally resonant.
- Focus on: ‘Joy’, ‘The Museum of Obsolescence’, ‘I am 60 odd years of age’, ‘Ghazal’.

‘Joy’

- Medical and sensory imagery captures final days of speaker’s mother (‘transparent tubes’).
- Memory rooted in personal detail (‘dumplings and kale’).
- Childhood anecdote (‘Playing hospital’) becomes poignant.
- Visual and auditory imagery (‘dark chamber / Around a chord of light’) links memory to belief.

'The Museum of Obsolescence'

- Surreal imagery critiques discarded power ('green money', 'a living man').
- Memory shown as selective and trivialised.
- Final image of Earth and mirror raises questions about self-awareness and loss.
- Irony and understatement warn of collective amnesia ('Amnesia' means a loss of memory. Remember, you can use antonyms as well as synonyms when answering the question.)

'I am 60 odd years of age'

- Documentary fragments voice overlooked histories ('I am the claimant...', 'I cannot read...').
- Repetition and structure assert identity.
- Stark imagery of illness and naming ('name I wore before slavery') highlights erasure.
- Memory functions as both resistance and reclamation.

'Ghazal'

- Refrain 'our name' evokes stolen identity.
- Agricultural and natural imagery links labour to loss ('famished birds', 'stolen crop').
- Abstract images suggest memory beyond language ('tribe of goats').
- Repetition in final couplet emphasises pain and presence ('our fraught, fraught name').

Conclusion

- Memory in Smith's poetry preserves, resists, and transforms.
- Imagery makes the hidden visible and the lost unforgettable.

“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.

Sample Essay: Tracy K. Smith's poetry explores the lasting power of memory using clear, vivid imagery. Her poems show that memory can preserve love, uncover injustice and help people reclaim their identity. In 'Joy', 'The Museum of Obsolescence', 'I am 60 odd years of age' and 'Ghazal', she presents memory as something both personal and political. Her images are often emotionally charged and visually strong, helping the reader connect with both individual stories and collective histories. As Erskine Clarke observes, Smith gives 'voice to the long dead, granting them space and dignity on the page'. Her poetry shows that memory is not something passive. It is a powerful force that allows us to speak, survive and resist.

Across these four poems, Smith shows that memory is not just something we keep inside: it is something we use to survive, question the world and speak out.

In 'Joy', Smith uses personal memories to show how the love between a mother and daughter continues, even during illness and death. At the start of the poem, the speaker describes her mother's final days with a powerful

medical image: 'Soon // There will be a traffic / Of transparent tubes striking / Their compromise with the body'. The repeated 't' sounds in 'transparent tubes' create a quiet rhythm, while the word 'compromise' shows how the mother's body is slowly giving in. Smith also uses sensory memory to keep her mother alive in the speaker's mind. The line about her favourite meal, 'dumplings and kale', is simple but meaningful. It shows how food and smell can connect us to the people we love.

Later in the poem, Smith remembers her mother as a child, 'Playing hospital with your sisters'. In a moment of play, the child says, 'These will be my medicine', holding a handful of raisins. This moment is both playful and deeply moving. It reminds us that ordinary details often become the most powerful memories. The poem ends with the image of the mother 'listening / To a dark chamber // Around a chord of light'. This poetic picture of death suggests that something beautiful and mysterious remains. The final line, 'What do you believe in?', links memory with belief. In this poem, Smith uses rich and gentle imagery to show how memory can ease the pain of loss and keep love alive.

'The Museum of Obsolescence' is a strikingly original poem in which Smith imagines a strange future where everyday things have become museum exhibits. The poem begins with images of old power such as 'green money, and oil in drums', and even includes 'a living man' as part of the display. This idea is deeply unsettling. It suggests that the things people once valued, even human beings, have become useless or forgotten. The museum itself becomes a symbol of memory, but the visitors seem amused rather than thoughtful. The use of the word 'titter' suggests that memory can be shallow or even mocked if people don't respect it.

The last image in the poem adds to this warning. The speaker describes ‘an image of the old planet taken from space’, just after a mirror, which she calls ‘someone’s idea of a joke’. The picture of Earth as an exhibit, along with the mirror, shows how people may ignore the truth even when it’s right in front of them. The word ‘joke’ points to how little people may care about what they have lost. Smith uses quiet, careful language to suggest that forgetting important things can lead to real damage. This poem shows that memory needs attention and care, or it may become empty.

‘I am 60 odd years of age’ is a moving historical memory brought to life by using the real words of African American veterans and their families. These voices come from pension claims after the Civil War. By arranging their words into a poem, Smith gives these speakers the space and dignity they were often denied. Lines such as ‘I am the claimant in this case’ and ‘I cannot read nor write’ are simple but strong. They show the effort people made to tell their stories. The repeated phrases create a rhythm of persistence, as if each person is standing up and insisting that they be remembered.

The details in this poem are often painful but honest. The speakers describe their illnesses and injuries without drama: ‘disease of eyes’, and ‘rheumatism’, as proof of what they have lived through. One man says, ‘My full name is Dick Lewis Barnett... / which was the name I wore before / the days of slavery were over’. The phrase ‘wore’ is a powerful choice. It suggests that names were not fully their own, but something they had to carry. The broken sentence structure and use of dashes throughout the poem reflect how hard it was to speak clearly when no one was listening. Smith’s use of real language, with very little change, turns these historical documents into a moving act of remembrance.

In 'Ghazal', Smith uses the structure of a traditional Arabic poem to explore memory, identity and loss. Each couplet ends with the phrase 'our name', which becomes a cry of grief and a demand to be seen. The poem opens with a powerful image of slavery: 'The wide rows stretch on into death / Like famished birds, my hands strip each stalk of its stolen / crop: our name'. The comparison to 'famished birds' shows the hunger and desperation of enslaved workers, while the 'stolen crop' suggests that something vital, like freedom or history, has been taken. The image connects memory to the land and to survival.

As the poem continues, the imagery becomes more symbolic. The line 'perhaps what we seek lives outside of speech, like a tribe of goats / On a mountain above a lake' suggests that memory might live in silence, in nature, or beyond words. The natural setting contrasts with the earlier scenes of violence and work. In the final couplet, the speaker repeats the refrain: 'Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name'. The repetition builds power. The word 'fraught' suggests that the name holds deep pain and struggle. Smith's use of the ghazal form, with its repeated lines and emotional intensity, helps her explore how memory can be broken, but still alive.

In all four poems, Smith shows that memory is not always simple or nostalgic. It is a way to love, to mourn, to fight and to speak. Her imagery makes these memories clear to the reader, whether it is a mother's final breath, a forgotten war veteran's voice, a museum full of failure, or a chant for stolen names. Through these images, memory becomes more than a feeling. It becomes a force. Her poetry reminds us that remembering is not passive: it is an act of witness.

