

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 uses powerful, precise imagery to explore memory in both personal and historical contexts.
- Her work honours both private grief and collective trauma.
- Focus on ‘Joy’, ‘It’s Not’, ‘The Greatest Personal Privation’, and ‘Ghazal’.

‘Joy’

Paragraph 1

- Final days of the speaker’s mother: hospital imagery (‘transparent tubes’) conveys the body’s decline.
- Domestic memory (‘dumplings and kale’) preserves identity and closeness.

Paragraph 2

- Childhood anecdote (‘Playing hospital’) adds tenderness.

- Spiritual and existential memory in final image ('dark chamber / Around a chord of light').

'It's Not'

Paragraph 3

- Father remembered through domestic details ('fruit trees', 'freezer lined with meat').
- Personification of death ('Death was thinking what it owed him') shows peaceful acceptance.

Paragraph 4

- Simile and metaphor sustain presence in absence ('white cloud of his hair', 'graceful crawl').
- Memory transforms grief into connection.

'The Greatest Personal Privation'

Paragraph 5

- Reclaimed historical voices; fragments expose pain and injustice ('Belonging to her', 'Please – The children').
- Repetition and dashes evoke broken lives and loss of identity.

Paragraph 6

- Chorus of memory ('Many, many, very many times') emphasises scale of suffering.
- Poetry as historical reclamation and resistance.

'Ghazal'

Paragraph 7

- Refrain 'our name' central to poem's focus on stolen identity.
- Simile ('like famished birds') and image of 'stolen crop' highlight dehumanisation.

Paragraph 8

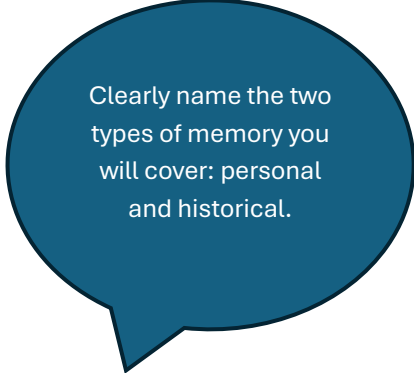
- Repetition in final line creates incantation of memory ('Our name our name...').
- Nature imagery ('blown from tree to tree') implies memory survives even when history forgets.

Conclusion

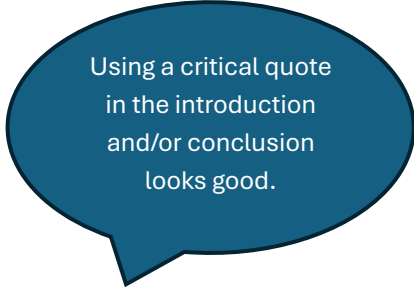
- Across all four poems, Smith uses vivid imagery to give shape to memory—personal and political.
- Her work reveals that memory defines identity, honours grief, and refuses silence.
- As one critic noted, she confronts “the legacy of loss and the act of reclamation” with clarity and grace.

Sample Essay:

Tracy K. Smith's poetry is rich in imagery that evokes both the intimacy of personal memory and the collective memory of historical injustice. Her work examines loss, identity and survival, using language that is often spare but emotionally resonant. Smith is deeply interested in what she has called 'the unresolved region of our life as a nation', and her poems seek to reclaim voices, moments and identities lost to time. In 'Joy', 'It's Not', 'The Greatest Personal Privation', and 'Ghazal', memory functions not simply as recollection but as a powerful and sometimes painful force that defines identity, expresses grief and offers quiet resistance.




Clearly name the two types of memory you will cover: personal and historical.



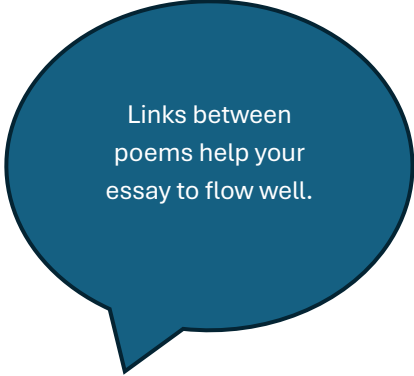
Using a critical quote in the introduction and/or conclusion looks good.

In 'Joy', Smith's imagery offers a tender portrait of her mother's final days, showing how memory and love are embedded in the smallest gestures. The poem opens with a clinical yet compassionate description of the dying body: 'Soon // There will be a traffic / Of transparent tubes striking / Their compromise with the body'. The use of alliteration in 'transparent tubes' and the juxtaposition of 'traffic' with the word 'compromise' suggest both the mechanical reality of hospital care and the delicate balance between body and spirit. These images are not only visual but tactile, drawing the reader into the experience of watching a loved one fade. The speaker's memory is vivid, rooted in sensory details that preserve the mother's personality. The meal of 'dumplings and kale' is not just food but a symbol of shared heritage, anchoring the speaker in familial and cultural memory.



Be sure to focus on poetic techniques and how they express the message.

This emotional intimacy continues as Smith evokes moments from her mother's childhood. The image of the speaker's mother 'Playing hospital with your sisters' becomes a poignant reflection on innocence in contrast to the reality of terminal illness. When the child says, 'These will be my medicine', clutching raisins, it is both a literal act and a metaphor for hope. The memory is bittersweet, suggesting that even play contains an unconscious preparation for the future. In the final lines, the speaker imagines her mother 'listening / To a dark chamber // Around a chord of light'. This powerful metaphor suggests that even in death, some essential part of the self is preserved. The rhetorical question that closes the poem—'What do you believe in?'—highlights Smith's philosophical concern with what endures beyond loss. In 'Joy', evocative imagery gives shape to memory and affirms its emotional and spiritual significance.



Links between poems help your essay to flow well.

The role of memory in 'It's Not' is similarly central. The poem recalls the poet's father through tangible images: 'the fruit trees / Heavy in his garden', 'the freezer lined with meat', 'the aisles of tools'. These are not grand symbols but familiar, domestic details that define a life. The cumulative effect of this imagery is to suggest that memory is grounded in place and routine. When Smith writes, 'Death was thinking what it owed him', she uses personification to reflect on the inevitability of death, while maintaining a tone of dignity and peace. The implication is that memory allows the speaker to resist despair, because the father remains present in the details he once touched and arranged.

Smith's use of metaphor in this poem deepens the emotional effect. The line 'He is only gone so far as we can tell' challenges the idea of absolute absence. Memory is shown to sustain connection, even across the boundary of death.

The father's presence is glimpsed again in the image of 'the white cloud of his hair / In the distance like an eternity'. The simile suggests both physical distance and emotional permanence. When Smith refers to her father's swimming as 'his slow, / Graceful crawl', the image becomes both a description and a symbol. The body moves forward with effort, sustained by habit and determination. Through its measured pace and graceful language, 'It's Not' honours memory as an act of endurance and quiet affirmation.

In 'The Greatest Personal Privation', memory becomes a site of historical pain, resistance and dignity. This erasure poem takes phrases from the letters of white slaveowners and recasts them as the words of the enslaved, creating a powerful act of reclamation. The poem opens with the simple but devastating line: 'It is a painful and harassing business / Belonging to her.' The word 'belonging' is stripped of sentiment and shown for what it is: a cruel denial of identity. In the final section, Smith uses fragmented dialogue to convey the emotional violence of family separation: 'Please – // We cannot – // Please – // The children –'. The repetition and dashes mirror broken voices and unfinished pleas. The agony is palpable, but the structure also allows space for the reader to bear witness.

Smith reinforces the idea that memory, even when inherited or imagined, can restore dignity to those erased by history. The repeated phrase 'Many, many, very many times' is first used in a tone of piety, and then reappears as lament. This repetition functions as both accusation and mourning. It also links the voices in the poem into a kind of chorus, which gives weight to their suffering and implies its scale. Smith has said that she wanted to give voice to 'the long dead' and allow them to 'be heard and listened to in a way that did not happen during their lifetime'. In this poem, evocative language allows

these voices to take form through remembered or recovered words, reclaiming their place in collective memory.

The same concern with identity and historical loss is evident in 'Ghazal', a poem that turns the idea of memory into a lyrical refrain. Structured as a traditional ghazal, the poem ends each couplet with the phrase 'our name', making the loss and recovery of identity its central theme. The first couplet sets the tone: 'The wide rows stretch on into death / Like famished birds, my hands strip each stalk of its stolen / crop: our name.' The simile 'like famished birds' evokes the dehumanising hunger of enslaved labourers, while the final image of a 'stolen crop' becomes a metaphor for the theft of identity. Names were taken, replaced, or repeated, leaving a blank where history should have been.

As the poem progresses, the refrain accumulates weight and urgency. In the final line, Smith writes: 'Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name.' The repetition becomes incantatory, demanding acknowledgement. The word 'fraught' is repeated to emphasise the burden memory carries—history distorted, lineage broken, identity withheld. Smith contrasts this with natural imagery—'blown from tree to tree'—suggesting that memory may still live in the landscape, even when lost from written record. The metaphor 'History is a ship forever setting sail' underscores the idea that the past is never fixed. Memory travels, recurs, and surfaces, refusing to be silenced.

In conclusion, Smith's use of evocative imagery across these four poems transforms memory into something dynamic and essential. Whether recalling a parent's gentle habits, reclaiming the silenced voice of the enslaved, or meditating on the legacy of a name, her work affirms memory as

a force that both defines and preserves. As one critic observed, her poetry confronts ‘the legacy of loss and the act of reclamation’ with precision and grace. Through her language, Smith ensures that nothing is truly forgotten. *(990 words. This would be a little over four pages of handwriting for most students.)*