

## Unseen Poetry – An Introduction

In this section, worth 20 marks, you will be asked questions on a poem you have probably never seen before. Remember, the poem has been carefully chosen to be accessible to Leaving Cert students so the chances are that you will understand it fairly easily if you approach it calmly and sensibly.

It is worth remembering the unseen poem is worth five per cent of your English exam. That could easily mean the difference between an A or a B.

Leave the unseen poem until last, and spend about twenty minutes on it. Read the poem three times before attempting the questions. It can be helpful to read the questions after the first reading, as they can set you on the right path or show you where you should focus your attention.

When you are reading the poem, consider the following:

- **Introduction** – Is there an introduction to the poem? If there is, be sure to read it. It is there for a reason. If none is needed, none is given.
- **Title** – Does the title tell you anything about the theme of the poem? Does it set up expectations which are perhaps fulfilled or shattered as you read on? The title of the poem is very important and the poet spent quite some time choosing it, so don't ignore it.
- **Theme** – What is the main message of the poem? Love is a very common theme, as are war, childhood, memories, and the beauty of nature.
- **Tone** – the feelings and attitude of the poet towards the subject of the poem. Think of the tone of voice the poet would use if reading this poem aloud. Would the tone change as the poem progresses? Would some parts be read in a loud, excited voice and some in a quieter manner? The tone can change several times throughout the poem. If you notice changes as you are reading through it, jot them down on the page beside the relevant lines in the poem.
- **Rhythm** - Is the pace of the poem fast or slow? Does this tell us anything about the theme or the tone? (A slow rhythm is often associated with sadness.) What effect does the rhythm have? Does the rhythm vary? If so, why? Poems can have exciting

moments in between calm, reflective ones. Look at the punctuation. Is there end line punctuation? That can slow the rhythm of the poem. Is there enjambment/run-on lines? That can speed up the rhythm of the poem. A full stop at the end of the poem can suggest closure and can tell us that the poet has come to some sort of understanding/resolution of the issue.

- **Rhyme scheme** – Is there a rhyme scheme? If so, what effect does it have on the poem? For example, a poem written in rhyming couplets has a definite rhythm, and single ideas are often contained within a couplet. A poet may use a rhyming couplet at the end of the poem in order to focus our attention on the main message of the poem or to make the lines in the couplet stand out. If there is no rhyme scheme, ask yourself why not? Or does the poem only contain full rhyme at the end? If so, this may indicate closure or may link the lines / ideas in our minds.
- **Tenses** - Is the poem in the past, present or conditional tense, for example? Does the tense change? Does this indicate that the poet has reached a conclusion? Or does the switch to the present tense show that the poet has become deeply involved with the issue? Is something unresolved?
- **Language– imagery, sounds etc.** - This is your opportunity to use those key literary terms. It is important that you do so. Start with sound: is there any alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia etc.? Remember, like drama, poetry is really meant to be read aloud and the sound is very important.
- **To whom is the poet speaking?** - Does the poet address the subject of the poem directly? This can create a sense of intimacy. Does the poet address the reader directly? Use of the word ‘we’ can make the reader feel connected with the poet. Does the poet speak in the poem or does he assume another persona? If so, why?
- **Your response to the poem** – did you like it? Why? Why not? You must explain yourself fully here. Don’t worry if you didn’t understand every aspect of the poem. The question(s) will not require you to do so. And remember, your response is valid if you can support it with quotation from or reference to the poem.

**NB** A common mistake is for students to point out features of style but not to explain the effect they have on the poem. Every time you point out a feature of style, use a verb to say what effect it has: *‘The soft ‘l’ and ‘s’ sounds in the alliterative ‘I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore’ add to the peaceful atmosphere of the poem.’*

## Sample Answers

### 2005 Leaving Certificate Unseen Poetry

#### **BACK YARD**

Shine on, O moon of summer.  
Shine to the leaves of grass, catalpa and oak,  
All silver under your rain tonight.

An Italian boy is sending songs to you tonight from an accordion.  
A Polish boy is out with his best girl; they marry next month;  
tonight they are throwing you kisses.

An old man next door is dreaming over a sheen  
that sits in a cherry tree in his back yard.

The clocks say I must go—I stay here sitting on the back porch  
drinking white thoughts you rain down.

Shine on, O moon,  
Shake out more and more silver changes.

*Carl Sandburg*

- (a) Do you like the world that the poet describes in this poem? Give reasons for your answer supporting them by reference to the text. (10)

(b) Choose a line or two that you find particularly appealing and explain why. (10)

**OR**

- Write a personal response to the poem 'Back Yard'. (20)

1. (a) Do you like the world that the poet describes in this poem? Give reasons for your answer supporting them by reference to the text. (10)

**Note:** You are not expected to give a lengthy answer here. Two paragraphs would be quite sufficient. The marking scheme requires students to identify the 'world' of the poem and say why it does or does not appeal to them. My sample answers may be longer than you would be able to write in an exam situation, but it is no harm to see what can be said on the topic.

**Plan:**

1. World is exotic in many ways (plants, nationalities) but also familiar (nature, human nature)
2. Positive message, contemplative atmosphere & celebratory tone

I find the world the poet describes very appealing. The blend of the exotic and familiar, of the domestic and the wider world caught my attention from the start. The title 'Back Yard', suggests the poem is set in America, an idea which is picked up again when the poet says he is 'sitting on the back porch', but the domestic setting of the poem is familiar to us. The 'catalpa' may be unfamiliar to us, but cherry, oak and grass are not. The people may be from different nationalities: 'an Italian boy' and 'a Polish boy', but their actions transcend their nationalities. One is caught up in the playing of music, while the other is out with his girlfriend. The moon shines down on them just as it shines down on all people, regardless of age or nationality. The old man is lost in his dreams too, looking at the beauty of his cherry tree illuminated by the moon. The universality of the moonshine reminds us of the universality of human nature, and this makes the world of the poem very attractive and one to which I can easily relate.

Another aspect of the world of the poem which I really enjoyed was the atmosphere evoked throughout. We are drawn into a contemplative place where the characters' actions appear to be paying homage to the moon. The accordion player is sending his songs to the moon, and the young couple are 'throwing [the moon] kisses'. The old man is lost in thought as he looks at the moonlit cherry tree. Even the poet does not want to leave this beautiful scene. The world of the poem here is a place of celebration, contemplation and, I think, happiness. As such, it is a most attractive place.

(b) Choose a line or two that you find particularly appealing and explain why. (10)

The lines which I find particularly appealing are the final two:

Shine on, O moon,  
Shake out more and more silver changes.

As in the rest of the poem, the poet addresses the moon directly, as if it were a living being. This creates a sense of intimacy and makes the atmosphere of the poem somehow comforting. There is a connection between the moon and the people in the poem, and their homage to the moon links them to one another. There is also something celebratory in the way the poet asks the moon to 'Shine on'. He seems to revel in the beauty of the moonshine and in the mood it evokes in those who bathe in its light and he wants this feeling to continue.

The sounds in the last two lines also appealed to me. The 'sh' sounds in 'Shine' and 'Shake' and the 's' and 'ch' sounds in 'silver changes' are gentle and quiet, almost as if the poet is whispering to the moon and does not want to break the magic of the moment by speaking too loudly. The broad vowel sounds slow down the movement of the line, which I think is in keeping with the overall mood of contemplation and dreaming.

Finally, I was very taken with the expression 'silver changes'. This seemed to me to have a double meaning. First, it made me think of the moon as almost dropping treasure on those below: 'silver changes' reminded me of silver coins, or change being shaken from a pocket or a purse. It also made me imagine the moon as a silver coin in the sky. Second, it made me reflect on the passing of time, and the fact that although the moon remains constant, those beneath it grow old and die. I thought of the contrast between the old man and the boys mentioned earlier in the poem. They are living their dream, he is left only with the memories of his.

These may be short lines, but they had a powerful effect on me nonetheless.

## **2003 Leaving Certificate Unseen Poetry**

*The poet, Rosita Boland, reflects on the tragedy of a war-torn region in our world.*

### **BUTTERFLIES**

In Bosnia, there are landmines  
Decorated with butterflies  
And left on the grassy pathways  
Of rural villages.

The children come, quivering down  
Familiar lanes and fields.  
Hands outstretched, they reach triumphant  
For these bright, elusive insects -  
Themselves becoming winged in the act.  
Gaudy and ephemeral.

1. Write a short response to the above poem, highlighting the impact it makes on you.  
(20)

This poem affected me strongly. The title, 'Butterflies', suggests something beautiful and delicate and lovely, but that expectation was blown away once I read on.

The language is simple and the tone of the poem is almost chatty in the first stanza. It is as if Boland wants to stress the difference between normality and the grotesque reality for the children in Bosnia during the war. The image of the landmines decorated with butterflies is a horrific one. The juxtaposition of fragile beauty and brutal violence is jarring and I found it very disturbing. I was also struck by the emphasis on the innocence of the victims. Of course, no victim of a landmine deserves their fate, but the mention of 'grassy pathways' and 'rural villages' conjures up an image of a place that should be far removed from the battlefield, and yet the war has been brought even to this idyllic place.

The introduction of the children in the second stanza adds to this impression. They are described as 'quivering' - a word which both suggests the gentle movement of butterflies'

wings in the breeze and, at the same time, fear or shaking. Yet, in this case, it is the reader who is quivering in horrified anticipation of what must come. I felt oddly helpless as I read of the children's 'Hands outstretched', reaching unwittingly for something that would bring them – not the joy they had anticipated – but a violent, bloody death. The link between the children and the butterflies is continued when Boland describes the children becoming 'winged' and 'ephemeral'. The image of the children's bodies flying through the air and the emphasis on the shortness of their lives moved me a great deal.

Boland's understatement in this poem added to the powerful impact it had on me. Her seemingly casual mention of the 'familiar lanes and fields' was poignant, as it made me think of the fact that the children had lived here all their lives and undoubtedly felt happy and safe in their home place. Yet the lurking menace of the landmines hangs over them from the first line of the poem.

This poem, while not comfortable reading, is one which I found both haunting and sobering. It seems to me to be a fitting tribute to innocent children everywhere who – much like the baby in Eavan Boland's 'Child of Our Times' - are the victims of a violent adult world.