



Leaving Cert English

Unseen Poetry Notes

How to answer the Unseen Poetry Question





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Unseen Poetry

In this question, you will be presented with a poem that you will not have studied. You will be asked to answer questions on the poem. 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.

Where do you get marks?

While marking your answer, the examiner will be adhering to the PCLM marking scheme. It is important for you to be aware of what the examiner is looking for, so you can make it easy for them to give you marks.

The PCLM marking scheme refers to:

Purpose

You will be marked on the PURPOSE of your answer – This means you will be marked according to how well your answer fits the question asked. If you stray from the question and start to ramble, you will lose PURPOSE marks. For example, if you are asked to give a personal response, you must frequently use language like “this made me feel”, “this reminded me of” and “I understood how the poet felt,” etc. Every time the examiner sees you do this, they will mark the page with PR for Personal Response - or whatever initials match the purpose of the question. The more times the examiner is able to write those initials on your answer, the higher your PURPOSE marks will be.

Coherence

COHERENCE refers to how well your answer is structured. This sounds more difficult than it actually is. The only thing you need to do to pick up these marks is to make sure that every idea you present to the examiner has a start, middle and an end. Don't mix up your points, and make sure your answer is clear and easy to understand. If you are making a very clever point about a poem, you don't want it to be lost among other ideas and arguments. Basically, present your opinion on the poem, explain it (using a quote), and then tell the examiner how you feel about it.



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STARTS HERE**



e.g. “I believe that the poet is trying to convey the sleepy feeling of a Sunday afternoon in this poem. The gentle use of sibilance brings a soft sound to the poem, and the rounded vowels slow the stanzas down: [QUOTE]. I find this poem incredibly calming, and I feel like the poet has succeeded in conveying the mood of the setting very well.”

Language

While you are writing your answer, it is important that you communicate your ideas clearly. The Examiner will award you marks for LANGUAGE, and you can pick these marks up easily through demonstrating a good vocabulary, writing proper sentences in the correct syntax, using appropriate punctuation, and overall using language appropriate to the question. Don't use over-familiar language (e.g. “So, anyway”, “It's totally good”), and don't over-use exclamation marks.

Mechanics

In this question, you will be marked on the MECHANICS of your answer. This refers to your spelling and grammar – You should always aim to get full marks in this section.

Tackling the question

In order to answer unseen poetry questions, you must work from the “outside” of the poem, to the “inside” of the poem.

Start with the **title**. What image does it inspire? Does it have a double meaning in the context of the poem?

Next, take a look at the **layout** of the poem.

- How many stanzas does it have?
- How many lines?
- What is the rhyme scheme?

Now we'll start to look at the poem itself. What are the **themes** of the poem?

- What is the poem about?
- What ideas are expressed in the poem?
- What emotions are described?

After you have done that, you can focus on the **persona** of the poem

- Who is speaking in the poem?



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- Is it the poet themselves?
- Or is it another character that they are writing for?
- Is it an omniscient voice?

Now we'll move further into the “**inside**” of the poem. Here is a list of possible poetic techniques to look out for when examining the poem.

- What imagery is used?
 - Metaphors
 - A metaphor is a figure of speech that describes a subject by pointing out that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object.
e.g. “She had a heart of gold”.
 - Similes
 - A simile is a figure of speech that compares two things that are alike in some way. To help you identify a simile, know that the words “like” or “as” are typically used.
 - Symbols
 - This is when there is something presented in the poem (an animal, person or object) which you believe actually stands for something else. Perhaps the chilling winter wind in a poem is actually a symbol for the poet’s loneliness.
 - Here is a list of possible symbols that many poets use
 - Flowers = Beauty/impermanence of life
 - Sunrise = New beginnings
 - Water = Purity
 - River = Life
 - Sea = Eternity
 - Garden = Order
 - Spring = New life and energy
 - Autumn = Maturity/fulfilment
 - Winter = Old age/death
 - Don't forget to address any **colours** that appear in the poem, as these can have significance as well.
 - Sensuous language



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- Does the poet try to appeal to all your senses? While you are reading the poem, keep the five sense in mind, and see which ones the poem appeals to. Sight, sound, smell and touch.

Once you have those aspects of the poem covered, you can go into further detail about the poetic techniques used within the poem. Let's look at the **language** of the poem.

- Diction
 - Diction is important in poetry because the choice of words in a work can convey feeling, action, or attitude. Diction can refer to the vocabulary used by the poet (e.g. using "chilled" instead of "cold"), and can also refer to the style of expression – maybe the poet uses poor grammar, or deliberately misspells words.
- Rhyme
 - Does the poem rhyme? Does it have a strict structure?
 - If the poem doesn't rhyme, does this add to the effect of the poem?
- Alliteration
 - Alliteration is the repetition of the same sounds or of the same kinds of sounds at the beginning of words or in stressed syllables
- Assonance
 - Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds to create internal rhyming within phrases or sentences
- Sibilance
 - Sibilance is a term used to describe repeated 's' or 'sh' sounds in a poem.
- Onomatopoeia
 - The use of words that imitate the sounds associated with the objects or actions they refer to. e.g. Snap, buzz, crackle
- Metre
 - The rhythmical pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in verse.
- Repetition

Finally, you need to give a **personal response** to the poem. It's very important that you outline how the poem appeals/does not appeal to you as an individual. This helps the examiner see that you are engaging with the writing of the poem.

- What is your reaction to the poem?



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- Can you relate to the poem?
- What does the poet say to you?
- What is your favourite image from the poem?

Use language and phrases which indicate that you are giving personal response.

- Personally, I think that
- I feel that
- In my opinion
- I get the impression that
- I was impressed/saddened/moved by
- This line reminded me of
- I can empathise with the poet because
- The theme of ... is a universal one, so I found it easy to relate to
- The poet's eye for detail brings ... to life, and evokes in me
- What I most admire about the poetry of (selected poet) is
- The theme is one which has a particular resonance for me because
- The poem opened my eyes to
- I was struck by the image of
- This poem had a profound impact on me because
- I found this image particularly poignant because

Remember! Every poem you have done was an 'unseen poem' when you first started it. Apply what you learned from the prescribed poems to the unseen poem in the exam.

Your answer should be roughly one and a half pages long, and you should complete it within 15-20 minutes, depending on the time you have left. Your answer is worth 20 marks.