

Unseen Poetry Revision Toolkit

1. The Information

- English Literature Paper 2 Section C
- 32 marks (you are not assessed for SPaG) – in total
- 45 minutes – in total
- Q1 is worth 24 marks (approx. 35 mins) and will ask you to analyse one poem
- Q2 is worth 8 marks (approx. 10 mins) and you'll have to compare the poem in Q1 with a second poem

2. A) The Process – How to approach the questions

Question 1

- Read the question and underline any key words
- Look at the question of question 2 to get an idea about what the poem is about
- Read the poem and annotate/make notes to pick out the important parts
- Plan your answer – focus on three/four key quotations – stay focused on the question
- Remember to write about what the poet says, the methods they use and the effect they have

Question 2

- Read the question and underline the key words – you will be asked to compare
- Read and annotate poem
- Think about similarities and differences
- Plan your answer – two/three main points
- This question is about the methods used and the effect on the reader

B) The Process – Five steps to analysing an unseen poem

- Work out what the poem is about – the literal meaning - what is the subject? - Is it written in first person (“I”), second person (“you”) or third person (“he/she”) – think about who the poem is addressing
- Identify the purpose, theme or message – the metaphorical meaning - what is the poet saying – why have they written it – does it put across a message – does it aim to get a response – it may have more than one purpose, theme or message
- Explore the emotions, moods or feelings – think about the different emotions in the poem – identify the mood
- Identify the techniques used – form, structure and language – use subject terminology – what effect do they create
- Include your thoughts and feelings – a personal response – did it have an impact on you – are there different interpretations

3. Example Question

Question 1

Ninetieth Birthday

You go up the long track
That will take a car, but is best walked
On slow foot, noting the lichen
That writes history on the page
Of the grey rock. Trees are about you
At first, but yield to the green bracken,
The nightjar's house: you can hear it spin
On warm evenings; it is still now
In the noonday heat, only the lesser
Voices sound, blu-fly and gnat
And the stream's whisper, As the road climbs,
You will pause for breath and the far sea's
Signal will flash, till you turn again
To the steep track, buttressed with cloud.

And there at the top that old woman,
Born almost a century back
In that stone farm, awaits your coming;
Waits for news of the lost village
She thinks she knows, a place that exists
In her memory only.

You bring her greeting

And praise for having lasted so long
With time's knife shaving the bone.
Yet no bridge joins her own
World with yours, all you can do
Is lean kindly across the abyss
To hear words that were once wise.

R.S. Thomas

In 'Ninetieth Birthday', how does the poet present old age and people's attitudes towards it?

(24 marks)

Question 2

My Grandmother

She kept an antique shop – or it kept her.
Among Apostle spoons and Bristol glass,
The faded silks, the heavy furniture,
She watched her own reflection in the brass
Salvers and silver bowls, as if to prove
Polish was all, there was no need of love.

And I remember how I once refused
To go out with her, since I was afraid.
It was perhaps a wish not to be used
Like antique objects. Though she never said
That she was hurt, I still could feel the guilt
Of that refusal, guessing how she felt.

Later, too frail to keep a shop, she put
All her best things in one narrow room.
The place smelt old, of things too long kept shut,
The smell of absences where shadows come
That can't be polished. There was nothing then
To give her own reflection back again.

And when she died I felt no grief at all,
Only the guilt of what I once refused.
I walked into her room among the tall
Sideboards and cupboards – things she never used
But needed; and no finger marks were there,
Only the new dust falling through the air.

'Ninetieth Birthday' and 'My Grandmother' both explore relationships between young people and the elderly. Compare the ways these relationships are presented in the two poems.

(8 marks)

4. Model Answer

Question 1 (extract of)

The personification of nature in the first stanza, "Voices sound, blue-fly and gnat / And the stream's whisper", reflects the silence of old age, but it also sounds disturbing, with the sibilance adding a secretive tone. The use of enjambment also slows the reader down and creates a sombre tone – reflecting the isolation of the elderly. The slow rhythm is reminiscent of old age – slow with lots of pauses in the middle of lines – also symbolises the action of walking uphill, on "slow foot", pausing for breath.

The message about old age is that the journey of life is hard and can end in loneliness. This is represented through the use of a metaphor, the journey is up a "long track": the old lady is isolated from the real world. On reaching the top it's almost as though the traveller is going towards heaven, "buttressed with cloud". Furthermore, the metaphor, "time's knife shaving the bone", suggests how close the lady is to death, an emotive image that emphasises the gulf between old and young. The old "lean kindly across the abyss" suggesting a rather patronising attitude from young people.

Question 2 (extract of)

In both poems, the language used demonstrates a sense of emotional distance between the narrators and the old women. The distance is emphasised by the metaphorical language used in both poems to describe the women's emotional isolation. In Jennings' poem, the grandmother is surrounded by "The smell of absences", a metaphor which shows that the grandmother's focus on her possessions rather, rather than "love", has left her emotionally isolated. Even though she has "All her best things" around her, she has no close relationships – "absences" surround her rather than people. Similarly, in 'Ninetieth Birthday' Thomas uses metaphorical language to show that the old woman is emotionally cut off, "the abyss" vividly describes the emotional distance, suggesting the narrator finds it difficult to reach her in "her own / World".

5. **Tips/How to get the marks – what is the examiner looking for?**

- Question 1 is worth a lot more marks than Question 2, so in the exam make sure you spend more time on your answer to Question 1
- Remember to include the effect on the reader – what they feel, think and imagine
- Use the correct subject terminology
- Support your points with quotations from the poems
- Stay focused on the topic of the question

6. **Revision resources**

- Youtube: 'Mr Bruff' or 'Stacey Reay' – loads of great videos – all good for revision
- GCSEpod
- Look at unseen poems and work out what the literal and metaphorical meanings are – annotate poems – you could use the poems in the 'Relationships' cluster of your anthology.