

# Edexcel Unseen Poetry



Writing about poetry

# Approaching unseen Poetry



## Objectives:

- To develop strategies to help you answer the question on unseen poetry

# Unseen Poetry

Over the coming lessons we will be learning how to prepare for the unseen poetry section of the GCSE English Literature exam.

In this part of the examination you will be asked to write about a poem that you have not studied before.

You will be provided with a poem and a question. An example of an unseen poetry question can be seen on the following slide.

## Section A: Unseen Poem

*Read the following poem:*

### The Song of the Old Mother

I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow  
Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;  
And then I must scrub and bake and sweep  
Till stars are beginning to blink and peep;  
And the young lie long and dream in their bed  
Of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head,  
And their days go over in idleness,  
And they sigh if the wind but lift a tress:  
While I must work because I am old,  
And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold.

W B YEATS

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**Explain how WB Yeats explores the life of the old woman in the poem. Support your answer with evidence from the poem. (20 marks)**

# What should I do?

In the GCSE English Literature exam, you have approximately **40 minutes** to read the poem and write a response.

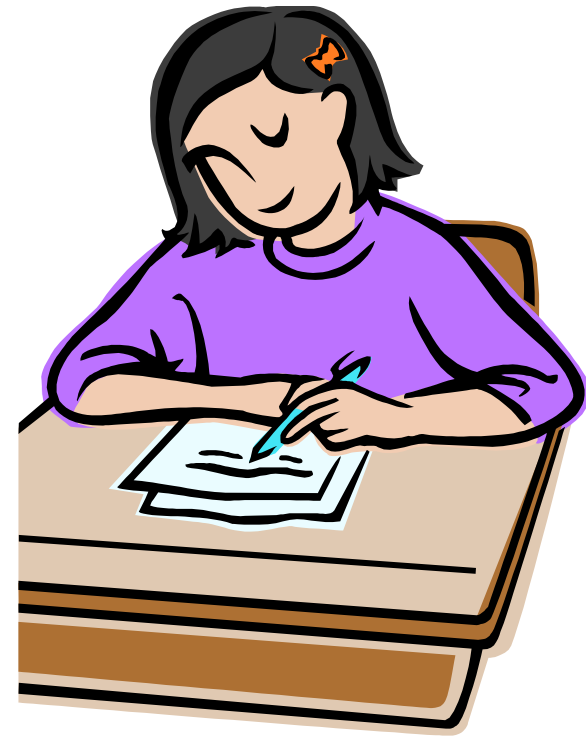
Before you begin, make sure you have read the title and any background information provided with the question. You should then read the poem at least twice.

As you read through you may underline or highlight words that seem important. By the end of your second reading try to get a fixed idea in your mind of what the poem is about.



# A HIT POEM

# Using a mnemonic



## Objectives:

- To learn a mnemonic
- To develop an approach to unseen poetry
- To write a response to an unseen poem in exam conditions

# What is a mnemonic?

A mnemonic is a word or phrase that is used to help remember something more complex.

# A HIT POEM

We are going to use the phrase **A HIT POEM** to help us with the unseen poetry question on the exam.



# What does it mean?

A HIT POEM is a mnemonic that can be used when writing about the unseen poem in the exam. What do you think it stands for?

A

H

I

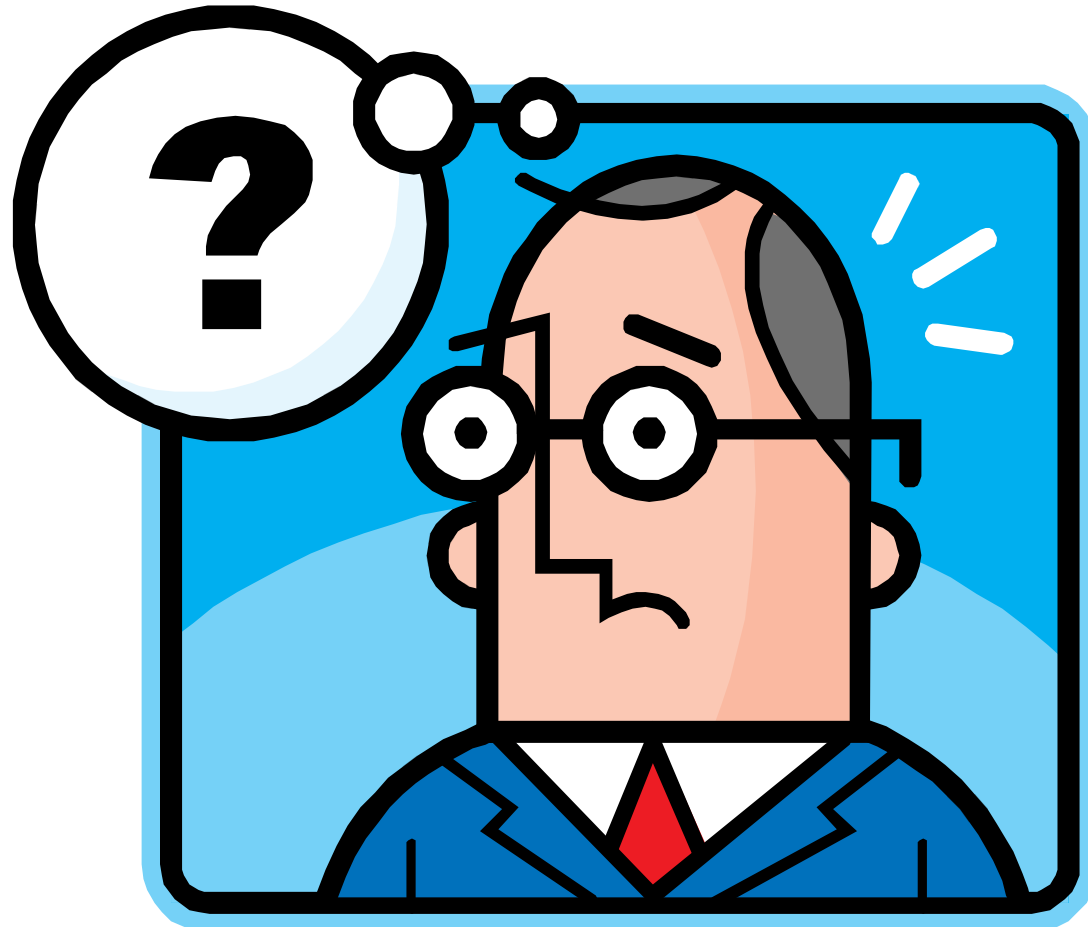
T

P

O

E

M



# What does it mean?

About

Historical/Social Context

Imagery

Techniques

Personal response

Organisation

Emotions

Message

# Making sure

A HIT POEM is only useful if you know what each word refers to.  
Below is a quick explanation of each one.

**A**bout - what happens in the poem - what is it about?

**H**istorical/Social Context - Any important contextual information. E.G. it may be a war poem from World War One

**I**magery - What images are used & what effect do they have?

**T**echniques - What poetic techniques are used?

**P**ersonal response - What are your personal feelings about it?

**O**rganisation - How has the poet structured the poem?

**E**motions - What is the tone or mood?

**M**essage - What is the theme? What is the poet's message?

# About

# About

Let's look at each word in more detail. **About** requires you to write a brief paragraph explaining what the poem is about. To do this you must have read the poem at least twice and have gained a good idea of **what is happening**. Read the **title** and any **background information** provided with the **question**.

We are going to read WB Yeats's poem 'The Song of the Old Mother' again and see if we can work out what it is about. Here is the poem:

## The Song of the Old Mother

I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow  
Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;  
And then I must scrub and bake and sweep  
Till stars are beginning to blink and peep;  
And the young lie long and dream in their bed  
Of the matching of ribbons for bosom and head,  
And their days go over in idleness,  
And they sigh if the wind but lift a tress:  
While I must work because I am old,  
And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold.

W B YEATS

# What is it about?

What happens in the poem? Use the sentence starters to help you write a paragraph about it.

## Song of the Old Mother

'Song of the Old Mother' by \_\_\_\_\_ is about ...

In the first two lines the old woman...

She \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ until \_\_\_\_\_

The woman thinks that young people are...

In the final two lines the woman says that...

At the end of the poem the fire...

# That's what they're talking about!

Below is an example paragraph about the poem.

## Song of the Old Mother

'Song of the Old Mother' by WB Yeats is about an old woman describing the chores that she does every day. In the first two lines the old woman gets out of bed then lights the fire. She cooks and cleans until nightfall. The woman thinks that young people are lazy and have a much easier and carefree life than she does. In the final two lines the woman says that she must work because she is old and at the end of the poem the fire, that took such a lot of effort to light, has gone out again.



This first paragraph is a great example of what you should write in your response. It simply explains what happens in the poem. This shows the examiner that you have a good, solid understanding of the text and it also provides an effective introduction to your essay.

**Historical /  
Social  
Context**



# Historical and Social Context

You only need to mention the historical and social context of the poem if there is some background information provided on the exam paper. It may state that the poem is set in a particular time or place; if this is the case, and it is significant to the theme or message of the poem, then you may mention it in your answer. Look at the example below:

*This poem was written in 1899 by Irish poet WB Yeats. In it an aged Irish peasant woman speaks about her life as a woman and mother.*

## The Song of the Old Mother

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Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;  
And then I must scrub and bake and sweep  
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And the young lie long and dream in their bed  
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And they sigh if the wind but lift a tress:  
While I must work because I am old,  
And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold.

W B YEATS

# Covering the context

Below is an example paragraph about the historical/social context of the poem

## Song of the Old Mother

'Song of the Old Mother' by WB Yeats was written in 1899 and is set in rural Ireland. The poem reveals what life was like for peasant women in those times. As she is a poor and aging woman her life is hard and very repetitive. WB Yeats uses this character to show people what life was like for the poor and elderly in rural Ireland at the turn of the century.



This is a good example of what to write under Historical and Social Context. It simply explains the background of the poem. This tells the examiner that you have a detailed understanding of the text.

However, if the setting and context of the poem are not mentioned in the question just move on to Imagery.

# Imagery

# Imagery

Look at the imagery used in the poem. What type of images are used? Are any images repeated or emphasised? Pick out two or three images that you think are important and write about them. What mood do they create? How do they help to convey what is happening in the poem? Is contrast used by the poet? Do the images create an emotional response?

Consider the above questions while studying the imagery used in 'The Song of the Old Mother'.

## The Song of the Old Mother

I rise in the dawn, and I kneel and blow  
Till the seed of the fire flicker and glow;  
And then I must scrub and bake and sweep  
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W B YEATS

# Writing about imagery

Use the sentence starters below to write a paragraph about the use of imagery in the poem.

## Song of the Old Mother

'Song of the Old Mother' uses imagery very effectively.

Words such as \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ convey...

The image \_\_\_\_\_ creates a mood of...

Contrast is used...

Some imagery has an emotive effect...

# Writing about imagery

## Song of the Old Mother

'Song of the Old Mother' uses imagery very effectively. Words such as 'kneel', 'scrub' and 'sweep' convey the hard physical work that the old woman does every day. The image 'the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold' creates a mood of sadness as, despite all her efforts, the fire goes out. This image of the fire going out could symbolise her life coming to an end as, like the fire, she too is feeble and dying. Contrast is used to reveal the different lifestyles of the old woman and the young idlers. Images used to describe the young include 'the young lie long and dream in their bed' and 'their day goes over in idleness' which are very different to the images of drudgery used to describe the old woman's life. Such imagery has an emotive effect as it is intended to make us feel sympathetic for the woman and irritated by the idle young people.



This is a good example of how to write about imagery. It uses quotations and explores a number of images in detail. The paragraph also discusses mood, contrast and emotive language.

# Techniques

# Poetic Techniques

Look for examples of poetic techniques in the poem.

Does it use any of the following? *Look for examples in the poem and highlight or underline them.*

*Metaphor*

*Simile*

*Alliteration*

*Assonance*

*Repetition*

*Enjambment*

*Hyperbole*

*Onomatopoeia*

*Oxymoron*

*Personification*

*Symbolism*

*If you don't know what these techniques are you must learn and revise them before the exam.*



# Poetic Techniques

Think about the poetic techniques discussed on the last slide. Copy down the table below. Find examples in the poem 'The Song of the Old Mother' and write down the effect created.

Technique	Evidence	Effect
metaphor	'the seed of the fire flicker and glow'	
repetition		
alliteration		

# Poetic Techniques

How does Yeats use poetic devices to get his message across? Use the sentence starters below to help you write a paragraph about it.

## The Song of the Old Mother

Yeats uses a number of poetic devices...

The metaphor...

Repetition of...

Alliteration is used to...

# Poetic Techniques

It is not enough to just spot techniques. You must **name the technique**, **provide a quote** and then **explain the effect** that it creates.

## Song of the Old Mother

Yeats uses a number of poetic techniques in the poem. The metaphor 'the seed of the fire flicker and glow' creates a vivid image of the fire growing from a tiny spark to a full grown blaze whilst the repetition of this image in the final line, 'the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold' emphasises how repetitive her life is. The metaphor of the fire getting weaker and dying also foreshadows the future for the old woman and creates sympathy for her. Alliteration is used to contrast the hard work of the old woman with the life of the young people. In 'the young lie long' the repeated 'l' sound creates a lazy, languid feel to emphasise the carefree, idle lifestyle of the younger generation.



This is how you should write about poetic techniques. The writer identifies the technique, uses quotations and then explains the effect in detail.

# Personal Response

# Personal Response

Here you need to discuss your personal feelings and attitudes to the poem. Select two words or phrases that you like. Write about how these words or phrases make you feel. Maybe they amuse you or make you feel anger or sympathy or maybe they remind you of something personal. Look at the example below:

*I find the final line of the poem very effective. 'And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold' makes me feel sad as it suggests that the old woman, who has had a life of drudgery and poverty, is nearing the end of her days.*

# Organisation

# Organisation

Organisation refers to the structure of the poem. In this section you will be looking for the use of structural devices such as rhyme scheme, rhythm, layout and stanza structure. Again it is not enough just to spot that the poem uses rhyming couplets, for example, you must also **include a quotation and explain the effect created.**

An example paragraph appears on the next slide.

# Organisation

The poem uses rhyming couplets and rhythm very cleverly. The rhyming couplets such as 'blow/glow' and 'old/cold' give the poem a repetitive feel like the woman's work. The use of a steady rhythm makes it read like a song which fits with the title of the poem.

You should write in a similar style when discussing organisation and structure. First of all **identify the structural technique** (EG rhyme, repetition, layout), **provide a quotation** and then **explain the effect** that the poet is trying to achieve.



# Emotion

# Emotion

Emotion refers to the tone or mood of the poem. In this section you will be looking for the poet's feelings and the atmosphere of the text. The poem may have a sad, happy, angry or humorous mood. It may be reflecting on the past, thinking of the present or dreaming of the future. Poems can also have more than one mood so look out for changes of tone partway through.

Here you must quote words or phrases from the poem and explain how they affect the mood of the text. An example is done for you below.

*The poem has a sorrowful tone. The list of hard and menial jobs in the third line 'scrub and bake and sweep' makes the reader feel sorry for the old woman. The contrast between her day to day struggle and the idle life of the young adds to this gloomy mood and the line 'I must work because I am old', which suggests that the woman has no choice but to work until she dies, reinforces the melancholy feeling of the poem.*

Message

# Message

The message is the **purpose** of the poem. Why has it been written? What is the poet trying to say? What are the issue and themes that the poem explores?

It could be about childhood, love, death, old age, war, racism, ageism, relationships, grief, regret, anything! There are often clues in the title and background information.

In this final section you will need to identify the main theme(s) of the poem and say whether the poet has achieved his/her purpose.

# Message

Below is an example of how to write about the poet's message and the themes of a poem.

*'The Song of the Old Mother' deals with a number of themes. Yeats explores old age and the attitudes of elderly people towards the young. The poem also covers issues such as poverty in rural Ireland at the turn of the century. Maybe Yeats was trying to show what life was like for old people who have to do lots of work and perhaps he hopes that the poem will change people's attitudes towards poor elderly people.*

# Model Response

# A HIT POEM model response

Let's now look at how an answer using the A HIT POEM structure.

## Song of the Old Mother

'Song of the Old Mother' by WB Yeats is about an old woman describing the chores that she does every day. In the first two lines the old woman gets out of bed then lights the fire. She does cooking and cleaning until nightfall. The woman thinks that young people are lazy and have a much easier and carefree life than she does. In the final two lines the woman says that she must work because she is old and at the end of the poem the fire, that took her a lot of effort to light, has gone out again.

Written in 1899 and set in rural Ireland the poem reveals what life was like for peasant women in those times. As she is a poor and aging woman, her life is hard and very repetitive. WB Yeats uses this old woman to show what life was like for the poor and elderly in rural Ireland at the turn of the century.

'Song of the Old Mother' uses imagery very effectively. Words such as 'kneel', 'scrub' and 'sweep' convey the hard physical work that the old woman does every day while 'the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold' creates a mood of sadness as, despite all her efforts, the fire goes out. The image of the fire going out could symbolise her life coming to an end as like the fire she too is feeble and dying. Contrast is used to reveal the different lifestyles of the old woman and the young people. Images used to describe the young include 'the young lie long and dream in their bed' and 'their day goes over in idleness' which are very different to the images of drudgery used to describe the old woman's life. Such imagery has an emotive effect as it is intended to make us feel sympathetic for the woman and angry towards the idle young people.

Yeats uses a number of poetic techniques in the poem. The metaphor 'the seed of the fire flicker and glow' creates a vivid image of the fire growing from a tiny spark to a full grown fire whilst the repetition of this image in the final line, 'the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold' emphasises how repetitive her life is. The metaphor of the fire getting weaker and dying also foreshadows the future for the old woman and creates sympathy for her. Alliteration is used to contrast the hard work of the old woman with life of the young people. In 'the young lie long' the repeated 'l' sound creates a lazy, languid feel to emphasise the carefree, idle lifestyle of the younger generation. I find the final line of the poem very effective: 'And the seed of the fire gets feeble and cold' makes me feel sad as it suggests that the old woman, who has had a life of drudgery and poverty, is nearing the end of her days.

The poem uses rhyming couplets and rhythm very cleverly. The rhyming couplets such as 'blow/glow' and 'old/cold' give the poem a repetitive feel like the woman's work and the use of a steady rhythm makes the poem read like a song which fits with the title of the poem.

The poem has a sorrowful tone. The list of hard and menial jobs in the third line 'scrub and bake and sweep' makes the reader feel sorry for the old woman. The contrast between her day to day struggle and the idle life of the young adds to this gloomy mood and the line 'I must work because I am old' which suggests that the woman has no choice but to work until she dies reinforces the melancholic feeling of the poem.

The Song of the Old Mother deals with a number of themes. Yeats explores old age and the attitudes of elderly people towards the young. The poem also covers issues such as poverty and life in rural Ireland at the turn of the century. Maybe Yeats was trying to show what life was like for old people who have to do lots of work and perhaps he hopes that the poem will change people's attitudes towards poor elderly people.



Remember the mnemonic

**A HIT POEM**

Use the phrase **A HIT POEM** to help you with the unseen poetry question on the exam.

# Remember

About

Historical/Social Context

Imagery

Techniques

Personal response

Organisation

Emotions

Message

Good  
Luck!

