



# AQA GCSE English Literature



Your notes

## How to Answer the Unseen Poetry Question

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## Approaching the Unseen Poetry Question

# Approaching the Unseen Poetry Question

Your exam question paper will ask you to answer one question on an unseen poem. This can seem daunting, especially as you have to write about a poem you have never seen before. However, examiners just want to see your ideas and opinions about the poem. The guide below will enable you to best express these ideas and opinions in a way that will gain the highest marks. It includes guides on:

- Answering the question
- Approaching unseen poetry
- Planning your essay
- Writing your essay

## Answering the question

You will be set a question that asks you to write about an unseen poem.

It is tempting to jump straight in and start analysing the given poem immediately. However, completing the steps below first will ensure you answer the question in the way that examiners are looking for.

### 4 key steps to answer the unseen poetry exam question effectively:

1. The very first thing you should do once you open your exam paper is to look at the question:

- This sounds obvious, but it's really crucial to read through the question a few times
- Why is this important? Regardless of what subject you're being examined in, the single-biggest mistake most students make in their exams is not reading the question through carefully enough that they answer the question they **think** they're being asked, rather than the question they've actually been asked
- It's especially important to get this right in your GCSE English Literature exams, because you only have five essay questions to answer across two papers, so if you misread a question, you're potentially costing yourself a large number of marks

2. Identify the **key words** of the question

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In 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley', how does the poet present ideas about living a happy and contented life?

[24 marks]



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- The key words are the focus of the question: the specific themes or ideas the examiners want you to focus on
- For the above question, the key words of the question are “**ideas about living a happy and contented life**”
- This is the theme the examiners want you to explore in your essay
- Do not be tempted to write a question on any other theme: this will affect your overall mark badly, as you won't be directly answering the question!
- In the example above, the theme is **living a happy and contented life**, so make sure you plan and write an essay about this

### 3. Read and analyse the unseen poem

- You should **only now** start reading and analysing the printed poem
  - Your reading and analysis will now be focused on the terms of the question, and the theme you have identified (**living a happy and contented life**)
  - This will change the way you approach the given poem, and make your reading more efficient

### 4. Consider your given poem in terms of this key idea or theme

- Use your definition of the key terms of the question to frame your thinking about the given poem
  - Where do we see examples of **living a happy and contented life** in the given poem?
    - Who is presented as **living a happy and contented life**?
  - How is **living a happy and contented life** presented by the poet?
  - What is the poet's overarching message about **living a happy and contented life**?

## Approaching unseen poetry

Approaching an unseen poem can seem very intimidating, especially as you will have to comment on a poem that you probably have not come across before. However, examiners just want to see you demonstrating your ability to 'notice' things in the text. They do not expect you to know and understand everything about a poem you have just read for the first time, so you should try not to be anxious about addressing this section of the exam. Indeed, examiners often comment that students generally excel in this section, as it is an opportunity for them to write about their own ideas and interpretations of the poem.

This section will provide some suggestions to help you develop a skillset that will enable you to read and explore any unseen poem. You don't have to follow these in the sequence provided, nor are the strategies either exhaustive or to be treated as prescriptive. They are simply a list of some useful strategies that you might wish to use when approaching a poem you have not seen before. This section will show you how to develop some ideas about:



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- [Reading strategies](#)
- [Titles, openings and endings](#)
- [Language patterns and structures](#)

## Reading Strategies

- You only need to have a simple strategy for approaching the unseen poetry question in the exam:
  - Be confident in the repertoire of tools and strategies you already have in order to help you unlock what the poem is about
- Usually the poem will have one big idea and this will generally be stated in the exam question
- When approaching an unseen poem, you should try not to worry about understanding what the meaning of the text is on your first reading:
  - Often that meaning is not unlocked on a first reading so you need to be able to read, pause, reflect and re-read the poem in order to uncover its meanings
- It is important to understand the difference between the surface reading of a poem and the inferential reading
  - The distinction here is between what the poem says and what the poem means
  - Therefore, the examiner wants to see what you think the poem means, not what the poem says
- Using an active and reflective reading strategy, like the one outlined below, can help you to develop a personal response to the poem:

### Reading strategy for Unseen Poems

**First reading:** This is all about your initial impression of the poem:

- First, read the title of the poem, scan over the poem on the page and take in its shape and the white spaces
- Next, read through the poem and work out what the literal meaning of the poem is
  - Remember, there are no right or wrong responses at this point – it's simply what you are thinking after a first read

**Second reading:** This is about looking closer and interrogating what you have read:

- Read the poem for a second time
- This second reading is all about noticing and questioning. Ask yourself:
  - Who is the speaker/narrator?



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- Who are the other characters mentioned?
- What objects/ideas has the poet included?
- Where is the poem set/situated?
- You might also want to begin annotating the poem with some thoughts:
  - *What do you notice as you read? Do you notice any patterns or repeats, in words, phrases, images, rhyme and rhythm? Do you have any questions about the poem?*

**Third reading:** This is all about exploring the meaning and the ideas in the poem

- Read the poem for a third time
  - *What do you think the poet is saying? Why was the poem written?*
  - *What is the message of the poem? What does the poem make you think about? Does the poem make you see something differently? How does the poem relate to yourself, to other poems you have read, or the world/big ideas?*
- It is useful to highlight different aspects of the poem during each repeated reading

### **Titles, openings and endings**

- Sometimes titles can get overlooked and neglected, yet they are often key to understanding the poem's meaning or a reflection on the content
- The title can even become a source of exploration in itself in your response to the poem
  - So feel free to use it as 'evidence' in your essay if it is relevant
- Look at the title of the poem
  - *What predictions can you make about the poem from its title? What do you think the meaning of the title is? Why do you think the poet chose this particular title for their poem?*
- Look at the opening and closing lines of the poem
  - *How do these lines link to the title? Do the opening and closing lines link to each other? What has taken place between the opening and closing lines? Why has the poet used this line to open and end the poem?*

### **Language patterns and structure**

- It is crucial to look more deeply into the poem and to identify any interesting instances of language or structural features
- This is very much about noticing things and considering why they stand out



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- You should try to start to see patterns emerging and begin to see how language and structure are working together to make meanings
- Structure is about the small and big building blocks of the poem
  - It is about how the poem has been put together and the impact this has on the reader to make meaning
    - Think about what the poet has chosen to include at the beginning, middle and end of their poem
    - Can you spot any changes in mood, or tone as the poem progresses?
  - How the poem is structured is part of being able to explore what is said, how it is written and what it might mean
- Some examples a poet might make in terms of structure are: repetition, use of white space, pace created by punctuation, enjambment, caesura or rhythm
  - *How do these structural devices impact the meaning of the poem? What other aspects of structure do you 'notice' as you read the poem? How does the structure link to the opening and ending lines of the poem?*
- You should also consider language choices the poet has made in order to create meaning
- Scan the poem and look for any repeated words, linked words, phrases, images, or any other connections that you can make in relation to language choices
  - *Can you identify any particular vivid/stand-out words or phrases? Can you identify any emotive words? Can you find examples of imagery? How does the imagery help you to understand the ideas in the poem? What patterns can you see?*

Further in-depth information about analysing a poem can be found in the **Writer's Methods & Techniques Section**

## Planning your essay

Planning your essay is absolutely vital to achieve the highest marks. Examiners always stress that the best responses are those that have a logical, well-structured argument that comes with spending time planning an answer. This, in turn, will enable you to achieve the highest marks for each assessment objective. The main assessment objectives are:

AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions</li> <li>▪ Select quotations and references from the given poem</li> </ul>
AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Use analysis of the poet's methods to support your argument</li> </ul>



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- Your plan should include all aspects of your response, covering all of the assessment objectives, but mainly focusing on AO1:
  - Your overall argument, or **thesis** (AO1)
  - Your **topic sentences** for all your paragraphs (AO1)
  - The quotations you will be using and analysing from the given poem (AO1)
  - A sense of why the poet has made the choices they have (AO2)
- Therefore, a plan may look like the following:

Topic sentence	Evidence from unseen poem
Macrae explores ideas about being contented within your own self through her use of metaphor	"while inside his heart was fat with sun"
Macrae uses a first name, almost as an afterthought, which brings a sense of familiarity to the reader	"Harry didn't care for things"
Macrae ends the poem with one word which helps to reinforce what she perceives as the true value of life	"diamonds"

#### Some other tips:

- You do not need to include a counter-argument (disagreeing with the question/including paragraphs which begin "On the other hand")
  - The questions have been designed to enable as many students as possible to write essays
  - Examiners say that the inclusion of a counter-argument is often unnecessary and unhelpful
  - It can affect your AO1 mark negatively
  - Focus only on what is relevant

## Writing your essay

Once you have read and evaluated the question, analysed your given poem, and created a clear plan, you are ready to begin writing. Below is a guide detailing what to include.

Your essay should include:

- An introduction with a **thesis statement**



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- A number of paragraphs (three is ideal!), each covering a separate point. It's a great idea to start each paragraph with a **topic sentence**

- A **conclusion**

### Introduction

- Your introduction should aim to clearly, and briefly, answer the question
- The best way to do this is to include a thesis statement
- A thesis statement is a short statement (one or two sentences) that summarises the main point or claim your argument is making
  - You should include the exact words from the question in your thesis statement
  - Examiners want to see **your own opinion**: your interpretation of what the poet is trying to show
- Your thesis statement should also attempt to explain **why** you think the poet presented the idea or theme of the question in the way that they have: what are they trying to say overall? What are the poet's messages?
  - A good way to think about this is to ask: what is the poet's one big idea in terms of the ideas or themes addressed in the question?
  - Including the poet's message or one big idea helps create a "conceptualised response", which examiners reward the highest marks
- An example of a thesis statement:

### Question:

**27.1** In 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley', how does the poet present ideas about living a happy and contented life?

**[24 marks]**

### Thesis statement:

"In 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley', Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life through 'Harry' and depicts his concept of a simple existence: it is one free from monetary possessions, working in companionship with animals and nature and one that is built on valuable friendships."

### Some other tips:

- Introductions should not be too long, or include all the details of what each paragraph will include
  - You will not be rewarded for including the same information twice, so don't waste time repeating yourself





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- Always include **the poem** in your thesis statement:
- Write your thesis in the third person, not the first person (don't use "I")
  - "I believe that the poet presents ideas about living a happy and contented life in order to..." ≡
  - "Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life ... in order to show ..." ≡

### Paragraphs

- Try to include three separate paragraphs that cover three separate points
  - This will ensure your response is to what examiners call the "full task"
- Start each paragraph with a topic sentence
  - A topic sentence is an opening sentence which details the focus of its paragraph
  - It should include the words of the question
  - All topic sentences must relate to your thesis
  - They should be seen as sub-points that provide a more specific and narrower focus than your thesis statement
  - Everything that follows a topic sentence in a paragraph must support the point it makes

### Example of a topic sentence:

"Macrae uses a first name, 'Harry', almost as an afterthought, which brings a sense of familiarity to the reader."

- Paragraphs should include an analysis of the poem
  - The most important thing is that you include a detailed and expanded analysis of the poet's methods to show how and why they present ideas about living a happy and contented life as they do
- Beware of writing an overly structured paragraph which follows a set pattern
  - You may have learned PEE, PEAL, PEED, or other structures for your paragraphs
  - However, examiners often say that although these are excellent for learning what to include in essays, they can be limiting in an exam
  - Instead, be led by the ideas in the text, and prove your own argument (both the overall thesis and your topic sentences)

### Conclusion

- It is always a good idea to include a conclusion to your essay so that your essay reads coherent and focused on answering the question throughout

- This can result in improved marks for AO1
- However, there is no need to spend a long time writing your conclusion
  - A conclusion for an unseen poetry essay should only summarise the proof you have provided for your thesis
  - It only needs to be two or three sentences long
  - It should include the words of the question and your thesis
  - Remember, you do not get rewarded for including the same information twice

**An example of a conclusion:**

“To conclude, in The Richest Poor Man in the Valley, Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life to illustrate an existence which is free from the fixation on shallow material possessions to one which cherishes what Macrae considers to be the most important things in life, such as treasured friendships, the joy of nature and ultimately being content within your own self.”



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## Writer's Methods & Techniques

Examiners want students to analyse a wide range of poetic methods (AO2), not just the language. Remember, analysing methods means evaluating all of a poet's choices, which includes a lot more than just the words they have chosen. It includes perspective, structure, form, and the meanings behind certain characters and symbols. On this page you will find guides on:

- **Analysing the meaning of a poem**
- **How to quote from the poem in your essay**
- **Analysing the poet's methods**

## Analysing the meaning of a poem

Much more important than knowing a long list of poetic techniques, or analysing a poem's language, form and structure separately, is to try to understand the meaning of the unseen poem, and the ideas the poet explores in their poem. This section will detail how to **begin your analysis with a poet's meaning and ideas**, rather than the methods they have used, and include the following:

- **Ideas and themes, not methods**
- **Tone**
- **Perspective**

### Ideas and themes, not methods

- Examiners warn against structuring your analysis based on the poet's methods
  - This means that they don't like when students identify a poet's method first, and then analyse what it means
    - For example, spotting that a poem includes sibilance, or caesura, and then attempting to say something relevant about that method
    - Often, this won't work because students will fail to identify a convincing link between the method, and the theme of the question
  - Instead, examiners suggest students focus their essays "on meaning and ideas, and use methods as a means of illustrating meaning rather than the methods driving the focus of the response"
    - So your argument should start with the poet's overarching ideas in terms of the question, and then find evidence from the poem that illustrate these ideas
    - This can mean that you will include **fewer poetic techniques**, and use **simpler language** in your response, but **the exam board encourages this**



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- For example, if the question was about how the poet presented ideas about marriage, we wouldn't want to structure our analysis like this:
  - "The poet uses caesura in line 13. This caesura could show how..."≡
- But instead, like this:
  - "The poet presents marriage as something challenging, which requires mutual respect. The poet shows this when..."≡

## Tone

- Another way to understand the meaning and ideas of a poem is to consider its tone
  - In poetry, tone is the 'mood' of a poem
  - This could be the mood that:
    - A speaker expresses in a poem
    - A poet has towards their speaker
    - The poet creates in terms of the setting of the poem
    - The poet creates in terms of the poem's subject matter
- The tone of a poem reflects its ideas and meaning
  - It is therefore something you should consider when thinking about **how** a poet expresses their ideas and meaning
- Because a poem's mood is created by the poet's language, pace and rhythm, symbolism and grammar, it works perfectly as **evidence** in your essay
  - So think: what is the tone the poet is trying to convey in their poem?
    - And how - via their choices - do they create this effect?
- Another sophisticated way to explore ideas and meanings presented by a poet is to consider whether the tone of a poem **changes**:
  - Think: why has the poet created this **tonal shift**?
    - And how - via their poetic choices - do they create this shift?
  - This also enables you to say something relevant about **structure**
- So think first about why a poet has created a certain tone, and what its effect is, before thinking about what methods they have used to create it:
  - For example, you wouldn't want to structure your analysis like this:
    - "The poet uses imagery in line 1. This creates a tone of ..."≡



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- But instead:
  - “Macrae explores ideas about being contented within your own self through her use of metaphor, “while inside his heart was fat with sun” which suggests Harry’s life is one which is filled to the brim with joy and pleasure which...”

## How to quote from the poem in your essay

- The ability to select ‘textual references’ can mean selecting an apt quotation from the poem
- However, it is the skill of precisely unpicking and selecting textual references, rather than using quotations, that’s important
- Therefore, references don’t need to be direct quotations
  - They can be references to things that happen in the poem
  - They can be references to the choices and methods the poet uses (“this idea is expressed when the poet uses first-person narration/a tonal shift/symbolism relating to X in order to...”)
- Examiners repeatedly stress that textual references are just as valuable as direct quotations
  - “You don’t get extra marks for more quotations, but you do get more marks for making plenty of interesting comments about the references you have selected.”
  - The most important thing is that these references are directly related to the ideas and themes you are exploring in your essay, and provide evidence to prove your thesis

## Analysing the poet’s methods

In order to achieve the highest AO2 marks, think about methods as a poet’s choices, not just the language they are using. What overall decisions have they made in relation to language, tone, perspective, structure and form? For what reasons have they made these choices? What overarching message do they help to convey?

### What not to do when analysing a poet’s methods

- Don’t “spot techniques”
  - Examiners dislike when students use overly sophisticated terminology unnecessarily (“polysyndeton”; “epanalepsis”)
  - Knowing the names of sophisticated techniques will not gain you any more marks, especially if these techniques are only “spotted” and a poet’s intentions are not explained
  - Instead of technique spotting, focus your analysis on the reasons why a poet is presenting their poem the way they do
- Don’t unnecessarily label word types



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- Similar to technique spotting, this is when students use “the noun X” or “the verb Y”
- This doesn’t add anything to your analysis
- Instead, examiners suggest you focus on ideas, or images, instead of words, or word types
- Instead of “The poet uses the noun “X” to show...” use “The poet uses the image “X” to show...”
- Don’t limit your analysis to a close reading of a poet’s language
  - You gain marks for explaining all of a poet’s choices, not just their language
  - Only focusing on language therefore limits the mark you will be given
  - Instead, take a whole-text approach and think about a poet’s decisions about:
    - Form
    - Structure
    - Tone
    - Perspective
  - You do not need to include quotations to analyse the above, but you will still be rewarded well by the examiner
- However, do not feel the need to include analysis of form, or structure, if it is not relevant to the question
- Never retell the story of a poem

### What to do when analysing a poet’s methods

- Take a whole-text approach to the poem
  - This could involve commenting on structure: “ ‘at the start / this changes when / in contrast...”
  - This could involve commenting on a poet’s choice of form
    - How have they conformed to, or subverted the form of sonnet/dramatic monologue etc.?
    - What deliberate choices has the poet made with their verse form? Are there reasons there is a regular, or irregular rhyme structure?
  - Think about how tone is presented and develops: why has the poet chosen to present this tone? Why have they included a tonal shift?
  - Are characters in the poem presented differently from each other? Why? What does each represent?
  - Do characters’ relationships with each other change? Why might a poet have chosen to do this?



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- Remember that personas, and characters in a poem, are constructs, not real people
  - Think about what each character's function is in the poem
  - What does the poet use their persona, or characters, to say about the theme?
  - Why has the poet chosen to write their poem in first, or third person?
  - Is the first-person narrator reliable or unreliable?
- Always frame your essay with the poet in mind
  - As the examiners say: "writers use methods, including language and structure, to form and express their ideas – the choices the writer makes are conscious and deliberate"
  - Therefore, write that a poet "highlights X", "suggests Y", "challenges Z"
  - And always use the poet's (last) name in your essay
  - Use the words "so" and "because" to push you to explain your own ideas further
- Zoom out to big ideas in your analysis
  - Go from analysing language, or other writer's choices, to a poet's overall intention, or message
  - This should also link to your thesis, and argument throughout
  - You can begin these "zoom out" sentences with "The poet could be suggesting that because X, then Y" or "The poet could be using the character of X to challenge contemporary ideas about Y"
  - Use modal language to present sophisticated ideas
    - Using words like "could", "may" or "perhaps" shows that you are thinking conceptually



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## Mark Scheme & Model Answer

The mark scheme in English Literature can seem daunting, and difficult to understand. This is because there is no “correct answer” for any essay: the exam board does not provide points that need to be included in any essay, and instead, examiners have to use the mark scheme to place an answer into a level.

It is therefore essential to understand the mark scheme really well yourself: if you understand exactly what you are being assessed on, you understand how to improve. Below you will find sections on:

- **Translating the mark scheme**
- **How to get a Level 6**
- **Tick list for success**

Also included on this page is a **full-mark model answer**, with detailed commentary as to how it would be awarded the top grade.

## Translating the mark scheme

Here is a simple version of the AQA mark scheme for the unseen poetry question, and below, a student-friendly translation of the mark scheme with expert advice and guidance, broken down into the different assessment objectives.

<b>AO1</b>	<b>Read, understand and respond to texts.</b>  Students should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response</li><li>• use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.</li></ul>
<b>AO2</b>	<b>Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.</b>

AO1

**What it says:** “Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response”





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**What it means:** Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions. All parts of the essay must directly answer the question

**Commentary:**

- Examiners want to see what they call a “coherent” response: an answer that relates to a central argument in every part of the essay
  - This is why it is vital to **plan** your answer first
  - It is also vital that you analyse the poem in terms of the question set
- This argument should always link directly to the question, so include the key words of the question in your thesis and your topic sentences
- Examiners want to see your opinions, not the opinions of an imagined ‘reader’

**What it says:** “Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations”

**What it means:** Select quotations and references from the poem. These must be accurate, and provide evidence for the points you make in your argument

**Commentary:**

- Examiners reward highest marks to students who relate the ideas and themes of the poem in terms of the exam question
- References do not need to be direct quotations
  - Examiners are equally happy when students just “pinpoint specific moments” in the poem
- You do not get more marks for more quotations
- All references just need to be accurate and provide evidence for your points and overall argument
- All references must be relevant to the points of your essay
- Examiners dislike when students include irrelevant quotations

**AO2**

**What it says:** “Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects”

**What it means:** Use analysis of the poet’s choices to support your argument. This evidence can be the language used in the poems, or any other deliberate choice made by the poet

**Commentary:**

- Examiners want students to move away from word-level analysis to whole-text analysis based on a poet’s ideas and message
  - This means not just focusing your analysis on the language or poetic techniques in the poem



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- Instead, think about the ideas they are trying to present:
  - What themes is it exploring? Is it challenging or criticising certain viewpoints?
- This analysis should move from **how** the poet uses language, structure and form, to **why** they do it
  - What is the poet using their poem to say? What is their overall message?

**What it says:** “[...] using relevant subject terminology where appropriate”

**What it means:** Include terminology on the poet’s techniques **only** when techniques are explained fully and relevant to your argument

**Commentary:**

- Examiners don’t like what they call “technique-spotting”
  - This is where a student uses (sometimes very sophisticated) vocabulary to name the literary techniques poets use without explaining them
- Equally, they don’t reward analysis that just names a word class (“the noun X”; “the verb Y”)
  - They think this is “unnecessary and unhelpful”
- A poet’s techniques should only be analysed if they provide further evidence to support your argument
- Examiners want students to move from **what** technique a poet uses to **how** and **why** they are using them

## What makes a Level 6 answer?

If you want to achieve a Grade 9, you should be aiming for a Level 6 response. Below you will see a table that explains how to move from a Level 5 response to Level 6.

**Question:**

**2 7 1** In ‘The Richest Poor Man in the Valley’, how does the poet present ideas about living a happy and contented life?

**[24 marks]**

Part of essay	Level 5	Level 6	Reason
Introduction	Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life and depicts a concept of a	In The Richest Poor Man in the Valley, Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life through ‘Harry’ and she depicts his concept	The Level 6 introduction is in the form of a thesis statement, which



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	simple existence through the character of Harry.	of a simple existence to convey her views about living a “rich” life: it is one free from monetary possessions, working in companionship with nature and one that is built on valuable friendships.	presents an overarching argument that encompasses ideas in both poems and crucially. The Level 5 response links to ideas though in a more limited way.
Topic sentence	Happiness and contentment are conveyed through the character of Harry, and Macrae’s use of a first name only serves to suggest a familiarity to the reader. Furthermore, the use of a third person omniscient perspective enables the poet to convey their full understanding of Harry, both on the inside and outside.	Macrae presents happiness through the character of Harry and her use of a first name almost appears as an afterthought, which brings a sense of familiarity to the reader. Further, Macrae’s use of the third person could be used to emphasise the detachment of Harry from his materialistic world, instead finding solace in being isolated from it, with him seemingly appearing to be “on the outside”.	The Level 6 response demonstrates a more integrated engagement with the poem, reflecting on the ideas in a more reflective and insightful way.
Analysis of writer’s methods	Macrae uses the structure of the poem to convey the simplicity of Harry’s life: it is uncontrolled and does not follow a strict, formal structure. Macrae’s use of enjambment also helps to convey this further and highlights how Harry “didn’t care for things that other people prize”.	The uncomplicatedness of Harry’s life is mirrored in the simple free verse structure of the poem and Macrae’s use of enjambment further helps to illustrate Harry’s life as one which is unconstrained and unbound. Further, the use of irregular line length could signify the unpredictable nature of his existence and further emphasises how he is free from the strict codes and structures of what are judged as important indicators of one’s life such as “money, houses, bank accounts”.	The Level 5 response presents thoughtful and developed ideas and demonstrates a clear exploration of the writer’s methods to create meanings and uses an appropriate reference to support their ideas.  The Level 6 response takes more of an analytical approach to the poem by looking closely at elements of method

			and selecting precise references to illustrate their argument.
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## Tick list for success

Marking your own essays can be difficult. However, if you use the tick list below, you can see which features and skills you have, and haven't, included in your answer. If you can say 'yes' to all of the questions below, your essay should be heading towards the highest level.

### AO1

- Have I included a thesis statement in my introduction?
- Does my thesis statement refer to the poem?
- Does my thesis statement include a central argument based on my own opinions?
- Does my thesis statement include key words from the question?
- Have I included topic sentences for all of my paragraphs?
- Do all of my paragraphs directly answer the question?
- Have I included a conclusion that sums up my argument and links to my thesis?
- Have I chosen two or three quotations from the given poem?
- Do all of my references directly support my argument?
  - Does each reference I have included support the points made in my topic sentences?

### AO2

- Does my analysis provide evidence for the points in my argument?
- Have I moved from close word-level analysis to whole-text analysis?
- Have I included analysis of the poet's overarching ideas and messages?
- Have I removed any unnecessary technique spotting?
- Have I removed any unnecessary naming of word classes?
- Have I explained a poet's use of techniques in terms of their overall message?

## Model Answer

Below you will find a full-mark, Level 6 model answer for an unseen poetry essay. Commentary below each section of the essay illustrates how and why it would be awarded Level 6. Despite the fact it is an answer to a specific past paper question, the commentary below is relevant to any unseen poetry question.

As the commentary is arranged by assessment objective, a student-friendly mark scheme has been included here:



Your notes

Assessment Objective	Number of marks	Meaning
AO1	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Write a clear essay with a central argument based on your own opinions</li><li>All parts of the essay must directly answer the question</li><li>Select quotations and references from the poem</li><li>Quotations must be accurate, and provide the evidence for the points you make in your argument</li></ul>
AO2	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Use analysis of the poet's choices to support your argument</li><li>Evidence can be analysis of the language in the poem, as well as any other deliberate choice made by the poet</li><li>Include terminology on the poet's techniques <b>only</b> when techniques are explained fully and relevant to your argument</li></ul>

### Model Answer Breakdown

The commentary for the below model answer is arranged by assessment objective: each paragraph has commentary for a different assessment objective, as follows:

- Introduction** includes commentary on all the AOs
- Paragraph 1** includes commentary on **AO1** (answering the question and selecting references)
- Paragraph 2** includes commentary on **AO2** (analysing a poet's methods)
- Conclusion** includes commentary on all the AOs

The model answer answers the following question:



Your notes

**The Richest Poor Man in the Valley**

On the outside  
he seemed older than he was.  
His face was like a weather map  
full of bad weather

5 while inside  
his heart was fat with sun.

With his two dogs  
he cleared a thin silver path  
across the Black Mountain.

10 And when winter  
kicked in  
they brought his sheep  
down from the top  
like sulky clouds.

15 Harry didn't care for things  
that other people prize  
like money, houses, bank accounts  
and lies.

He was living in a caravan  
20 until the day he died.

But at his funeral  
his friends' tears  
fell like a thousand  
diamonds.

Lindsay Macrae

**2 7 . 1** In 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley', how does the poet present ideas about living a happy and contented life?

**[24 marks]****Level 6, full-mark answer:**

In 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley', Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life through 'Harry' and she depicts his concept of a simple existence to convey her views about living a "rich" life: it is one free from monetary possessions, working in companionship with nature and one that is built on valuable friendships.



Your notes

**Commentary:**

- The introduction is in the form of a thesis statement
- It includes a central argument based on my own opinions
- It includes key words from the question:
  - *“Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life through ‘Harry’...”*
- It acknowledges the poet making deliberate choices and conveying a message
  - *“she depicts his concept of a simple existence to convey her views about living a “rich” life...”*
- It includes modal language to show a conceptualised approach

Macrae presents happiness through the character of Harry and her use of a first name almost appears as an afterthought, which brings a sense of familiarity to the reader. Further, Macrae’s use of the third person could be used to emphasise the detachment of Harry from his materialistic world, instead finding solace in being isolated from it, with him seemingly appearing to be “on the outside”. Further, he is presented as appearing “older than he was” and having a face “which was like a weather map full of bad weather” which initially gives the impression that he is wearisome and has perhaps been somewhat battered by life. However, Macrae quickly indicates that his outward appearance belies his inner contentment through her use of the metaphor “while inside his heart was fat with sun”. Her metaphor suggests Harry’s life is one which is filled to the brim with joy and pleasure and it suggests an abundance of positivity and energy on the inside which stands in contrast to the superficial nature of material possessions on the exterior. Macrae continues her use of this contrast between the interior and exterior appearance of wealth to convey her ideas that inner happiness and joy are fundamental aspects of the human condition and Macrae uses this to underscore the importance of being content within your own self.

**Commentary:**

- Paragraph begins with a topic sentence
- Topic sentence directly addresses the question (answer always address the idea of “happiness and contentment”)
- Topic sentence has a narrower focus than the thesis statement (focus is on “the presentation of Harry”)
- The whole paragraph is related to the topic sentence
- Paragraph includes multiple relevant references to the poem
- All references are linked to the question, and support the argument of the topic sentence

The uncomplicatedness of Harry’s life is mirrored in the simple free verse structure of the poem and Macrae’s use of enjambment further helps to illustrate Harry’s life as one which is unconstrained and unbound. Further, the use of irregular line length could signify the unpredictable nature of his existence and further emphasises how he is free from the strict codes and structures of what are judged as important indicators of one’s life such as “money, houses, bank accounts”. Macrae uses the word “lies” after this



Your notes

phrase which further illustrates the deceit and falseness of these things which lie on the surface of one's existence and are deemed to be important. Indeed, Macrae's choice of title for the poem with its juxtaposition of "richest" and "poorest" conveys how wealthy Harry is in terms of self-contentment, despite his outward appearance to others of being "poor". Macrae further contrasts this in the next and final stanza of the poem when she uses the words "diamonds" to illustrate how rare and priceless Harry was and Macrae's use of simile to describe the tears shed by his friends at his funeral, "like a thousand diamonds", heightens the emotional impact of the poem and highlights their devastation at the loss of his companionship.

**Commentary:**

- Analysis provides evidence for the points in the topic sentence
- Whole-text analysis of the poem (focus on overarching poetic choices like perspective)
- Not just analysis of the language, but also:
  - Perspective
  - Voice
  - The poet's ideas
  - Structure
- All analysis explained fully in terms of the question and my own argument
- Analysis explained in terms of the poet's overall message

To conclude, in *The Richest Poor Man in the Valley*, Macrae presents ideas about living a happy and contented life to illustrate an existence which is free from the fixation on shallow material possessions to one which cherishes what Macrae considers to be the most important things in life, such as treasured friendships, the joy of nature and ultimately being content within your own self.

**Commentary:**

- Conclusion uses key words from the question
- Conclusion links to thesis
- Conclusion sums up more detailed arguments outlined in topic sentences of all paragraphs
- It also gives a fuller understanding of the poet's intentions, based on ideas explored in the essay





Your notes

## How to Answer the Unseen Poetry Comparison Question

The final question on the exam paper will ask you to make links between the unseen poem that you will have just written about, with a second unseen poem. You are required to make comparisons between the two poems. The guide below will enable you to best express these ideas and opinions in a way that will gain the highest marks. It includes guides on:

- Approaching the question
- The mark scheme
- A model answer

### Approaching the question

In the second part of the unseen poetry question, you will be asked to read a second, shorter poem. The second task is a short comparison with the first unseen poem that you will have just written about. It is a short, synoptic task. Here is what it looks like:

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In both 'Nobody' and 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley' the poets describe ideas about how to live your life.

What are the similarities **and/or** differences between the methods the poets use to present these ideas?

**[8 marks]**

- When you get to the final question, the **question** will tell you what the main link is between the two poems
  - Read it carefully first of all in order to start your thinking
  - For example, the link between both poems is revealed in the question stem above: "**ideas about how to live your life**"
- Next, spend a few minutes reading the second poem
- You will already have written about the first unseen poem, so you should spend your time reading through the second one, noting any similarities or differences as you do so
- It is important to present a focused, succinct answer and you should aim to write two short, concise paragraphs
  - A good guide to start planning this sort of question would be to plan one paragraph of similarities and one paragraph of differences between the two poems or vice versa



Your notes

- You might wish to use some of the following sentence starters to ensure you are comparing and contrasting both poems throughout your answer:
  - *'Both poems are about...however...'*
  - *Both poets explore...however...'*
  - *Both poems contain vivid images...'*
  - *'Both poets present ideas on...,*
  - *whereas the first poet....'*
- You should **focus on two or three methods** which the poets use to create meaning
  - For example, you could comment on the poets' use of analogy or the use of imagery to describe the natural world
  - **The only way to get top marks for this question is to compare the methods the two poets use to convey their messages**
    - In this way, this question is asking you to employ slightly different skills to the other poetry questions in the exam
    - When planning, you should therefore aim to write down the methods each poet uses to create the effects that they do
  - Avoid giving a narrative description of content for both poems as it will mean you cannot move out of Level 1
    - Remember, the task requires a focus on how the two poets communicate their ideas

## The Mark Scheme

Here is an example of the AQA mark scheme for the last unseen poetry question. This question assesses AO2 only which requires you to analyse the language, form and structure used by the poets to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate. In addition, you are also required to identify the similarities and/or differences between the two unseen poems.



Your notes

Mark	AO	Typical features of response
<b>Level 4 7–8 marks</b>	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Exploratory comparison of writers' use of language, structure and form with subject terminology used judiciously</li> <li>Convincing comparison of effects of writers' methods to create meanings</li> </ul>
<b>Level 3 5–6 marks</b>	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Thoughtful comparison of writers' use of language and/or structure and/or form with subject terminology used effectively to support consideration of methods</li> <li>Comparative examination of effects of writers' methods to create meanings</li> </ul>
<b>Level 2 3–4 marks</b>	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relevant comparison of writers' use of language and/or structure and/or form with some relevant use of subject terminology</li> <li>Some comparison of effects of writers' methods to create meanings</li> </ul>
<b>Level 1 1–2 marks</b>	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Some links between writers' use of language or structure or form</li> <li>Some links between effects of writers' methods to create meanings</li> </ul>

- The mark scheme refers to the term 'methods' as this enables you to approach your analysis in a more flexible way
  - Examiners are looking to reward you for your analysis of anything the poets have done on purpose to make meaning
- While the Assessment Objective wording refers to language, structure and form, you are not required to explicitly and separately refer to each of these in your response
- You are required to compare the similarities and differences between both poems so you must ensure you are doing this throughout your answer
- While the skill of comparison is not a discrete Assessment Objective for the exam, it is still important that you make connections within and between both poems

## A Model Answer

Below you will find a full-mark, Level 6 model answer for an exam question. A commentary below the essay illustrates how and why it would be awarded Level 6. Despite the fact it is an answer to a specific past paper question, the commentary below is relevant to any unseen poetry comparison question.

The model answer is based on the following two poems and answers the following question:



Your notes

**The Richest Poor Man in the Valley**

On the outside  
he seemed older than he was.  
His face was like a weather map  
full of bad weather

5 while inside  
his heart was fat with sun.

With his two dogs  
he cleared a thin silver path  
across the Black Mountain.

10 And when winter  
kicked in  
they brought his sheep  
down from the top  
like sulky clouds.

15 Harry didn't care for things  
that other people prize  
like money, houses, bank accounts  
and lies.

20 He was living in a caravan  
until the day he died.

But at his funeral  
his friends' tears  
fell like a thousand  
diamonds.

Lindsay Macrae



Your notes

**Nobody**

- If you can't bring yourself to build  
a snowman or even to clench  
a snowball or two to fling  
at the pine tree trunk, at least  
5 find some reason to take you out
- of yourself: scrape a patch of grass clear  
for the birds maybe; prod at your shrubs  
so they shake off the weight, straighten up;  
or just stump about leaving prints  
10 of your boots, your breath steaming out.
- Promise. Don't let yourself in  
for this moment again: the end  
of the afternoon, drawing the curtains  
on the glare of the garden, a whole  
15 day of snow nobody's trodden.

Michael Laskey

2	7	2
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In both 'Nobody' and 'The Richest Poor Man in the Valley' the poets describe ideas about how to live your life.

What are the similarities **and/or** differences between the methods the poets use to present these ideas?

**[8 marks]****Level 4, full-mark answer:**

Both Macrae and Laskey use several methods to encourage the reader to consider how they live their life. Both poems present their perspectives through different narrative voices. While Macrae employs the use of the third person through the character 'Harry', Laskey chooses to use the second person. Macrae's use of the third person could be used to emphasise the detachment of Harry from his materialistic world, instead finding solace in being isolated from it and therefore seemingly "on the outside". Whereas Laskey's second person enables the poet to directly address the reader through his repeated use of "you" and "yourself", hence making his message appear to be universal and thus one that should be heeded by everyone.

Further, this is highlighted by the comparison between the direct, instructional tone of Nobody with that of the more descriptive, reflective tone of The Richest Poor Man in the Valley. Laskey's use of language is much more commanding and this is evident through his use of imperatives: "Don't let yourself in for this

moment again". This makes Laskey's message appear to have a greater sense of authority and also helps to create a sense of urgency for the reader to change the way they live their life. In contrast, Macrae's tone appears more reflective and thoughtful and she gently encourages the reader to compare their life to Harry's in order to reflect on the dominance of materialism on people's lives and to underscore the importance of being content within your own self.

**Commentary:**

- Exploratory comparison of the similarities and differences between both poems
- The response demonstrates an integrated engagement with the poem, reflecting on the ideas in a reflective and insightful way
- Thoughtful and developed ideas demonstrate a clear exploration of the poets' methods to create meanings
  - Methods are clearly stated throughout
  - These methods include:
    - Perspective
    - Tone
- Appropriate references used to support ideas

**Your notes**