Unseen Poetry Preparation Anthology

The Pearson Edexcel AS and A level English Literature Unseen Poetry Preparation Anthology can be used to prepare for Component 3 of your assessment.
Approaching Contemporary Unseen Poetry: An Anthology of poems and resources
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Something of a ‘secondary school canon’ of modern poetry has built up over the years; we hope that this collection will extend the pool of great poets studied in today’s schools and colleges. We believe that the move to study post-2000 texts, that have been written in the lifetime of all those taking A level English Literature, will offer students an exciting opportunity – to see how today’s poets treat issues and concerns that are sometimes universal and sometimes specific to our twenty-first century lives. It ensures that some of what you study really does look at the here and now, at poets who reflect on the world you inhabit.

The collection begins with four essays by specialists whose professional life is closely linked with English literature and poetry – an academic, a teacher, an editor and a poet. They offer you some ‘ways in’ to approaching unseen poems and some strategies for honing your skills.

Who better to teach you about contemporary poetry than the poets themselves? Most of this anthology is written by six of the best in contemporary poetry. We have tried to create the next best experience to live poetry readings; in this collection, the poets themselves introduce their work to you through one of their poems, and then choose a second poem they think will help your A Level study of contemporary literature. We hope you get a sense of their voice, interests and particular styles and are drawn to read some of the further reading suggestions they make, to widen your knowledge of the literature of your time and what underpins it. Their questions will help you learn about the choices writers make using both form and language to convey meaning. These can be used during class discussion time, so that you familiarise yourself with these poets and their methods. You can then apply the knowledge and skills you have learnt to the second half of this anthology where you are provided with a sample of Practice Unseens. These, together with our linked sample student essays and examiner comments, will support your work on improving your Unseen Poetry responses.

We hope in your preparation for the A level paper 3 exam that you will also spend time reading and understanding some poetry from the canon. For A level students this will occur, in part, in your Prescribed Poetry study for Component 3B. In this collection, some poets have directed you to read poems from that canon that offer a meaningful link to their own chosen poems. Making links between poems, selecting appropriate points of comparison and drawing connections across them will help prepare you for your examination tasks. The conductor Simone Young once said about music that ‘tradition is the handing on of the flame, not the worshipping of the ashes’. The same can be said about literature and in many ways this is the intention of this collection. It is right that today’s students study the literature that is being produced in their own time. The published anthology of contemporary poetry that you study for this component, and the unseen poems that you meet in the examination, will be written or published post 2000. But we cannot study contemporary poetry in isolation. We must also understand the strong and deep connections that today’s writing has with the literature that has come before it. In some contemporary poems we see a continuation of forms and traditions from the literary giants that have preceded them. In others, we see deliberate rule-breaking and manipulation of such traditions.
Many of the poets featured in this anthology are performing live around the country right now. They can be seen up close and personal, reading in small bars, cafes and other venues around the UK. We hope that you will take the opportunity to hear some of them live and be inspired by them. For those of us at the exam board who have had our own A level Literature teaching groups, some of our best teaching moments have been seeing sixth formers transfixed by a performance from a contemporary poet. Some of you might be inspired to take part in the annual T. S. Eliot Poetry Prize Shadowing scheme which will enrich your reading of contemporary poetry.

T. S. Eliot said that there are different stages of becoming a good reader. You begin intuitively, enjoying some poems, discarding others. After a while you start organising your experience of reading. You find you’re reading each poem in the light of others and understanding them all more precisely, even ones you’ve read already. You see more in them and enjoy more*. We hope that the signposts and journeys in this collection will be a milestone in your reading of poetry and that you find some new poets that inspire and lead you forward.

Read the four perspectives on ways of approaching unseen poems. You may wish to annotate the essays and compile your own checklist of the valuable advice that you find here.

2A Approaching an unseen poem: a close (and distant) reading
Professor Peter Barry, Aberystwyth University

A Soft-edged Reed of Light
That was the house where you asked me to remain
on the eve of my planned departure. Do you remember?
The house remembers it – the deal table
with the late September sun stretched on its back.
As long as you like, you said, and the chairs, the clock,
the diamond leaded lights in the pine-clad alcove
of that 1960s breakfast-room were our witnesses.
I had only meant to stay for a week
but you reached out a hand, the soft white cuff of your shirt
open at the wrist, and out in the yard,
the walls of the house considered themselves
in the murk of the lily-pond, and it was done.

Done. Whatever gods had bent to us then to whisper,
Here is your remedy – take it – here, your future,
either they lied or we misheard.
How changed we are now, how superior
after the end of it – the unborn children,
the mornings that came with a soft-edged reed of light
over and over, the empty rooms we woke to.
And yet if that same dark-haired boy
were to lean towards me now, with one shy hand
bathed in September sun, as if to say,
All things are possible – then why not this?
I’d take it still, praying it might be so.

by Julia Copus, from The World’s Two Smallest Humans (2012)

Just looking
To make a close reading of a poem you need to read it several times. But don’t rush. Start by just looking at it. This one is divided into two twelve-line stanzas, with a gap in between. So perhaps it presents a topic from two different viewpoints, or describes an event which has two distinct stages. We would expect some shift or development from one part to the next, and just looking alerts us to the need to describe the nature of this shift. We notice, too, that the two parts hinge on the word ‘done’, which ends the first and begins the second. ‘Done’ can refer to something which has been done, or something which two parties have agreed to do, in which case they may shake hands and say ‘Done!’ Both senses are relevant. But don’t assume that every aspect of a poem’s form is directly related to content. Constant straining to demonstrate a tight interlock between the two often results in far-fetched readings. So there is nothing significant here in the verses having twelve lines each. It’s not a cryptic reference to the twelve days of Christmas (though Christmas features in the last line, as we’ll see).
Slow reading

Having spent a few minutes ‘just looking’, you can now start reading the poem. My advice is as before – don’t rush it. In fact, the opposite – try to become a slow reader. Also, don’t read the lines, or the stanzas – read the sentences. To work out the sense of a poem, you must ignore the line endings and the stanza breaks and read the sentences, because lines of poetry are not intended as stand-alone units of sense. So when reading the opening (‘That was the house where you asked me to remain’), don’t stop at the end of the line – go on till you reach the full stop that ends the sentence in the next line – ‘on the eve of my planned departure.’ The opening line is ‘run-on’, meaning that its sense runs on across the line ending. When you get to the full stop you have the gist of the situation presented in the poem. If you lose the overall sense at any point, go back to the beginning of the sentence in which the loss of sense occurred (or, better still, the one before that) and read through again from there. One slow reading of this concentrated kind is worth five or six rapid skim reads.

But the situation of a poem isn’t usually set out from its beginning, for poems often start as if suddenly, with a train of thought already well under way. Thus, the opening ‘That was the house’ indicates that the speaker has been thinking (or talking) about this house for some time. The poem goes straight to a pointed question addressed to the other person involved – ‘Do you remember?’ But is the question actually asked, or only formed mentally? It is difficult to be certain, but if a conversation is taking place, it seems to be of the intimate kind that would only happen if a couple were alone. Yet ‘we’ readers can hear it, even though we are not the ‘you’ who is the primary addressee – we are like ‘over-hearers’, or covert addressees. This is a frequent occurrence in lyric poetry (poetry which seems to convey the intimate, private feelings of a speaker) – John Stuart Mill, in his essay ‘What is Poetry?’ (1833), described poetry as ‘overheard speech’, noting that poets write as if unaware of our presence, as if self-communing, as a person might when writing a diary, or communicating only with a significant other.

Close and distant reading

So now we can put forward a ‘distant reading’ (that is, an overview) of the situation presented in the poem, which would go something like this: in the first stanza the speaker recalls the moment in a particular house which instigated a relationship that in the end led nowhere. In the second she says that if she could return to that moment, she would take the offered hand again, and make the same bargain, in spite of knowing that it never could be their ‘remedy’, or their ‘future’, while at the same time praying that – somehow – it might be.

So the ‘distant reading’ briefly summarises the situation depicted in the poem (though it doesn’t paraphrase the poem, of course), and it is an essential part (or partner) of the ‘close reading’. It is the necessary frame within which all the details commented on in the close reading cohere and make sense. For the close reading, try not to snip out from the poem isolated words, phrases or lines to use as evidence. Instead, quote a significant block of text which seems crucial, and then home in on it. I will do that with the last five lines, which crystallise the effect of the poem, with their touching (pun intended) profession of faith in what cannot actually be believed:

And yet if that same dark-haired boy
were to lean towards me now, with one shy hand
bathed in September sun, as if to say,
All things are possible – then why not this?
I’d take it still, praying it might be so.
I give these lines as a ‘displayed quotation’, rather than as lines run on in my own text with line-endings indicated by an oblique stroke. I do so to foreground the poem as a poem, and to highlight my view that these lines are crucial. Notice that what is quoted is a complete sentence, making sense in itself even when isolated from the rest. Writing it out in full is another way of slowing down, making me notice things about these lines that I might otherwise have missed. For instance, the order of the phrases seems to have a delaying effect, postponing the eventual arrival of the decisive and quietly defiant statement ‘I’d take it still’. Thus, between the ‘one shy hand’ and ‘I’d take it still’ there are two intervening lines, and the effect is to emphasise the significance of the handclasp by seeming to make the moment happen in slow motion. The order of the phrases manipulates emphasis onto the key declaration and puts it in the strongest position, right at the end of the poem.

I notice, too, that in both stanzas the line about the hand reaching out (the fifth-to-last line in both) is longer than the lines around it, as if reaching beyond the margin-line of the stanza into a void which is both unknowable and already known. It might be possible to identify other symmetries and effects of this kind in the poem. But don’t overdo this kind of thing. Good poems don’t always have formal elements of this ‘mimetic’ kind (that is, elements that seem to ‘mime’ or ‘enact’ their meaning).

Tone and tradition

The close reading should also comment on tone or diction (meaning word choice and style). ‘A Soft-edged Reed of Light’ is fairly formal in tone, rather than chatty or colloquial. For instance, it mentions ‘the house where you asked me to remain’ (rather than ‘stay’, as we would probably say in relaxed conversation) ‘on the eve of my planned departure’ (rather than ‘the night before I was due to go’). So the tone seems related to that of the more formal poetic styles of an earlier century. There are other echoes: addressing a house directly reminds me of Tennyson’s poem ‘Dark house, by which once more I stand’, about being outside the house of his dead friend Arthur Hallam as dawn breaks (Poem 28 of *In Memoriam*). Further, the ending of ‘A Soft-edged Reed of Light’ directly echoes Thomas Hardy’s ‘The Oxen’, which is about the old country legend that animals in the fields kneel for Christ’s birth at midnight on Christmas Eve. The last two of the four quatrains (that is, four-line stanzas) read:

So fair a fancy few would weave
In these years! Yet, I feel,
If someone said on Christmas Eve,
’Come; see the oxen kneel,

‘In the lonely *barton* by yonder *coomb*
Our childhood used to know,’
I should go with him in the gloom,
Hoping it might be so.

The delaying effect is seen here too, as two lines are inserted between ‘Come; see the oxen kneel’ and ‘I should go with him’, exactly as two lines in ‘A Soft-edged Reed of Light’ separate the ‘shy hand’ from ‘I’d take it still’. It is worth noting, finally, that Copus changes Hardy’s ‘*Hoping it might be so*’ to ‘*praying it might be so*’. Which is stronger, or better? I don’t know, but sometimes the questions we ask are more important than their answers, and no close reading can explain everything about a really good poem. If a close reading, by some chance, ever managed to do that, we would have nothing to bring us back to the poem again.
Further reading

- *Reading Poetry*, Peter Barry, Manchester University Press, 2013: the first five chapters are on Meaning, Imagery, Diction, Metre and Form; Chapter 6 is on ‘Close and Distant Reading’; Chapter 8 is on ‘Text and Context’.

- *How to Study Modern Poetry*, Tony Curtis, Macmillan, 1990: Chapter 2 (‘The Making of a Poem’) is on his own ‘The Death of Richard Beattie-Seaman’, then four chapters on the 1940s/50s, 60s, 70s and 80s.


- *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem*, Ruth Padel, Chatto, 2002: 52 chapters, each printing a modern poem, followed by a 2- to 3-page reading of it.

2B Approaching an unseen poem – a teacher’s perspective

Gary Snapper, English Teacher, Cheney School, Oxford / Editor, National Association for the Teaching of English

What makes a teacher happy when they read a response to an unseen poem? I’ve read hundreds of such essays over the last 25 years, and I’ve thought hard not only about what makes a good response, but also how to help my classes to produce them. I’ll try here to distil my thoughts in this short space – just as you will have to do when you try to organise your thoughts about an unseen poem in your AS or A level exam.

First, and perhaps most important, when I read the unseen response essay I hope to get a sense that the writer is someone who understands how poetry works and what it is for. First and foremost that means someone who understands that poems are not intended to be studied in classrooms or written about in exams, but rather are written to be read for pleasure: the aesthetic pleasure a poem’s creativity provides – both through the ideas and meanings it evokes and, equally importantly, in the way it is crafted by the poet – its shape, sound, form, structure, tone, style, imagery, and so on, and the way it plays with and makes patterns from words.

It may seem ironic for me to say, in an article about writing about poems in exams, that one of the things I’m looking for is a sense that poems are not intended to be written about in exams – but it’s an important point. To really understand and analyse poetry, you have to be able to see poems as works of art, lovingly crafted by poets to tell stories, make arguments, reflect on experiences and evoke feelings, using language in a very particular, often playful, way. They are not like crossword puzzles or maths problems that need to be solved. Each poem is a carefully shaped whole employing a variety of poetic techniques to create an object of beauty – a work of art – and a thought-provoking experience. Your job, in an unseen commentary, is to explore this fragile object without losing a sense of its purpose and wholeness, its real life outside the classroom and the exam hall.

Why might anyone want you to write about poems in exams, when that’s not what they are for? To understand that, you need to reconcile yourself to the difference between reading and studying poetry: they are not the same thing, although of course they are strongly connected. In ‘the real world’, people read poetry for pleasure in their leisure time, or turn to poems for solace or joy at times of difficulty or celebration, or use them to bold effect in performances and advertisements – and so on. When you study poetry in an A level literature course, you are setting out on the path to becoming an expert in a specialist academic field – learning about the history and methods of a powerful and influential form of communication, to analyse the subtleties of skilled thought and language, and to develop your own subtleties of response. In your response to the unseen poem, you have the opportunity to show that you can apply the knowledge you’ve gained in class about how to think and write about poetry.
Section 2 How to approach an Unseen Poem: four perspectives

Reading a poem, in various ways, is of course part of studying it, and when you approach an unseen poem your first readings of it are crucial: it’s the nearest you’ll get to the experience of reading the poem for pleasure in ‘the real world’. It’s at this point that you need to let the impact of the poem speak to you. What kind of poem is it? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? What shape or form does it have? What feelings or thoughts does it evoke? What images or words immediately stand out? Imagine you are looking at a painting in an art gallery and listening to a piece of music at the same time. What sounds and images grab your attention? Then there’s the question of what the poem is about. Again, this should strike you as part of your first impressions of the poem: a general impression of the theme of the poem, or its overall message (if there is one). And don’t forget that the title of the poem is usually significant too!

Many of my students want to go straight to what the poem means and what techniques are used in the poem, skipping the question of what the poem is like, and what impact it has. Once they begin writing, some are too keen to launch in at this point, instead of establishing the impact of the poem and its overall narrative or meaning to anchor the rest of their analytical answer for their reader. So when I introduce poems to my classes, I try to read them aloud in a way that emphasises the sounds and structures of the poem as well as its meanings, or I ask them to prepare readings which do the same. I try to impress on them how important it is to hear the poem in your head when you read it. Many poems use sound effects – rhyme, assonance, consonance and alliteration – often, but not always, creating some kind of onomatopoeia – which contribute to the pleasure of the poem, and may also reflect the meanings in the poem. But such sound effects are only part of the way a poem sounds: the silences, breaks and pauses in a poem are part of its effect, as are the poem’s overall pace, rhythm, tone, mood and atmosphere.

Once you’ve thought about the impact of the poem, you can start to reflect in more detail on the content of the poem, and the way it’s structured: what the poem actually means, what the argument or narrative of the poem is, how the various parts of the poem connect, and how the poem develops from beginning to end. It’s vital to remember here that meaning is constructed by the reader as a response to what the poet has written. In many poems, meanings are deliberately ambiguous: the poet wants the reader to engage actively in deciding what the poem might mean. Such ambiguity is again intended to be part of the pleasure and interest of much poetry. In these cases, a good response will tentatively suggest what a poet might mean, or offer more than one possible interpretation. So, for example, an answer that establishes ‘the poet describes a relationship between two people, possibly one that is about to end, and explores both its sensual and destructive qualities’, before going on to explore relevant sections of the text, is more carefully crafted than an answer which asserts ‘the poet describes a failed relationship which has ended and has had a destructive effect on him’.

Finally, you can begin to think in detail about the form and language of the poem: the techniques which the poet has used to convey its images and ideas. There’s no mystery here. I teach my students about the ‘bag of tricks’ that poets carry about – the various verse forms they can choose from; the way they use stanza, rhyme, metre, end-stopping and enjambment; the way they choose and combine words and sentences to create a particular tone, mood, atmosphere or style; the way they use literal and figurative imagery (description, metaphor, simile) and rhetorical devices.
Section 2 How to approach an Unseen Poem: four perspectives

After identifying these techniques, I know that the real work my students have to do is to learn how to write subtly and sensitively about the effects these techniques have in the context of the whole poem – how they contribute to the meaning of the poem and the experience of reading it. The candidate who writes 'The poem is constructed in four stanzas of five lines each', with no more about how that structure reflects on the poem's content, might be well advised to remove this comment completely. A response which comments 'the progress of the four stanzas charts the progress of the speaker's movement from emotional pain to acceptance', and goes on to analyse how the poem's language reflects this, is building a stronger analytical essay.

Now that you've thought about all these things, you're ready to start writing. The introduction to your essay is where you can show that you have thought carefully about the experience of the poem as a whole work of art – briefly indicating what it's about, what kind of poem it is, what its impact is, what kind of language it uses, what kind of message or meaning it might have. By the end of your introduction, the examiner will be happy because you've already shown that you have a pretty good idea of how poetry works and what it is for – and there's a good chance that they can sit back and enjoy whilst you talk them through your detailed analysis of the content, language and form of the poem.

Remember that the unseen commentary is only one way of writing about poetry. It's a type of exercise known as 'literary appreciation' which is designed to cultivate your knowledge of poetry as a literary craft and your sensitivity to the ways writers use language and readers respond to it. It's important to be aware that there are other critical ways of writing about poetry which are more concerned with evaluating the cultural significance and value of poets' work, and of poetry in general. Once you've got the basics of poetry sorted, you'll be ready for that next step!

Further reading

If you're going to read lots of poetry, it makes sense to start by reading poems that have been identified as really good, interesting or worth reading by the people who put together poetry anthologies. Some of these anthologies are designed specifically to introduce readers to a range of really great poems of many different sorts by many different writers.

- Poem for the Day, Nicholas Albery and Peter Ratcliffe (eds.), Chatto and Windus, 1994: this is one of the best anthologies, which gives you one poem to read each day.
- Penguin's Poems for Life, Laura Barber (ed.), Penguin Classics, 2007: you could also try this anthology, which organises poems around different stages of life, from birth to death.

Also try finding the poetry anthology shelf in your local bookshop. You'll find a huge range of anthologies on offer – from collections of poems about love, war, Scotland, sport and so on, to collections of comic verse and 'Poems That Make Grown Men Cry'.

11
‘A poem should not mean/but be’, so says an old poem about poems.

A poem isn’t a series of statements or observations or arguments. It isn’t mere prose. It’s more alive than that. Indeed, Ted Hughes believed his poems about animals continued his habit as a child – the rather cruel habit – of capturing little creatures and keeping them in his pockets. Poems have the fascination, if not quite of living beings, then of language at its most alive. They come to us with a voice that’s still carrying the pulse and warmth of the body.

But those printed words are inert, a useless lump, until they are re-activated by a reader and brought to life again in the mind.

Look at the poem first. Some poems sit comfortably on the page. They are tidy and well behaved, as Shakespeare’s sonnets are. Others sprawl all over it, reluctant to be confined by its margins, like the great rebellious poems of Pablo Neruda and Allen Ginsberg. Others again seem barely to want to intrude on the white space. Such is William Carlos Williams’s ‘This is Just to Say’ or his infamous ‘The Red Wheelbarrow’. The breathless verses of Emily Dickinson look modest and shy on the page. But be wary of those! There’s nothing whatsoever timid about her electrifying poems.

A poem may come in any shape or size. And that is part of its style and its personality. So give it the once-over.

Then read the poem. No, don’t just read it. LISTEN to it. I don’t mean you have to read aloud – though a time may come when you can’t resist doing that. But read at speaking pace, perhaps mouthing the words as you go, but in any case hearing the lines in your head. Poems are for the ear as well as for the eye. Part of their *being*, as opposed to *meaning*, is the noise they make: Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan
Of tan with henna hackles, halt!

That’s how Wallace Stevens’s ‘Bantams in Pinewoods’ starts, kicking up quite a racket. Some poems can send a chill through you from the off: ‘This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary’ (Sylvia Plath, ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’). But poems can lull and seduce, too: ‘Lay your sleeping head, my love,/Human on my faithless arm’ (W. H. Auden, ‘Lullaby’). Again, beware!

Once you start hearing a poem like that, then you have re-connected it with the body, where it belongs. Now you can converse with it, start making some sense of it, question it where it intrigues or puzzles you, tease out its meaning – because yes, poems do mean as well, though it may not be the most vital thing about them. That meaning usually comes with hints and insinuations, with those shades of meaning we are actually very adept at picking up in conversation or on the phone. Ditto with poetry. Part of the meaning resides in the intonation of the sentences and the rhythm of the lines. The American poet Robert Frost has a nice phrase for this: ‘the sound of sense’.
One thing to bear in mind is the poem becomes yours as its reader. You don’t need to ask, ‘what did the poet mean?’ It doesn’t have some secret meaning that the author is privy to, or that can be accessed only by the Critic. I can tell you for a fact that readers have told me many things about my poems that were news to me, but they were true.

Poems do contain secrets, however – hidden connections, subtleties and surprises, things they disclose or half-disclose as a reward for attentive reading. One of my own long-time favourites is ‘Filling Station’ by Elizabeth Bishop. It begins ‘Oh, but it is dirty!’ And she repeats that word ‘dirty’ several times, and insists on the oiliness of the gas station, or petrol station to you and me. It’s a foul, smelly, oily place. But it fascinates her. And she begins to notice things – a plant, a woman, a mother somewhere in the background, and a beautifully embroidered ‘doily’ covering a small table.

That changes things. Even the oilcans of ESSO are neatly stacked so that they sing ‘SO, SO, SO’ to the passing traffic. She sees the underlying hidden texture of family life. ‘Somebody loves us all’, the poem daringly concludes. And so everything is changed, the messy awful world we live in is ‘redeemed’, if we want to be fancy about it.

Looked at another way, the poem is about the process of writing or reading a poem. It’s about what happens when the imagination comes awake and regards the strangeness and wonder of the world. The quality of our attention is repaid. I have just stopped, or been forced to stop, not at the petrol station – but at this poem, and because I give it my full attention, I am rewarded.

The filling station turns out to be, if you’ll forgive my terrible pun, a ‘fulfilling’ station.

The great thing about language is it contains trickery and treachery, all sorts of giveaways and hints, opportunities for jokes and slips-of-the-tongue. It’s a playground for our brains. Good writing, and poems above all, make the most of this. Just as I was writing these sentences, and re-reading ‘Filling Station’ for, oh, perhaps the thousandth time in my life, I noticed a detail I’d never seen, something I should certainly have spotted before, since it occurs three times. It gave me quite a kick.

You’ve already spotted it? I looked at that word ‘doily’ again and saw the oil hidden in it.

Further reading

- ‘This is Just to Say’ http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/just-say
- ‘Lullaby’ http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/lullaby-0
- ‘Filling Station’ http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/filling-station

The Poetry Review has been published by the Poetry Society since 1912, and is a quarterly source of new poems, reviews, essays and interviews with contemporary poets. The Poetry Society is the UK’s leading poetry organisation. They run programmes of live events, competitions and workshops, as well as providing resources, advice and support for young people and schools. For more information please visit www.poetrysociety.org.uk/education.
In 2002 I was approached, with 37 other poets, to write a poem in response to Wordsworth’s sonnet, ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802’. The aim was to celebrate the bicentenary of its composition and also to use the sonnet to link Westminster Bridge with Shakespeare’s Globe. I stood on the bridge one bright spring morning noting the black cabs, Routemaster buses, tourists and most significantly, the London Eye (aka The Millennium Wheel). I didn’t want to write a timeless poem; I wanted to capture the sights and sounds of 2002. The subsequent anthology of poems, Earth has not anything to show more fair, included several sonnets that looked nothing like Wordsworth’s tidy original, with references to strip-lit offices, crack heads, traffic jams, disposable cameras and mobile phones; one translated the entire sonnet into text language. Though composed in isolation, those poems were in contemporary dialogue with one another as much as they were inspired by Wordsworth’s original.

When I visit secondary schools I’m often asked where I get my ideas from. My primary inspiration is other poems. The best part of being a writer is being a reader. That might seem odd but many believe that every poem is a response to a poem that has already been written. Researching a new piece is inspiring, as I read a range of poems around a particular theme, form or tone. I read for visual impact first, then aloud in my head, as most poetry is written for the eye and the ear. Often I find one poem will kick-start my own. It may use a striking image, communicate with startling honesty, or have an unsettling last line. Writers use the term ‘reading as a writer’, meaning reading to identify the techniques used to create a work of art before attempting those techniques yourself. Such reading fires my creativity. But you don’t have to be a writer to do this. When you’re revising for comparing linked poems, imagine yourself as a writer rather than a student with a forthcoming exam. When you read an unseen poem, ask yourself what works and what doesn’t? Why did the poet make those creative decisions and how would you approach writing a new poem in response to it? Which elements would you replicate and which would you change?

The more poetry you read, the more individual poems will remind you of other poems you have studied. In the Unseen Poetry Preparation Anthology, several contemporary poets choose one of their poems to discuss and then compare and contrast to a second linked poem by another poet. Some contrast similar themes, for example, identical forms and spoken and written language. I was very struck by how, in each case, reading the second poem enhanced my reading of both. All the originals are strong poems, but in dialogue with a second, that power is intensified. For example, Jacob Sam-La Rose’s Faith explores mutism and political protest; Alexandra Teague’s Adjectives of Order, explores the complexities of learning a foreign language and surviving the Vietnam War. I was familiar with Jacob’s poem before I read the anthology but re-reading it alongside Alexandra’s made it all the more poignant and potent. The fact they are both written in the same form (unrhymed tercets) further heightens the poetic connections between them. Paired in the anthology, each poem becomes more than the sum of its parts.

Sometimes you find yourself reading two poems by the same poet. You gain greater insight not only into each poem but deeper access into their work as a whole. Some poets work in traditional forms and metres; some take liberties with those forms so always be alert to formal poems masquerading as free verse; and some poets write in free verse that at times employs formal elements like internal rhyme or metrical repetition. T S Eliot famously rejected the notion of ‘free verse’, declaring ‘…there is only good verse, bad verse, and chaos.’ Take note of this. Even in the purest of free verse, poets have made decisions about certain poetic features (e.g. where to put line-breaks and stanza breaks). Similarly, poets must make other creative choices, for example, whether to use dialect, unusual technical terms. Many have recurrent themes which may have arrived subconsciously. When you read two poems by the same poet, and assess their similarities and differences, you begin to have a sense of their poetic style. You
Section 2 How to approach an Unseen Poem: four perspectives

make valued judgements about which poem you prefer and why. You start to cultivate your unique poetic taste. And the more knowledge you have, the more enjoyable it becomes.

You have the exciting challenge of choosing a second poem that you have studied to go with one that is presented to you. I say exciting because you have the freedom to determine the course of your essay. Like the narrator of Robert Frost’s poem, ‘The Road Not Taken’, you must take one of two paths. Which poem of the offered poems will you choose? This element of choice enables you to be more creative. Therefore, it is essential to choose the contrasting poem that enables you to have more insights in your essay. This may not necessarily be your favourite one, or the one that is more obviously accessible, but the one you can link most effectively with the unseen poem.

Make sure you read the question carefully. Are there any key areas it asks you to focus on? Go with your gut reaction, and then make a quick list of similarities and differences in form and content. Start with the visual: are they written in the same or a contrasting form? Look at stanza lengths and line lengths. Read both poems aloud in your head and move on to sound: metre, rhyme scheme, any other form of repetition. Do they adhere to the same structure (e.g. begin in the past and end in the present)? Then briefly move on to content: explore theme. Is there a similar subtext? Think about voice: point of view; accessibility versus complexity. Is the unseen poem written by one of the poets in the anthology? Make sure there’s at least one clear similarity in order to write a substantial essay. If you can’t quickly find a connection, move to the other poem. You will generally find that, for you, one yields more potential than the other. But if you find them equally thought-provoking, you might choose the more challenging option. Once you’ve made your choice, stick to it.

Just as each poet has their own inimitable style, it’s important you write your essay. Remember, you’ve already made a choice, you’ve stated a preference. Having an angle at the beginning will help your essay remain unique and focused. Always begin with an introduction that mentions both poems. What makes poetry interesting to you? I’m obsessed with traditional poetic forms and how contemporary writers engage with them, so depending on the unseen poem, and the optional anthology poems, I might choose either a formal or free verse poem or make the relationship between sound and sense my primary focus. But you may be fired by strong visual imagery, use of the vernacular, philosophical or political ideas, or a multicultural or international perspective. You may have a strong reaction to one or both of the poems which you wish to communicate. Don’t be afraid of having an opinion but always back up any assertion with evidence from the poems. And remember that you are writing about poems, works of art that make particular use of visuals and sound, words and white space.

There are no hard-and-fast rules for structuring the main body of the essay. However, it must have an introduction and conclusion, remain focused on the original question and give equal weight to both poems. It should reflect your unique response to the task. The conclusion should summarise the points you’ve made in your essay. You may find, as I often do, that the comparative process yields new insights into both poems. Emphasise them. On many levels, having to prepare for this exam is a gift: it enables you to read some compelling contemporary poetry, have time to study it in depth, and broaden your knowledge and aesthetic pleasure. Furthermore, it gives you inside knowledge of how poets work, how we obsessively compare and contrast other poems to inspire new poems, and how exhilarating it is to engage in that poetic dialogue.
Section 3 provides a range of poems selected by some of the leading figures in twenty-first century poetry. Use these to learn more about contemporary poetry, guided by the voices of the contemporary poets who have selected them for you. The poets encourage you to consider one of their own poems, followed by a second and, in one instance, third poem either from post 2000 or the established literary canon. They also make suggestions of further reading that you can undertake. Your study of contemporary poetry will be enhanced by reading widely within both modern poetry and the literary canon that has come before it.

In your final exam you will be asked to respond to a poem written post 2000 in comparison with a poem from your studied contemporary anthology.

3A Jacob Sam-La Rose

Jacob Sam-La Rose’s poetry has been characterised as vivid, masterly and carefully structured. His debut pamphlet, *Communion* (2006), was a Poetry Book Society Pamphlet Choice and his collection *Breaking Silence* (2011) has been shortlisted for a Forward Poetry Prize (the Felix Dennis Award). He is widely recognised as a facilitator, mentor and supporter of young and emerging poets, and as an advocate for the positive impact of new technology on literary and artistic practice and collaboration. He lives in London, England.

Faith (2011)

‘Faith’ was written on commission for International PEN to launch a festival dedicated to celebrating freedom of expression. It’s a large theme to engage with and, as so often happens with larger themes, much of the work of writing the poem came in the form of finding an angle, a slant to approach from. There were two contrasting images that presented themselves, that I couldn’t let go of: there was a series of protests in response to the G-20 London summit that year, some of which turned violent; also, through the work I’d done in schools, I’d recently met a student who was an elective mute. The marriage of these two made the poem for me.

Faith

A girl in class opts out of speech. A teacher mouths problems at home and who knows what too-large or brutal vision stalled the engine of her voice.

In a photograph I pass round, a man reels from a baton to the head and cameras bloom in every hand to catch his perfect grimace. Today, we write about the things that we believe. The class comes up with God, by all the usual names, and faith in numbers, that the *News at Ten*’s more often bad than good, that some things never change, no matter what you say, although there’s so much to be said.

A girl carves out a space for her voice to return to.

Praise her fierce and stubborn silence. Somewhere, rain will fall on dry land for the first time in months. I want to know what her first words will be.
Thinking points

1. With regard to the poem’s title, what is the significance or value of faith as offered in the poem?

2. If I was writing in response to the theme of freedom of speech and expression, what’s the value of silence as I have detailed it in the poem?

3. What are the different ways that silence is rendered or manifested in the poem?

4. The poem moves through unrhymed tercets. What effect does that have on the way you might read it?

Adjectives of Order by Alexandra Teague (2010)

I chose Alexandra Teague’s ‘Adjectives of Order’ as a thematic partner for ‘Faith’ for both the contrasts and the parallels. Both poems are written in tercets. Each poem presents a student struggling with challenging experiences. The student in ‘Faith’ is moved to silence. The student in ‘Adjectives of Order’ is presumably older and struggling with the mechanics of a foreign language, learning the best or most appropriate way to describe what he has lived through.

Adjectives of Order

That summer, she had a student who was obsessed with the order of adjectives. A soldier in the South Vietnamese army, he had been taken prisoner when

**Saigon** fell. He wanted to know why the order could not be altered. The sweltering city streets shook with rockets and helicopters. The city sweltering streets. On the dusty brown field of the chalkboard, she wrote: *The mother took warm homemade bread from the oven. City is essential to streets as homemade is essential to bread.* He copied this down, but he wanted to know if his brothers were *lost before older,* if he worked security at a twenty-story modern downtown bank or downtown twenty-story modern.

When he first arrived, he did not know enough English to order a sandwich. He asked her to explain each part of *Lovely big rectangular old red English Catholic leather Bible.* Evaluation before size. Age before color. Nationality before religion. Time before length. Adding *and,* one could determine if two adjectives were equal.

After Saigon fell, he had survived nine long years of torture. Nine *and* long. He knew no other way to say this.
Thinking points
1 ‘Adjectives of Order’ explores the relationship between language and the attempt to make sense of experience. What is the significance of the poem’s closing sentence?
2 Would you argue that the poem makes comment on the power of language to articulate experience, or that the poem makes comment on the inadequacy of language?
3 What does the poem do to challenge our thinking on the value of proper syntax and grammatical construction?

Further reading
• *Breaking Silence*, Jacob Sam-La Rose, Bloodaxe Books, 2012

3B Jen Hadfield

Jen Hadfield was born in Cheshire in 1978 and has been living in Shetland, more than 200 miles off the coast of Scotland, for the past eight years. In 2008 she won the T. S. Eliot Prize for her second volume of poetry, *Nigh-No-Place*. She writes poetry because a poem is often a better way of remembering people, places and experiences than photographs. She writes about wildlife and the landscape around her, about the here-and-now, and about how we make ourselves a home.

Daed-traa (2008)

I’m a stop-start writer: there are long spells of time where I don’t write poetry at all. When I start again, I often ‘warm up’ by writing something about poetry itself. I had just moved to Shetland when I wrote ‘Daed-traa’. The sea here is unpolluted and the rockpools are full of outlandish marine creatures: butterfish and hermit crabs and a weird luminous green sponge that covers the rocks like porridge. I started by trying to describe a rockpool in a poem, but ended up deciding that the poem itself was like a rockpool.
Daed-traa

I go to the rockpool at the slack of the tide

to mind me what my poetry’s for.

It has its ventricles, just like us –
pumping brine, like bull’s blood, a syrupy flow.

It has its theatre –
hushed and plush.

It has its *Little Shop of Horrors*.
It has its crossed and dotted monsters.

It has its cross-eyed beetling Lear.
It has its billowing Monroe.

I go to the rockpool at the slack of the tide

to mind me what my poetry’s for.

For monks, it has barnacles

to sweep broth as it flows, with fans,
grooming every cubic millimetre.

It has its ebb, the easy heft of wrack from rock,
like plastered, feverish locks of hair.

It has its *flodd*,
It has its welling god

with puddled, podgy face and jaw.

It has its holy hiccup.

Its minute’s silence

daed-traa.

I go to the rockpool at the slack of the tide

to mind me what my poetry’s for.

**Thinking points**

1. ‘The slack of the tide’ is a still hour between the tide coming in and going out again: a rest in the constant motion of the water. How do I use rhythm and rhyme to suggest the movement of the water in this poem? Can you find the moment the water becomes ‘slack’? How does it happen?

2. I’m not religious at all, but I’ve used the word ‘holy’ and the imagery of a god in this poem. How reverent do you think the imagery is? Why do you think I have used it?

3. What is the effect of the poem’s repetitive refrain? What do the poem and rockpool have in common? Look for other poetic features which explore their relationship.

4. How do I use this poem to consider what nature means to me? What use is poetry to people: what else can a poem do for you?
Poetry by Tom Leonard (1969)

Tom Leonard taught me two very important lessons about poetry.

1. Whatever your accent, the way you speak – like your fingerprints – is unique and, so, a precious part of who you are.

2. Poetry says that your voice deserves to be heard.

His poems are often from the point of view of people who have been told that they don’t speak ‘proper English’. They’re often spelt phonetically: that is, instead of being spelt as they would be in a dictionary, the words are spelt as they would be pronounced.

Poetry

the pee as in pulchritude,
oh pronounced ough
as in bough

the ee rather poised
(pronounced ih as in wit)
then a languid high tea …

pause: then the coda –
ray pronounced rih
with the left eyebrow raised
– what a gracious bouquet!

Poetry.
Poughit.rih.

That was my education
– and nothing to do with me.

Thinking points

1. How much can we know about a person from the way they speak? Look at the ‘voice-portrait’ from ‘the pee of’ to ‘bouquet’. How does Leonard want us to imagine this person?

2. Say this poem out loud. Do you use language in a different way when you speak and write? In general, do you think poetry is more like speech or writing? How does that illuminate the poem’s form and meaning?

3. What response do you think the poet is trying to elicit from the reader? What is it about the poem’s shape, sound or spelling that has that effect? What is your personal response to this poem?
4 In his poem, ‘100 Differences Between Poetry and Prose’, Leonard says ‘Poetry is the heart and the brain divided by the lungs’. Would you say Leonard’s argument in ‘Poetry’ is intellectual, emotional or both? Support your theory with examples from the poem.

5 If you’re interested in all these ideas about poetry, voice and identity, you could write your own poem about what makes a poem a poem, or a poet a poet. Write it to represent your natural speech as closely as possible, creating your own spelling system if necessary. Is this different from the way you normally write?

Further reading
- *Bevel*, William Letford, Carcanet Press, 2012: this has been one of my favourite new poetry books in the last few years. Letford, another Scottish poet, writes about everyday life as if he’s in love with every moment. And he writes about it in everyday language.

3C Patience Agbabi

Patience Agbabi is a popular poet, performer, mentor and Fellow in Creative Writing at Oxford Brookes University. She read English Language and Literature at Oxford and has an MA in Creative Writing from Sussex. She has lectured in Creative Writing at Greenwich, Cardiff and Kent. Since 1992, she has taught in a wide range of secondary schools, arts centres, libraries, youth clubs and prisons. She has worked repeatedly on Arvon’s schools and open courses. Canterbury Laureate 2009 to 2010, she received a Grant for the Arts to write a contemporary version of *The Canterbury Tales*. *Telling Tales* (Canongate, 2014) is her fourth poetry collection.

Martina (2000)

‘Martina’ was inspired by Alice Fulton’s poem ‘You Can’t Rhumboogie in a Ball and Chain’, which is about the tragic life and death of 60s hippy icon, Janis Joplin. I couldn’t tell if it was a *sestina* at first, but liked the way it wove images and repeated key words that got to the essence of Joplin. These end-words formation-danced on the page and also echoed the musicality of speech. I was given my six end-words: *time, girl, end, child, boy and dark*, by Nuyerican poet, Samantha Coerbell. They helped shape my narrative, set in the Second World War, when it was still taboo to become pregnant outside marriage or be openly gay.
I must have been sweet sixteen at the time, boyish, straight up straight down. She was the girl next door but one, living at the dark end of the street, the fat ugly duckling child who grew up gorgeous. A different boy for each day of the week. She was a dark horse, kept herself to herself, her sloe-dark eyes revealing nothing. It was wartime and rations chiselled our features but boy, she kept her curves. I was a grown-up girl, she was woman. Time had silenced the child in her eyes. We prayed for the war to end in our Sunday best. But we were weekend disciples, evacuees scared of dark nights pierced with blitzkrieg pyrotechnics, child-like, clinging to mother’s skirt. She found time to party in new nylons, good-time girl growing voluptuous from man and boy, on chocolate and plum brandy. I was tomboy running errands, climbing trees till the end. But she was the midnight-rouge glamour girl who French-kissed GI lovers in the dark who drawled, “Anytime, lady, anytime.” She was wicked woman: I was wild child.

We all knew she was expecting a child. In those days we all expected the boy to marry her. But, it being wartime, too soon his two-month leave came to an end. Her father threw her out into pitch-dark November’s clutches with the words “No girl of mine…” She gave birth to a baby girl, Martina. They wanted to put the child up for adoption. Tina had the dark features of her father, the soldier boy tortured by fate’s keen bullet till the end, bleeding dry on a battlefield. In time, she got married for the child’s sake, a boy-next-door type; and in time I met a girl with sloe-dark eyes and loved her till the end.

Thinking points
1 What does the narrator of the poem think of the ‘girl/next door but one’?
2 Modern sestinas choose flexible end-words with multiple meanings. The end-word ‘boy’ changes from stanza to stanza. What effect does this have?
3 Now choose another end-word that you find interesting and show how it enhances the narrative of the poem.
4 Why do you think I chose 10-syllable lines not in iambic pentameter?
5 The poem ends with an envoy, a three-line stanza (using all six end-words) that sums up the themes of the poem: what are they?
IVF by Kona Macphee (2002)

I chose this poem because it’s contemporary and openly reveals the emotional side of the inability to have children. In vitro fertilisation (IVF) is a scientific procedure offering hope to many childless couples. I wanted to give you a stark contrast to ‘Martina’ where a single woman has an unplanned child in the 1940s. I also wanted you to experience a modern but traditional sestina, where the form is integral to the content. I admire the technical ability of the poet to take us into the heart of this conflict.

IVF

I come home early, feel the pale house close around me as the pressure of my blood knocks at my temples, feel it clench me in its cramping grasp, the fierceness of its quiet sanctioning the small and listless hope that I might find it mercifully empty.

Dazed, I turn the taps to fill the empty tub, and draw the bathroom door to close behind me. I lie unmoving, feel all hope leaching from between my legs as blood tinges the water, staining it the quiet shade of a winter evening drifting in on sunset. Again, no shoot of life sprouts in this crumbling womb that wrings itself to empty out the painfully-planted seeds. The quiet doctors, tomorrow, will check their notes and close the file, wait for the hormones in my blood to augur further chances, more false hope.

My husband holds to patience, I to hope, and yet our clockworks are unwinding. In the stillness of the house, we hear our blood pumped by our hearts that gall themselves, grow empty: once, this silence, shared, could draw us close that now forebodes us with a desperate quiet.

I hear him at the door, but I lay quiet, as if, by saying nothing, I may hope that somehow his unknowingness may close a door on all the darkness we’ve let in: the nursery that’s seven years too empty; the old, unyielding stains of menstrual blood.

Perhaps I wish the petitioning of my blood for motherhood might falter and fall quiet, perhaps I wish that we might choose to empty our lives of disappointment, and of hope, but wishes founder – we go on living in the shadow of the cliffs now looming close: the blood that’s thick with traitorous clots of hope; the quiet knack we’ve lost, of giving in; the empty room whose door we cannot close.

Thinking points
1. Why do you think the poet has chosen an intimate, first-person narrator?
2. Read the first stanza quietly in your head. How does the metre affect the mood of the poem?
3. Comment on the use of enjambement in stanzas 1 to 3. How does this contrast with the envoy?
4. How do the end-words contribute to the imagery of the poem?
5. What is the narrator’s attitude towards IVF and how does the sestina form accentuate this?

Further reading
- *Transformatrix*, Patience Agbabi, Canongate Books, 2000: read the sestina sequence ‘Seven Sisters’.
3D Helen Dunmore

Helen Dunmore is a poet, novelist, short story and children’s writer. Her novel *A Spell of Winter* won the inaugural Orange Prize for Fiction, and her work has also been awarded the McKitterick Prize, the Signal Award for Poetry and the Cardiff International Poetry Prize. Her poem ‘The Malarkey’ won the National Poetry Competition in 2010. Her best-known work for young people is the *Ingo* series of novels. Helen Dunmore’s books are translated into more than 30 languages, and she is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her latest novel, *The Lie* (2014), is set during and immediately after the First World War.

The Duration (2013)

There’s a sentence in the diary of Cynthia Asquith which she wrote just before the Armistice in 1918. Two of her brothers, and many friends, had been killed during the First World War. She wrote that, with the coming of peace, it would be necessary to recognise that ‘the dead are not only dead for the duration of the war’. The permanence of loss became, for many, more unbearable once normal life resumed and there was no shred of hope that somehow, the ‘missing’ might return. In this poem ‘the duration’ has a double meaning. It recalls the duration of war, but also suggests the unlimited period of loss that stretched out for the bereaved after the war was over. The middle-aged parents in the poem have lost their only son, but the mother still refers to her husband as ‘Father’, as she did while the boy was alive. ‘Quality lasts’, she says of the macintosh, but this is profoundly ironic: the square of mackintosh has survived, but not her son.
The Duration

Here they are on the beach where the boy played for fifteen summers, before he grew too old for French cricket, shrimping and rock pools.

Here is the place where he built his dam year after year. See, the stream still comes down just as it did, and spreads itself on the sand into a dozen channels. How he enlisted them: those splendid spades, those sunbonneted girls furiously shoring up the ramparts.

Here they are on the beach, just as they were those fifteen summers. She has a rough towel ready for him. The boy was always last out of the water.

She would rub him down hard, chafe him like a foal up on its legs for an hour and trembling, all angles. She would dry carefully between his toes.

Here they are on the beach, the two of them sitting on the same square of mackintosh, the same tartan rug. Quality lasts.

There are children in the water, and mothers patrolling the sea’s edge, calling them back from the danger zone beyond the breakers. How her heart would stab when he went too far out. Once she flustered into the water, shouting until he swam back. He was ashamed of her then. Wouldn’t speak, wouldn’t look at her even. Her skirt was sopped. She had to wring out the hem. She wonders if Father remembers.

Later, when they’ve had their sandwiches she might speak of it. There are hours yet. Thousands, by her reckoning.

Thinking points
1. I have used military vocabulary, e.g. ‘enlisted’ or ‘patrolling’, in the apparently idyllic context of a summer’s day at the beach. What do you think is the effect?
2. The boy is embarrassed by his mother’s attempts to bring him back from the ‘danger zone beyond the breakers’. This incident was memorable to the mother, but she is not even sure that her husband will recall it. Why do you think this is?
3. There’s an implied contrast in the poem between the eternal ‘present tense’ of the sea and the beach, and the past tense of the son’s life. But sometimes, the past and the present become one. You might think about points in the poem where this happens.
4. This poem has only one narrator. Can you rely on her voice? What is she not telling us?
My Boy Jack by Rudyard Kipling (1916)

I have chosen this poem because it is a fascinating example of how a poem can contradict the poet’s own intentions. Kipling wrote ‘My Boy Jack’ in 1916, to boost morale after the British Navy’s losses during the Battle of Jutland. ‘Jack’ probably represents the ‘Jack Tars’, as British sailors were known: six thousand died at Jutland. But behind the poem lies the shadow of Kipling’s own bereavement. His only son John died, aged eighteen, in 1915 in the Battle of Loos. Kipling felt lifelong anguish at having pulled strings to wangle a commission in the Irish Guards for his boy. John Kipling was extremely short-sighted, like his father, and had been rejected previously for military service because of this. The poem states that these terrible losses are worthwhile, and that a parent should ‘hold your head up all the more’, but Kipling’s suffering and artistry make it much more complex than that.

My Boy Jack

"Have you news of my boy Jack?"
   Not this tide.
"When d’ you think that he’ll come back?"
   Not with this wind blowing and this tide.
"Has any one else had word of him?"
   Not this tide.
   For what is sunk will hardly swim,
      Not with this wind blowing and this tide!
"Oh, dear, what comfort can I find?"
   None this tide,
   Nor any tide,
   Except he didn’t shame his kind
      Not even with that wind blowing, and that tide.
Then hold your head up all the more,
   This tide,
   And every tide,
Because he was the son you bore,
   And gave to that wind blowing and that tide!

Thinking points

1 What do you think of the question and answer structure of the poem? What effect does it create?

2 The second voice in the poem gives very simple, repetitive answers to the first voice in the first two stanzas. In the third and fourth stanzas the tone changes. What is your view of this change of tone, and does it imply a change of speaker too?

3 The poem relies heavily on repetition and variations within repetition. What is your response to this technique?

4 The voice in the last stanza of the poem urges acceptance and pride. Does this convince? Which voice do you find persuasive within the poem?
Further reading

- *The Malarkey*, Helen Dunmore, Bloodaxe Books, 2010: if you have enjoyed ‘The Duration’, you might like to look at this collection of my poems.

- *1914. Poetry Remembers*, Carol Ann Duffy (ed.), Faber & Faber, 2013: ‘The Duration’ was included in this new anthology of contemporary poems published to mark the centenary of the outbreak of the First World War.

3E Esther Morgan

Esther Morgan’s three collections are all published by Bloodaxe Books. Her first, *Beyond Calling Distance*, won the Aldeburgh Festival First Collection Prize and her third, *Grace*, was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. She was born and spent her childhood in Worcestershire. She began writing poetry during her time as a volunteer at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere, Cumbria, where looking at Wordsworth’s notebooks was the first step in understanding the importance of drafting in creating a finished poem. She has worked as a freelance editor and writer and was Historic Recordings Editor for the Poetry Archive, the world’s leading online resource of poets reading their own work (www.poetryarchive.org). She currently lives and works in Norfolk, combining motherhood with communications work for Norfolk Museums Service and various writing projects.

Sand (2001)

‘Sand’ is the last poem in my first book, *Beyond Calling Distance*. In the collection as a whole I was interested in exploring voice and silence – in what kinds of pressures and repressions prevent people from speaking out. A lot of poems, as is the case with ‘Sand’, are first-person dramatic monologues, spoken by often isolated narrators. This particular poem had its starting point in an article I read about the expansion of the Sahara desert in Africa due to climate change and increased aridity. The idea of the sand itself advancing like a slow but inexorable army got the poem going. And then I started to wonder what would happen if someone refused to leave their home in the face of this threat. So these twin concerns – voice and the environment – came together.
Sand
That last spring I seemed to guess.
In one long dusk I harvested the garden,
hung clusters of flowers from the rafters.
I pressed violets between the leaves
of dictionaries and bibles, filled
whole seed trays with keep-sake petals.
The summer burned hotter, turning
the hydrangea heads coppery,
rosebuds into bunches of dried blood.
Their dusty pot pourri still lingers.
I fall asleep, my fingers tracing
the wallpaper’s trellis of honeysuckle.
I am the last one left in this valley,
empty and brown as a beggar bowl.
All day I sweep the desert from my steps.
The slate floors crunch like emery boards.
Wood loses its lustre, dulls to the matt
of a cataract eye. My skin cracks like a lizard’s.
I turn on taps out of habit.
The plumbing is racked by shuddering sobs.
I risk bad luck – umbrellas blooming indoors
like black silk poppies. I’ve spent hours
sifting the attic for grass-stained tennis balls,
shutting my eyes, inhaling the past.
No twilight. Night falls like a blade.
In my dry bed, I dream rain;
fat droplets on waxy laurel leaves,
clouds the colour of tear-run ink,
the subtleties of mist. I dive into a pool
and wake. The dunes curve their scimitars.
Silence – except for the tinnitus
inside my head, its constant shush and whisper.
The horizon shifts in the moonlight,
a drift surges, snapping a telegraph pole
like a pencil, a forest of pines
shrinking to Christmas trees.
I think of the pale green domes of cathedrals
buried out there like unhatched eggs.
Soon this house will go blind, its windows silted,
the sun eclipsed, an hour glass twist
in the fireplace. I already sense its silkiness,
the kiss that will stopper my mouth.
Thinking points

1. What kind of person do you think is speaking (or writing) the poem? What do you think their motivation might be for telling the story?

2. What is the effect of using a first-person voice rather than, say, a third-person voice? Why choose this technique instead of basing the poem more closely on the factual account that inspired it?

3. Where do you think the poem is set and why? What impact does this have on the reader?

4. How does the sound of the language in the poem create atmosphere and dramatise the narrative?

5. There is a lot of sensual imagery in the poem. Identify moments where the poem appeals to different senses and discuss their effect.

Ozymandias by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1818)

It wasn’t a conscious influence but perhaps at the back of my mind when writing ‘Sand’ was Shelley’s haunting sonnet ‘Ozymandias’, a poem I’ve known and loved since childhood. Shelley wrote the poem in 1817 after a conversation with a friend about recent archaeological discoveries in the Near East. Ozymandias has been identified as Rameses II – who may well have been the pharaoh of the Book of Exodus which tells the story of the Israelites’ enslavement by the Egyptians and their long years in the wilderness. Shelley was a political radical, a republican hostile to the concept of empire and authoritarian power. In his poem the figure of Ozymandias becomes a powerful focus for these sentiments. Great poems retain their relevance – when images of Saddam Hussein’s massive statue being toppled in Iraq were beamed around the world, ‘Ozymandias’ was immediately quoted and referenced by many. I love the fact that Shelley had no idea when he wrote his short poem that it would become such a touchstone of English poetry, a status which adds another dimension to this piercing analysis of power and time.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”
Thinking points
1 Consider the title of the poem. How does it connect to the ideas which the poem explores?
2 There are three different voices in the poem. Identify them and discuss their relationship to each other and how they enact some of the poem’s central concerns.
3 Sound is a significant element in the poem – explore how Shelley uses contrasting sounds to create different moods.
4 The white spaces within and around a poem can be an important part of its impact. What role do you think the white space has at the end of this poem?

Further reading
• Beyond Calling Distance, Esther Morgan, Bloodaxe Books, 2001
• If you're interested in the connection between a poet's speaking voice and their writing voice, dip into the Poetry Archive, which has hundreds of contemporary and historic poets reading from their own work: www.poetryarchive.org
• Staying Alive, Being Alive and Being Human are three wonderful anthologies published by Bloodaxe Books with themed chapters, helpful introductions and a great range of poetry from around the world.
• Writing Poems, Peter Sansom, Bloodaxe Books, 1994: this book was written as a guide to help people discover their own voice in poems, and to avoid some of the commonest pitfalls of putting pen to paper. It contains great advice for reading poems as well as writing them, and lifts the lid on some of the many issues and technical decisions poets have to grapple with.

3F George Szirtes
George Szirtes, poet and translator, was born in Budapest in 1948. He came to England with his family as a refugee in 1956 following the Hungarian Uprising. They settled in London where he went to school; he went on to art school in Leeds and London. He has published some 40 books altogether and has won major literary prizes for both poetry and translation. He has worked with artists, musicians and composers. His New and Collected Poems appeared in 2008.

My father carries me across a field (2004)
The poem is one of 25 in five sections based on incomplete memories of childhood, all in the same terza rima form. The sequence begins with five poems on forgetting, the implication being that memory is partly constructed through the imagination. This poem recalls the night the family crossed the border into Austria, illegally, on foot. It sees the crossing through childhood characters from A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh and arises out of a sense of miracle and desolation beyond the child’s comprehension but felt through the parents. Terza rima is a form derived from Dante and his exploration of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven: its rhyme scheme works like interlinked arms and drives the poem forward with a sense of inevitability, each verse joined to the next.
My father carries me across a field
My father carries me across a field. 
It’s night and there are trenches filled with snow.
Thick mud. We’re careful to remain concealed

From something frightening I don’t yet know.
And then I walk and there is space between
The four of us. We go where we have to go.

Did I dream it all, this ghostly scene,
The hundred-acre wood where the owl blinked
And the ass spoke? Where I am cosy and clean

In bed, but we are floating, our arms linked
Over the landscape? My father moves ahead
Of me, like some strange, almost extinct

Species, and I follow him in dread
Across the field towards my own extinction.
Spirits everywhere are drifting over blasted

Terrain. The winter cold makes no distinction
Between them and us. My father looks round
And smiles then turns away. We have no function

In this place but keep moving, without sound,
Lost figures who leave only a blank page
Behind them, and the dark and frozen ground

They pass across as they might cross a stage.

Thinking points
1  What is the connection between memory and imagination in the poem?
2  What is the relationship between the subject of the poem and the form of it?
3  Why the feeling of extinction?
4  What does the image of the ‘stage’ at the end add to the poem?
5  What is the effect of the characters from A. A. Milne?
Inferno IV by Dante, translated by Ciaran Carson (c1300)

This fourteenth-century Italian epic poem describes Dante’s journey through hell, guided by the Roman poet Virgil. I have chosen it because it is the model for my own poem, not just formally, but in its associations. The terza rima is not as strictly rhymed as in the original but it keeps the echo rolling along with the narrative to carry the reader through Dante’s adventure.

Inferno IV

Shattering the deep sleep in my head,
   a peal of thunder rang, so I awoke
   confused, like someone shaken out of bed;

and coming to, and getting up, I looked
   about with rested eyes to ascertain
   where I might be. O such an awful nook!

this was, in truth, the dread Abyss of Pain
   whose brink I stood upon, from which there rolled
   collective groanings, endlessly sustained.

Dark as a thundercloud was that enormous hole;
   so deep, the eye could get no fix on where
   it ended; nor could I see any foothold.

‘Down into the blind world we must fare,’
   began the poet, whiter than a sheet;
   ‘I first, then you, we’ll make a goodly pair.’

And I, who’d marked the pallor of his cheek,
   said: ‘Go? When you, who, when I was in doubt,
   was wont to be my strength, appear as weak?’

And he: ‘It’s when I hear the awful shouts
   of those below, that pity drains my face
   of color; not cold feet, as you make out.

Onward! a long road lies ahead of us.’

Please remember that in your exam you will need to respond to a poem written post 2000 in comparison with a poem from your studied contemporary anthology. This poem is pre 2000, but is provided here to offer further practice in applying your analytical skills.

Thinking points

1. The poem is a translation. Are there particular problems associated with the translation of poetry?
2. How far do we have to believe in Hell as an idea to enjoy the poem and make it relevant to us?
3. What is the balance between old and new language in the translation?
4. What, for you, are the best lines, and why?
5. Would this passage be just as effective if the whole were prose? What would be lost? How would you argue for the value of the form of it?
Canadian Pacific by Derek Mahon (1966)

This short poem is by the contemporary Irish poet, Derek Mahon. I have chosen it because while it deals with a quite different emigration, like mine, it uses an analogy (my analogies are A. A. Milne and a stage), in his case migrating geese, and seeks to understand a similar event and a similar state of mind. Derek Mahon was born into a Protestant family in Belfast and his youth was spent in the Troubles from which he sought to escape and yet to describe by finding parallels elsewhere. And children appear in his poem, too.

Canadian Pacific
From famine, pestilence and persecution
Those gaunt forefathers shipped abroad to find
Rough stone of heaven beyond the western ocean,
And staked their claim, and pinned their faith.
Tonight their children whistle through the dark.
Frost chokes the windows; they will not have heard
The wild geese flying south over the lakes
While the lakes harden beyond grief and anger —
The eyes fanatical, rigid the soft necks,
The great wings sighing with a nameless hunger.

Thinking points
1. How close to ordinary speech is Mahon’s poem?
2. How well does the sudden break from the gaunt forefathers to their whistling children work? Could Mahon have split the poem into two verses and to what effect?
3. The last three lines are vital to the poem. What happens there that re-orientates the reader?
4. Mahon is a perfectionist. What is the effect of the word ‘chokes’ in the sixth line?
5. Think about the poem as music. What is it about the poem that renders it musical when spoken aloud?

Further reading
- George Szirtes’ Reel (2004) and New and Collected Poems (2008), both from Bloodaxe Books: the other poems in the sequence from which ‘My father carries me across a field’ is taken are parts of a whole; see ‘Flesh: An Early Family History’ in these two collections.
- Omeros, Derek Walcott, Faber & Faber, 2002: passages from this epic poem use an echo of terza rima at the very beginning; also see The Star-Apple Kingdom, Derek Walcott, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980: the poem ‘The Schooner Flight’ in this collection also flirts with terza rima.
- Here, Wiszlawa Szymborska, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010: try this if you’d like to read more poetry with an Eastern European background.
- And of course … Winnie-the-Pooh, A. A. Milne, Egmont, 2013, for the Hundred Acre Wood, Owl, Eeyore and the rest.
Sample Unseen Poems

Section 4 provides seven examples of poems, all written post 2000, which you can use for unseen practice. Although you will be comparing an unseen poem to one from your studied collection in the A level paper, you may like to use a selection of these poems for individual analysis, as a way to develop your analytical skills. You could also use these poems to make links to others in your studied collection, considering points of similarity and difference. Within each poem you may like to consider:
- the poet’s development of themes
- the poet’s use of language and imagery
- the use of other poetic techniques.

My Father’s Language (2011)

When my father sits in the straight-backed leather chair
the room contains him as my head contains this thought
of him. As though, in the gathering darkness,
made safe by the position of a rug or lamp
he is not being lost to shadows and incoherence.

As though he is not being lost to the drift of age.
Alzheimer’s – slow accumulation of losses.
First, memory: the near shore of my father’s life,
licked by the small waves, starts to grow faint and vague.

Next it is swept clear by the escaping tide.

First memory, then language. What process of attrition
(‘tangles’, the text books answer, ‘fatty plaques’) sees him revert to a spoken Anglo-Saxon?
His language rattles in its dearth of nouns.

Everything is a ‘thing’. ‘Where is the thing for the thing?’

‘Where is the thing? The thing, you know, the thing?’
(In this bone-dry wasteland where the nouns have died
‘daughter’ might sometimes be confused with ‘wife’)
I say: The thing’s not lost. No. Take this thing.

Here is the thing. The thing – Daddy – take this thing.

Leontia Flynn
Thinspiration Shots (2013)

i
Beneath the website’s banner – if you eat
you’ll never dance again – a close up
of a ballerina, veins like wires,
balancing on a single satin shoe.

5  Once, you dreamt of being small enough
to fit inside your grandma’s jewellery box:
the dancer spinning on her gold left leg,
a mirror doubling her, the tinny music
playing
on and on until the lid was shut at last,
and you were locked in with the dark.

ii
One model has a waist just like a snake.
The other is all whippet ribs,
her legs a deer’s. The way she
rests one hand against the fence
hummingbird-light, as if she’s never still,
reminds you of those hours of press ups
when the lights were out,
the dizzy sit-ups before dawn,
the miles you ran away from home, near
fainting,
20  trying to give yourself the slip.

iii
Scroll down. A brunette in a mermaid
pose,
too slight to break the surface of the lake.
You would have drunk a lake-full if you
could,
those days they put you on the scales,
25  your bladder swollen, taut.
When they were sure there was
enough of you, you’d go upstairs
lock the bathroom door,
crouch above the cool
30  white bowl and piss it all away.

iv
The shape of her is surely made for air,
the blonde who stands on the hillside,
back bared to the camera.
You take her in, those shoulder blades
35  sharpened to wings. You wanted to be
light like her.
But now, your mirror’s not a magnifying
glass.
She teeters on the edge of flight. Tonight,
you look away. You close the page.

Helen Mort
Resolution (2000)
The new year blurs the windowpane.
Soho surrenders to the rain
as clouds break over Chinatown.
See how the storm's resolve winds down?
Its steel pins thin and mist away.
Get up. Come here and see the day.

Through this droplet's contact lens,
the West End and the future tense
look dainty, vacant and convex.

We haven't seen such weather since
the morning they invented sex.
And yet, baptised, by rain and gin,
of last year's unoriginal sins
of inattention and cliché,
this looks like every other day
that we will never see again.

Our window on the world begins
to dry, the breakfast bulletins
appal, the civil voices lie.
our private garden cloud with doubt.
So let me make this crystal clear:
the rain has stopped. Your taxi's here.
The New Year bells will ring you out.

Michael Donaghy
Scent (2012)
Lately, going in and out of the house
we once shared, I sometimes think
that the dead have many disguises;
so I hesitate at the blue-painted gatepost
– there where the evening midges dance –
because of the propinquity of a twining shrub
you long ago planted – now in jubilating flower
and surrendering faintly
its button-holding scent – one so alluring,
so delinquent, it could have made Adam
fall on Eve, with delight, in Eden.

In this world the scent could have haunted
the sacred gardens of Athens
to distract a philosopher from his thoughts,
or wafted through an open window
of the Great Library in Alexandria
unbidden, prompting a scholar
to uplift his eyes from his scroll.

But what do I care about that.
For me, now, you are its sole tenant.
Compelled I linger, allowing myself
the charm and freedom of inebriating fancy
till the scent becomes only the scent itself
returning, and I, at the gate, like Orpheus,
sober, alone, and a little wretched.

Dannie Abse
But what lovers we were, what lovers,
even when it was all over –
the deadweight, bull-black wines we swung
towards each other rang and rang

5) like bells of blood, our own great hearts.
We slung the drunk boat out of port
and watched our unreal sober life
unmoor, a continent of grief;

the candlelight strange on our faces

10 like the tiny silent blazes
and coruscations of its wars.
We blew them out and took the stairs
into the night for the night’s work,
stripped off in the timbered dark,

15 gently hooked each other on
like aqualungs, and thundered down
to mine our lovely secret wreck.
We surfaced later, breathless, back
to back, then made our way alone

20 up the mined beach of the dawn.

Don Paterson
Raymond, at 60 (2012)

The 185 from Catford Bridge, the 68 from Euston –
those same buses climbing the hill long into the evening.
This is what stays with him best now, this and watching,
in the ward where Mother had finally died,

the way the rain had fallen on the window –
a soft rain sifting down like iron filings.
The whole of that evening he’d kept his eyes fixed on the rain,
out there in the O of the buses’ steel-rimmed headlamps.
Now I am I, he thought, his two dark eyes ablaze – as if he’d found God

the very moment she’d left him. He took off his hat,
and he put his dry lips to her cheek and kissed her,
unsettled by her warmth, the scent of her skin
so unexpected he found himself suddenly
back on Bondway, crushed to her breast, in a gesture

that meant, he knew now, You are loved. There he was, with her
pulling his bobble-hat over his ears in that finicky way she had.
What was he? Eleven? Twelve? Too old, in any case, for her to be
holding his hand the entire short walk from the house
that first time she’d taken him down to watch the buses.

That first time she’d taken him down to watch the buses,
holding his hand the entire short walk from the house,
what was he? Eleven? Twelve? Too old, in any case, for her to be
pulling his bobble-hat over his ears in that finicky way she had
that meant (he knew now) You are loved. There he was with her
back on Bondway, crushed to her breast, in a gesture
so unexpected he found himself suddenly
unsettled by her warmth, the scent of her skin,
and he put his dry lips to her cheek and kissed her.
The very moment she’d left him, he took off his hat.

Now I am I, he thought, his two dark eyes ablaze – as if he’d found God
out there in the O of the buses’ steel-rimmed headlamps.
The whole of that evening he’d kept his eyes fixed on the rain,
a soft rain sifting down like iron filings,
the way the rain had fallen on the window

in the ward where Mother had finally died.
This is what stays with him best now, this and watching
those same buses climbing the hill long into the evening:
the 185 from Catford Bridge, the 68 from Euston…

Julia Copus
Birthday (2002)

Bed. Sheets without sleep, and the first birds.
Dawn at the pace of a yacht.

The first bus, empty, carries its cargo of light
from the depot, like a block of ice.

5 Dawn when the mind looks out of its nest,
dawn with gold in its teeth.

In the street, a milk-float moves
by throw of a dice,

the mast to the east raises itself
to its full height. Elsewhere

someone’s husband touches someone’s wife.
One day older the planet weeps.

This is the room
where I found you one night,

bent double, poring over
the Universal Home Doctor,

that bible of death, atlas of ill-health:
hand-drawn, colour-coded diagrams of pain,

chromosomal abnormalities explained,

progesterone secretion,
cervical incompetence...

Susan, for God’s sake.

I had to edge towards it,
close the cover with my bare foot.

25 Dawn when the mind looks out of its nest.
Dawn with gold in its teeth.

From the window I watch
Anubis, upright in black gloves

making a sweep of the earth

under the nameless tree,
pushing through shrubs,
checking the bin for bones or meat

then leaving with a backward glance, in his own time,
crossing the lawn and closing the gate.

Simon Armitage
Section 5 offers supporting notes on the unseen poems in Section 4.

5A Notes on ‘My Father’s Language’ by Leontia Flynn

Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the overall focus or ‘story’ of the poem in your essay. Consider the following points in relation to the poem and your answer. Are there any changes you would make?

In this poem, Flynn describes her father’s deterioration with Alzheimer’s. She considers communication both in her poetic art and, more generally, in human relationships. Inevitably the precise choice of words of the poet’s craft offer painful contrast with her father’s lack of language as described in the poem. The movement of the poem reflects a shift in the poet’s relationship with her father as he loses his ability to find words. Her appropriation of his language, ‘the thing’, in the second half of the poem, reflects her own emotional and linguistic movement towards her father as his own mind shifts and moves away from the solidity of the setting described in the first stanza.

1. Consider the effect of the first stanza of the poem which seems to offer a familiar setting in which her father is secure. Which words convey security? What do they suggest about the relationship and this man?

2. Consider the poet’s use of repetition – ‘the thing’, ‘as though’. What is its effect?

3. Think about how the poet explores stillness and movement in the poem and how these convey:
   - the father’s illness
   - their relationship.

4. Is it valuable to comment on the poem’s free verse and 5-line stanzas? How, if at all, do the poet’s choices of form reflect on the poem’s content?

5. Think carefully about the relationship between the poet’s craft, with its reliance on words, and her father’s lack of language:
   - What is the effect of the poet using ‘words’ to convey this situation?
   - What does the poem suggest about language and relationships?

6. Which points of comparison could be made between this poem and others from your studied collection?

Further reading

- Other poems by Flynn can be found on her website: http://leontiaflynn.com/index.html
- The Poetry Archive contains a number of poems read by Flynn herself: http://poetryarchive.org/poet/leontia-flynn
- An interview with Leontia Flynn in which she discusses the poem ‘My Father’s Language’ may be found at: http://www.literarybelfast.org/article/4343/leontia-flynn-s-profit-and-loss

Biographical information

While you will not of course be expected to know the biographical information about an unseen poet presented in examination conditions, the following information is for your own interest and general knowledge.

Leontia Flynn was born in County Down in 1974. She won an Eric Gregory award in 2001 and her first book of poems These Days (Jonathan Cape, 2004) won the Forward Prize for Best First Collection, and was shortlisted for the Whitbread Poetry Prize. Her second poetry collection Drives (Jonathan Cape) was published in 2008. Her third collection, Profit and Loss, was published in September 2011 and was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize 2012. Leontia Flynn has been Research Fellow at the Seamus Heaney Centre for Poetry, Queen’s University, Belfast, since 2005.
Section 5 Unseen Responses: Reviewing your Answers

5B Notes on ‘Thinspiration Shots’ by Helen Mort

Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the poem's central concerns in your essay. Consider the following points in relation to the poem and your answer – are there any changes/ additions you would make to your response?

Helen Mort's short sequence 'Thinspiration Shots' tackles the subject of eating disorders, specifically the world of online sites which promote extreme weight loss. The sequence takes us on a journey through the experience of an unnamed female protagonist, from illness, through denial, delusion and the start of recovery. Her history is told using a succession of images of very thin women and girls, the so-called 'Thinspiration Shots' of the title. Mort employs startlingly physical imagery to explore the psychological aspects of compulsive dieting. Alongside powerful imagery, patterns of sound, including a strong rhythm, underpin the sequence and contribute to its overall impact.

1. The act of looking and being looked at is central to the poem. Why do you think this is, and how does the poet use this idea to indicate the emotional development of the main protagonist?

2. What is the effect of writing the poem in the second person, i.e. ‘you’, rather than, say, the first or third person?

3. Identify images of physical transformation in the poem and comment on why you think they're important.

4. How does the poet convey a sense of physical constraint in the poem? In thinking about this consider both the form of the sequence, and the poet's use of imagery.

5. Why do you think the form and imagery change so markedly in the final poem? Comment on the images connected to flight in this section.

6. Which points of comparison could be made between this poem and others from your studied collection?

Further reading

- *Division Street*, Helen Mort, Chatto & Windus, 2013
- Here's a recent interview with Helen Mort where she talks about some of her inspirations and her approach to writing: [http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/in-conversation-helen-mort/](http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/in-conversation-helen-mort/)
- Helen Mort’s website has biographical details, audio clips, links to reviews and other useful info: [http://www.helenmort.com/](http://www.helenmort.com/)

Biographical information

While you will not of course be expected to know the biographical information about an unseen poet presented in examination conditions, the following information is for your own interest and general knowledge.

Helen Mort was born in Sheffield in 1985. Her collection *Division Street* is published by Chatto & Windus and was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize and the Costa Prize. She has published two pamphlets with tall-lighthouse press, ‘the shape of every box’ and ‘a pint for the ghost’, a Poetry Book Society Choice for Spring 2010. Five-times winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year award, she received an Eric Gregory Award from The Society of Authors in 2007 and won the Manchester Young Writer Prize in 2008. In 2010, she became the youngest ever poet in residence at The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere.
5C Notes on ‘Resolution’ by Michael Donaghy

Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the poem’s central concerns in your essay. Consider the following points in relation to the poem and your answer – are there any changes/ additions you would make to your response?

‘Resolution’ takes place on ‘the morning after the night before’. It’s a rainy New Year’s Day and the narrator is in a reflective mood. Addressed to another person with whom, the poem implies, the narrator has just had a casual affair, the poem wittily exposes the difficulties and delusions bound up in the concept of the New Year’s resolution, the ‘fresh start’.

1 The poem begins with a six-line stanza of three couplets. What happens to the rhyme scheme after that? How does this relate to the narrative of the poem?

2 Look at the poet’s use of words connected to vision. What’s the significance of this strand of imagery in the poem?

3 The language in the poem is playful, making use of puns and other kinds of wordplay. Can you identify some examples and comment on how they affect the tone of the poem?

4 The poem reads like a short scene from a play. What devices does the poet use to achieve this effect and what purpose does it serve?

5 Identify three words or phrases to describe the speaker of the poem. Consider the reasons for your choice and the supporting evidence in the poem.

6 Which points of comparison could be made between this poem and others from your studied collection?

Further reading

- The Poetry Archive contains a number of poems read by Michael Donaghy himself: [http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/michael-donaghy](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/michael-donaghy)

Biographical information

While you will not of course be expected to know the biographical information about an unseen poet presented in examination conditions, the following information is for your own interest and general knowledge.

Michael Donaghy was born in New York to Irish immigrant parents and grew up in the Bronx. After earning a BA from Fordham University and an MA from the University of Chicago, he moved to London in 1985. In England he won an Arts Council Writers Award and was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; his work was recognised with the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize and the Whitbread Prize. In addition to writing and teaching, he played the flute and the bodhrán, specialising in traditional Irish music. Adept at using traditional forms, Donaghy often employed conceits, extended metaphors, puns, paradoxes and stories. Witty and erudite, the poems reference literature, science and the oddities and losses of contemporary life. Donaghy taught at City University and Birkbeck College, London. He died of a brain haemorrhage in 2004 at the age of 50.
Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the overall focus or ‘story’ of the poem in your essay. Consider the following points in relation to the poem and your answer. Are there any changes you would make?

In this poem, the speaker addresses a partner who is no longer present – we can assume dead. The first stanza of the poem locates the scene as very personal and domestic, in the house and, more strongly, the garden that the two people shared. As he stands at the gatepost, the speaker catches a brief scent of a shrub that his partner planted in the past. The scent fixes him in a poignant moment of transition between past and present, loneliness and union, and allows him some connection with the person he has lost. In fact, the moment allows him to address the partner, using first-person and second-person pronouns (‘I’, ‘you’) and speak to them as though they were there. While the location of the poem is the garden, Abse includes wider epic literary, fictional and religious references, for example the stories of Adam and Eve and of Orpheus and the Underworld. These broaden the scope of the poem from a very personal experience in a local setting to the universal questions of human life and existence, and perhaps also underline the huge impact of this loss and emotion on the speaker. The poem could be described as a kind of vignette, since it captures and expresses a moment in time.

1. Read the first stanza of the poem.
   - Notice the emphasis on the words ‘in’, ‘out’, ‘dead’, ‘disguises’ and ‘hesitate’. What do they reveal about the speaker’s mood?
   - Consider the more effusive and sensuous language emphasised in the second half of the stanza and how it reflects a change of mood. What is the effect of this contrast?

2. Consider the speaker and the verbs establishing his thoughts and actions in the poem. What do they reveal about him and what is their effect on the reader?

3. The poet has chosen a number of academic and biblical references. Locate these in the poem and consider what, if anything, they add to the central concerns of this poem.

4. What is the importance of the title to Abse’s poem?

5. Consider the structure of the second stanza of the poem in relation to the others.
   - Notice the punctuation or lack of it. What is the effect of this?
   - Compare the structure of stanza one with that of the other stanzas and consider the effect of the contrast.

6. Dannie Abse’s wife died in a car crash in 2005 and much of his subsequent writing has focused on this loss. In an unseen examination you could not be expected to know this biographical information, of course. How far does such biographical information enhance your own reading of the poem? Does it add anything that you would not have gleaned from a careful ‘unseen’ reading of ‘Scent’?

7. Which points of comparison could be made between this poem and others from your studied collection?
Further reading

- Other poems and information about Dannie Abse can be found on his website: [http://dannieabse.com/](http://dannieabse.com/)
- ‘Scent’ was selected from Abse’s most recent poetry collection, *Speak, Old Parrot*, which was published by Hutchinson in 2013, the year of his 90th birthday.
- The Poetry Archive contains a number of poems read by Abse himself: [http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/dannie-abse](http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/dannie-abse)

Biographical information

While you will not of course be expected to know the biographical information about an unseen poet presented in examination conditions, the following information is for your own interest and general knowledge.

Dannie Abse is a poet, author, doctor and playwright. He has written and edited more than 16 books of poetry, as well as fiction and a range of other publications. He is president of the Welsh Academy of Letters and was recently awarded a CBE for services to poetry and literature.

5E Notes on ‘The Wreck’ by Don Paterson

Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the overall focus or ‘story’ of the poem in your essay. Consider the following points in relation to the poem and your answer. Are there any changes you would make?

1. Look carefully at the couplets Paterson uses to structure his poem. How tightly do they link? Are they rhyming? Does his choice bear any relevance to the subject matter of his writing?
2. Read the poem aloud in your head or aloud, depending on where you are doing this work! Sound is important in this poem. Notice the vowel sounds in the first three couplets. Are they heavy or light? What is their effect on the pace and delivery of the poem? Can you identify any other dominant sounds, for example through Paterson’s use of alliteration? What is the purpose of this in relation to the poem’s topic?
3. How far do the images the poet chooses reflect the relationship he portrays? Consider ‘bells of blood’, ‘drunk boat out of port’, ‘deadweight, bull-black wines’, ‘lovely secret wreck’ and any others that appeal to you.
4. Paterson makes use of vocabulary relating to both the sea and war in this poem. Can you identify:
   - examples of this language?
   - how they link to ideas of being sober and drunk?
   - their purpose and effect?
5. Consider the last couplet of the poem. How, if at all, has the mood changed? What is Paterson suggesting about this relationship?
6. Which points of comparison could be made between this poem and others from your studied collection?
Further reading

- Other poems by Paterson can be found on his website:
  http://www.donpaterson.com/bio.htm
- The Poetry Archive resource contains a number of poems read by Paterson himself:
  http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/don-paterson

Biographical information

While you will not of course be expected to know the biographical information about an unseen poet presented in examination conditions, the following information is for your own interest and general knowledge.

Don Paterson was born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1963. His publications since 2000 include Landing Light, Orpheus and Rain. He is known both for his work as a jazz musician and a prize-winning poet; amongst other awards he has won the T. S. Eliot Prize twice. Most recently he has published work about reading Shakespeare’s sonnets and has written a number of poems in this form himself, due for publication in 2014.

5F Notes on ‘Raymond, at 60’ by Julia Copus

Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the poem’s central concerns in your essay. Consider the following points in relation to the poem and your answer – are there any changes/additions you would make to your response?

In this poem Copus uses the specular form (a form that she in fact invented and other poets have since used) to explore the relationship between a mother and son. This form, from ‘speculum’, the Latin for mirror, is a poem of two stanzas in which each line from the first stanza is repeated, or mirrored, in the second stanza but in reverse order. Key elements of the form are its circularity and its sense of inevitability – the fascination for the reader partly stems from seeing how the poet achieves such a difficult technical challenge.

In ‘Raymond, at 60’ Copus describes the complex emotions of a man in late middle age following the death of his elderly mother. Memory is at the heart of the poem – Raymond’s memory of the night she died blurring into a boyhood memory when he’d felt smothered by her care. The poem flows from the present, to the recent past, to the distant past and back again. In doing so, the specular form dramatises the nature of the central relationship and its impact on Raymond’s emotional development.

1 How does the title help to set the scene for the poem?

2 Consider movement in the poem – both in terms of images of movement and the form itself. What does the poet’s use of both of these reveal about Raymond’s relationship with his mother?

3 In addition to the above, consider the use Copus makes of physical gestures in the poem – how do these convey the complex relationship between mother and son?

4 What is the significance of the two statements in italics, and the fact these are both unspoken thoughts?

5 Can you comment on the mood of the poem? What details does the poet use to create this atmosphere?

6 Which points of comparison could be made between this poem and others from your studied collection?
Further reading

- You can read a good analysis of another Copus poem published on the Times Literary Supplement’s website: http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tol/public/article1249590.ece
- For a more in-depth look at Copus’s qualities as a poet, the British Council’s literature website has a good critical essay which also includes a discussion of the specular form: http://literature.britishcouncil.org/julia-copus
- The Poetry Archive contains a number of poems read by Copus herself: http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/julia-copus

Biographical information

While you will not of course be expected to know the biographical information about an unseen poet presented in examination conditions, the following information is for your own interest and general knowledge.

Julia Copus was born in London, near to the Young Vic theatre, and now lives in Somerset. Her two previous collections, The Shuttered Eye and In Defence of Adultery, were both Poetry Book Society Recommendations, while her third collection, The World’s Two Smallest Humans, was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize. She has also won first prize in the National Poetry Competition and the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem (2010).

5G A critical response by Ruth Padel to Simon Armitage’s poem ‘Birthday’

In her book about poetry which offers perspectives on how to read poetry as well as excellent analyses of 60 modern poems, Ruth Padel includes an essay on ‘Birthday’. Read the essay below. Consider the structure and style of Padel’s analytical piece. Her close language analysis reveals how the poem’s focus gradually reveals itself to the careful reader. She explores the structure and movement of the poem from dawn to dark, the sounds of the poem and how these reflect the pain portrayed, and of course the title of the poem which should never be ignored. For examination purposes we would not require biographical materials at the opening of your essay and would recommend a clearer initial paragraph to establish the overall focus of the poem. Padel’s essay itself mirrors the gradual revelations in Armitage’s poem, not disclosing its painful focus on miscarriage until the sixteenth paragraph.

Look again at your unseen response. Check that you have established your understanding of the overall focus or ‘story’ of the poem in your essay. Consider Padel’s analysis of the poem in relation to your answer. Are there any changes you would make?

Armitage, born in 1963 in Huddersfield, grew up in Yorkshire, studied geography and psychology at Portsmouth and Manchester, and became a probation officer. Then poetry took charge. His first collection (1989) established him as a leading poet of his generation. He has published ten books of poems since, taught at the Universities of Leeds, Iowa and now Manchester Metropolitan. He has written two novels, a memoir, television films, stage plays. His many awards include an award for song lyrics in a BAFTA-winning Channel 4 film.
His early probation work gave his poems not just a rich seam of unexplored material but a particular social perspective which struck a note with many audiences, especially young urban readers. He has a wonderful ear for spoken language and timing. That part of his voice which is seemingly casual and off-the-cuff (with rhythms that appear to come naturally from the speaking voice – whoever is supposed to be speaking) disguises deeply sophisticated craft. His poems, often on the National Curriculum, are a rare mix of the genuinely popular and seriously literary.

This title poem in a collection called *The Universal Home Doctor* is a quiet approach to a highly emotive subject, which discloses itself as you go. Through seventeen couplets it moves from a *bed* indoors to *closing the gate* outside, a last act watched from the *window*. The first six scene-setting couplets, with no people in them, look *out* from *bed* to the outside world. Six more present a central drama between *I* and *you* in the bedroom. The last five echo the first section, but now the speaker looks out to see an intruder: the Egyptian god of the dead *in black gloves* like an undertaker.

The first movement builds a picture of earliness and beginnings (*first, first, dawn, dawn, dawn*) that is somehow *without* (the poem's third word) promise. The words in these descriptions feel chilly, silent, negative. *Empty. A cargo of light* (which could sound lovely but actually, when you think about it, reinforces emptiness), a *block of ice. Dawn with gold in its teeth* could also be lovely but sounds menacing too.

The first couplet has no verbs. When verbs do begin, inanimate subjects act almost eerily on their own. A *bus* carries, milk-float *moves*, mast *raises itself*. And *to its full height*, like someone intending to assert or dominate. Which strengthens the slight sinisterness behind the other images, as if *full realisation* (of something causing pain or fear) is coming back to the *mind*. Whose, we do not yet know. But it *looks out of its nest* as the poem looks out from the *bed* to the wider world.

When we get a person, he is *elsewhere*. This act, *someone's husband* touching *someone's wife*, is a betrayal that is nothing to do with this room. It is the climax of the world starting up, unfolding into a new day; which at this point means *the planet* being *one day older*. Routine wrongness, how the world goes. So *the planet weeps*: climax of all these objects acting on their own. It puts on the table the despair behind this section's images.

Vowel sounds bind together these first six couplets. *Bed*'s short E is echoed in *empty* and *nest*. The EE of *sheets* moves on through *sleep, teeth, street* and *east* to culminate in *weeps*. The IR of *first* echoes on through *birds* and *first*; its final ST is echoed in *mast* and *east*. The long I of *light* flickers through *like, mind, dice, height, wife*. The long O of *gold* picks up *depot* and is echoed in *older*.

After scene-setting, the drama. People: *you* and *I*. This *is* the same room, but the verbs now look back to how it was in the past (*found; I had to edge; [I had to] close.*). The central couplet describes a medical reference book in unusually emotive terms. *Bible of death* expands on *weeps*. We are talking about mourning. The poem is sad not only for the *planet*, but for loss inside *this room*. 
Then another work of reference that every home needs, which brings in the geographical as well as the sacred world. Not the family bible, but a map of this weeping planet: an atlas, which maps ill-health in a nice new modern way (colour-coded). This reference work is about not the outside world or sacred history like a real bible or atlas, but the inside of the human body, this thing through which we hurt and which lets us down (as incompetence). Its title in the central couplet contains the word which ties the planet and all objects in it to what is happening in this room (now and in the past) and to every mind looking out of any nest. It is universal, whose sound effect is prepared for by double in the line before. And its language of explanation for pain is the climax of the autonomous impersonality with which the poem began. It is technical, but in a human context the phrase cervical incompetence sounds unbearably reproachful. So the poem brings in real spoken language (Susan, for God’s sake) to shut it up, for the name Universal Home Doctor is ironic. This is a home. But no book (or not one like this) can doctor what has happened, cure the pain.

The drama is three slight actions. The speaker found you, edged towards, then closed this chapter of pain with a bare foot. Simple, personal bare words rise up and throw out the technical language which is supposed to map what happens inside you. They close down the impersonality. These tiny acts move the poem forward to the final section. Some of the vowel sounds here pick up those of the first section. (Night echoes the long monosyllabic I; bible and cervical place the I in a new rhythmic context. Bent echoes bed and empty, and is followed up in death, health and edge. Poring echoes the OR of those two dawns and is repeated in abnormalities.) But others create a new soundworld. The OO of room is echoed in you, universal, Susan, towards and foot. The U of double is echoed in colour and cover, its L in the frightening language around the central book: universal (the central line), chromosomal, cervical. The long O of over and Home (again in the central line, half-echoing room) reappears in coded, chromosomal, progesterone and close. The emotional AIN (pain and explained) mutates to sake.

With the drama past, the present tense returns. In the reprise of the third couplet, teeth seems even more sinister after bent double, death and pain. Action passes from the I who closed the book to what I sees. Not only inanimate objects now but a figure. We have had the bible of death, but this figure comes not from the Bible but an even more ancient sacred world. The poem describes the Egyptian guide to the topography of death in a string of present participles: making, pushing, checking, leaving, crossing and (bringing back the closing book) closing.

Meanwhile the OR of dawn returns twice, and again in the last line (lawn). The long I of mind now looks forward to I, upright and time; the EE of teeth to sweep, tree, leaving and meat (which widens into the last word gate); the long O of gold to window, bones, own and closing. Shrubs picks up gloves, crossing echoes the short O of watch.
I have read the poem with many groups. When I ask what they think it is about, most people say ‘death’ at first but one always says ‘miscarriage’ and eventually convinces the others by pointing to clues. *Cervical incompetence* reveals what kind of ill-health and pain is involved and reflects back on early images of emptiness and lack; on *without sleep* and *bent double*. It gives a human, biological dimension to the closing images of book and *gate*; and also (with muted horror) to *bones* and *meat*. This is not only a fox or dog nosing rubbish. There are undertaker-like *black gloves*.

Retrospectively, the *throw of a dice* associated with a *milk-float* suggests the biological lottery of miscarriage and lost maternity. And the poem’s sad title is *Birthday*.

*Anubis*, jackal-headed god of the dead, is a surprise in this urban-sounding garden with its *street*, *shrubs* and *bin*. He mythologises the private, domestic sadness. The *nameless tree* could be a private reference (a tree in their garden whose name the couple do not know) but also sounds ancient and mythical as if familiar from some journey of the dead. And, significant, as if something were buried under it.

*In his own time* may reflect the calculatedly unhurried movements of any urban fox, but does it in the pseudo-comforting language used when someone in authority asks you to do something difficult. (In hospital, perhaps.) It sums up the silently autonomous way all objects in this poem have acted. It also says in a different register what the medical book explained through its *diagrams*: what happens in the body (as well as out of it) happens in its *own time*. There is nothing you can do but close the book, as *Anubis* closes the *gate*. *Book of the body*, gate of the body. The gate between living and dead.

A book of technical language, whose ambiguous title can never be fulfilled, cannot *doctor* private suffering. But there are disciplines that do put suffering into bearable *universal* perspectives: myth, philosophy, religion; and poetry. *There was a time when only wise books were read*, says Milosz’s poem ‘*Ars Poetica*?’, helping us to bear our pain and misery. / *This is not quite the same* / *as leafing through a thousand works fresh from psychiatric clinics.*

*Anubis* stands for myth and religion. If you lose a baby, it is *universal* to torment yourself trying to explain why. But also *universal* to try and comfort someone you love in pain, try and find ‘*closure*’ for her or both of you. To close the *cover*.

This is about *universal* grief. But it is the particulars, the specific details and sounds that give it universal power.

6 Student Essays

This section shows some student responses that compare two of the contemporary poems from section 4. The students have been asked to compare the ways in which the two poets present strong emotions. Consider the quality of responses to the poems and how well they have addressed the poems themes, language, imagery or other poetic techniques.

Remember that in the A level paper, you will compare an unseen contemporary poem with one of the poems from your studied anthology, Poems of the Decade.

| AO1 | Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression |
| AO2 | Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts |
| AO4 | Explore connections across literary texts |

Example 1

Though both the poems ‘Scent’ by Dannie Abse and ‘The Wreck’ by Dan Paterson have a clear cut title, if the reader looks at the duality of the title, different interpretations begin to become more apparent. The word ‘scent’ on paper implies a sense of pleasantness and a natural smell that is somewhat distinctive to a person. This is much like the poem, as the reader learns that the persona becomes lost in an uncontrollable passion for a scent that remind them of a person who was once very close to them. However, hearing the word ‘scent’ could also be interpreted as ‘sent’, a conscious act that is carried out by someone. This also shows an aspect of the poem as it is implied by the persona that the dead never leave us, even though they have been sent away.

The duality in choice of title is similar to Paterson’s ‘The Wreck’, which initially gives the impression that there is loss or ruins within the poem, or perhaps something that was there before that is not now. However, the word ‘wreck’ could also suggest a sign of drunkenness and uncontrollable actions that are carried out. Either interpretation means something that is in ruins, regardless as to whether it is still in its original form or if it is still remaining.

The structure of ‘Scent’ is unique. The opening of the poem is very vague, ‘going in and out of the house,’ but then goes on to describe the ‘ruining shrub’ the persona lost once planted long ago. By placing this at the opening of the poem it creates a sense of allusion and the explicit scent that the flower withholds. Abse structures the poem to end right back where it began- ‘charm’ and ‘freedom’ link back to the beginning of the poem, when the narrative voice talks about themselves being ‘allured’ and ‘delinquent’. It suggests that the persona is reiterating the enjoyment of being out of control with their passion, and the sense of a freedom that comes with it. Yet the final sentence ends with such emotional honesty. ‘Sober, alone and a little wretched’ expresses subtlety of emotion and leaves the reader feeling empathetic to the poignant persona.

‘The Wreck’ is structured in a more complex way than ‘Scent’. Paterson structures his poems in couplets, perhaps creating a sense of pairs or relationships. The opening of the poem gives the reader the initial impression
that it reflects signs of love or falling in love. However, by the end of the poem, the reader learns the tension of the ‘lovely secret wreck’ between the couple, and the symbol of love becomes less apparent. Paterson may have wanted the reader to think that the emotions in relationships are not always easy going and that first impressions do not always define a couple.

The form of the poem ‘Scent’ shares a distinct change from beginning to end. It allows the reader to be carried away into the universe by the biblical reference of Adam and Eve, perhaps sharing the essence of pure passion, relating to something more fundamental and well known. Yet it zooms into a small part of the persona’s personal experience of being out of control with their passionate emotions.

Unlike Paterson who creates the form of his poem much like a wreck- his use of a variety of punctuation and multiple uses of enjambment demand when the reader will choose to end the sentence. This gives an uneven rhythm, in combination with half rhyme couplets creates a disrupted and inharmonious poem, perhaps mirroring the emotions being explored in the couple’s relationship.

Abse creates his poem as a vignette to carry the explicit memories the narrative voice is experiencing. The scent of a ‘jubilating flower’ shows the intense passion and unbelievable sense of happiness that the narrative voice is experiencing, simply by the scent of a flower. Abse shows a clear classical interest when he mentions both ‘The Great Library in Alexandria’ and the ‘Gardens of Athens.’ Not only does this link the reader back to the fundamental feeling of something personal, but both places are the epitome of stillness and silence- mirroring how the persona feels when they are experiencing the scent. The ‘sole tenant’ of the scent could even ‘distract a philosopher from his thoughts.’ This particularly illuminates the narrative voice’s passion for absence. It shows how the power of this particular smell can arouse a connection between the living and dead.

‘The Wreck’ has aspects of purity and passion, however different in consistency to ‘Scent.’ Paterson refers to ‘tiny silent blazes’ and the ‘candlelight’. Yet throughout the poem, the writer also repeatedly expresses energy in his verb usage- ‘swing’, ‘rang’ and ‘swung’ all demonstrate a physicality to show the strong and intense relationship that this couple as ‘lovers’ were experiencing. This is further demonstrated when Paterson metaphorically uses bathos (‘our lovely secret wreck’) to show the heavy passion and intensity of the relationship by lapsing the mood.
Example 2

Both Dannie Abse through ‘Scent’ and Don Paterson in ‘The Wreck’ express emotions through the overarching theme of love. Abse through the memories of a lost lover stimulated by scent, and Paterson through reminiscing of a lover on their previous relationship. Both poets are able to effectively convey emotion in their work.

Dannie Abse is able to express emotion purely through his choice of title. The single word ‘scent’ plays upon the idea of soft, perfumed aromas that draw connotations of a sensuous nature. Similarly, the word also carries a duality in its meaning: whilst the word itself conveys ideas of perfume and aromas, when pronounced phonetically it is conveyed as a message ‘sent’ from a conscious decision. This is an idea that is interwoven throughout the poem to convey the emotions carried in the scent of the flowers that becomes a message from the poets’ lost lover.

In contrast, whilst Dan Paterson also uses a short simple title choice to great effect, the title of ‘The Wreck’ creates very different impressions. Traditional interpretations of the title draws upon ideas of a shipwreck, a literal interpretation of the metaphor of the poem, however it could alternatively be interpreted in a modern sense as the description of a drunken, wasted individual who is reckless in nature, both of which are explored by Paterson in the poem.

Whilst the key linking theme of both poem is undoubtedly love, both also explore ideas of desperation and desire. In ‘Scent’, Abse conveys the powerful emotions felt by the narrator in their desire to connect once more with the person they have lost. In the very first line, Abse recalls ‘going in and out of the house we once shared’ suggesting they are almost desperately searching for some connection they can make with the deceased. This is furthered through the way Abse states that the ‘dead have many disguises.’ This could be interpreted as the poet showing the raw desperation to remain in touch with the memories they hold, yet so often they find that the stimulants of these memories try to avoid them. Here, Abse is also able to evoke sympathy in the reader for the desperate nature of their attempt to make any connection with the dead.

Similarly, Paterson presents the theme of the emotion of desire and desperation through his description of the reckless nature of the relationship. Paterson is able to achieve this through the way he begins the poem as if the person is mid-sentence. This immediately creates a faint rhythmic pace to the poem, mirroring the passion of the relationship. The final line of the final stanza ‘even when it was all over’ suggests that some desire to engage with each other in passionate actions still exists between them, even though it would seem that the formal relationship is over.

Both Abse and Paterson are able to convey emotions of desperation through their lexical choices in the first lines of each respective poem. Abse draws upon ideas of the desperation to connect once more with a deceased lover, whilst
Paterson explores the desire and urge to engage in passion once more between two apparently separate figures.

Both poets are also able to express emotions through their use of imagery. Abse uses the image of a flower to represent the poet’s connection with the dead, specifically through its location by the gatepost, whilst Paterson draws upon the imagery of the sea and the sexual connotations it holds.

In ‘Scent’ the flower is presented as the stimulant to the poet’s memories of the person they have lost. Just like the title the image conveys ideas of softness yet with a strong power to disrupt even the greatest [sic]. This is shown in the first stanza through the way Abse describes the flower as having a ‘button-holding’ scent- one so alluring,’ revealing the softness of the scent through the way it is described as ‘button-holding,’ whilst also conveying the power and strength it holds, capable of ‘alluring’ anyone into a state of uncontrol. This is furthered in the second stanza in Abse’s imagery of Athens and Alexandria. Abse is able to emphasise the soft power of the scent through the way is it distinguishable from all other scents in a ‘sacred garden.’ A place already saturated with aromas. In the same stanza, however, Abse is able to convey the power of the scent through the way it is able ‘to distract a philosopher from his thoughts’ as well as ‘promptly a scholar to uplift his eyes,’ highlighting the power of the scent and the strength of memories to draw the attention of even the great and good in its power.

Similarly, Paterson uses the imagery of the sea to present the emotions of the couple. In both the third and fourth stanzas of ‘The Wreck’ Paterson emphasises the influence of the sea in dictating where the lovers journey. In the third stanza, Paterson’s lexical choice of ‘slung the drunk boat out of port’ reflects the wild yet reckless nature of the couple’s relationship. The verb ‘slung’ contrasts greatly with the soft tenderness of the scent in Abse’s poem yet it could be argued that both methods are equally effective in contrasting the depth and strength of love experiences in both poems. In ‘The Wreck’, Paterson’s description of the boat as ‘drunk’ encapsulates he state of the lovers on board. In the fourth stanza, Paterson’s description ‘unmoor, a continent of grief’ evokes images of lovers casting away the shackled of their lives and allowing themselves to be at the mercy of the roll of the sea. An image which is in itself sexual in nature through the idea of rhythmic, rolling movements.

Both poets structure their poems to convey the idea of love and the emotions experienced. The poem ‘Scent’, as a vignette, in written in free verse emphasising the way in which the first-person poet is immersed in their memories and is uncontrollably carried away by them. Abse’s choice to make the first stanza longer than the other two, clearly lengthened, draws once more upon ideas of being lost and carried away in emotions. However, another interpretation of this could be that it is representing the idea of change, a change in the lives of the poet following the death of their lover.
In contrast, Paterson writes his poem in rhyming couplets with ten stanzas, each two lines in length. This could be seen as Paterson emphasising the idea of unity in a relationship. And, though it may now be over, a connection remains, both between each stanza through rhyming couplets and similarly between the two lovers in their passionate desire for one another. Both poets are able to convey the emotion and expressiveness of love through the structures of their poems.

In conclusion, both Dannie Abse in the poem ‘Scent’ and Dan Paterson in ‘The Wreck’ are able to present and convey emotions through a wide variety of methods. Though they may in some cases, use contrasting methods this is necessarily and arguably equally effective in conveying the contrasting approaches to love and the emotion is carries.

Example 2
This is a clear response with relevant connections and therefore falls into level 3. A neat start in the opening paragraph leads to a rather wordy response, at its best when it deals with the imagery of the poems. There is some attempt to compare the structure of the two poems, which is not entirely convincing however. In fact the word “structures” tends to be used inappropriately – we are told ‘the verb ‘slung’ contrasts greatly with the soft tender experiences of love through the structures of their poems.

Example 3

Both the poems ‘My Father’s Language’ and ‘Scent’ are concerned with strong emotions towards someone. However, there are differences in meaning that indicate that the extent of strong emotions differ. Both poems present relationships with lovers or family in a largely similar manner, though the nature of the relationships differ. For instance, while Flynn’s poem offers an insight into a woman losing her father (albeit not physically) due to Alzheimer’s, Abse’s poem talks of the loss of a lover or family member (it is not clear which). Both speakers retain a connection, however. While Abse’s speaker does so through scent, Flynn’s speaker does so through language, the only ‘thing’ (quoting directly) that he can express himself through. Both Flynn’s poem and Abse’s maintain a nostalgic tone throughout, indicating their inability to progress on. This choice of topic for both poems may be a result of the fact that they are post-modern. They tackle issues of family and loss with particular insight into the process of remembrance and sorrow for past times. Furthermore, a key difference is that both poems are in the first person (Flynn’s poem making an immediate acknowledgement of the relationship: ‘My father sits’) but they both present differing tones. Abse’s poem, for example, has a rather impersonal tone as it mentions nothing of the lover or family member except that of an ‘alluring’ scent, making it an almost universal poem in its exploration of nostalgia.

While Abse’s poem uses the metaphor of the scent of the flower to illustrate
the nature of their relationship, Flynn’s poem utilises a metaphor of the sea to
depict the extent by which the speaker has lost her connection with her father
due to Alzheimer’s. Memory has been ‘licked by small waves’, starting to ‘grow
faint’. What remains is language, though it has reduced him to a ‘spoken Anglo-
Saxon’, his language consumed by ‘nouns.’ However, though his language has
deteriorated, they manage to maintain a connection through simple conversations
with nouns. In Abse’s poem, on the other hand, the scent of the ‘jubilating flower’
is what helps the speaker connect to his/her lost partner. While both poets use
metaphors in differing manners, both poets illustrate a [sic] connection that is
returned, despite the loss of memory, or in Abse’s case, the loss of a person.
Both poems also use enjambment to illustrate the meandering nature of the
speaker’s thoughts. Flynn, for instance, uses enjambment to compliment the
speaker’s reference to the nature of Alzheimer’s on her father’s memory;
‘the near shore of my father’s life.’ The whole poem can thus be seen as a
representation of the father’s Alzheimer’s as the waves continuously sweep
away his life. In Abse’s poem, enjambment is used to depict a continuous
connection through scent, though the last stanza provides us with evidence that
the scent has left and the speaker is ‘sober, alone.’ Both speakers, it can be
stated then, are at a war with forces they cannot win against. The speaker of
Abse’s poem, however, is still unable to accept the loss as is seen with the varied
stanza length. The speaker of Flynn’s poem has a continued relationship with her
father, as demonstrated by the equal stanza length throughout the quatrains.
Unlike Abse’s speaker, Flynn uses dialogue to illustrate how her relationship with
her father has deteriorated. Interestingly, the speaker has an almost optimistic
tone at the end of the dialogue with nouns. Flynn writes ‘I say: the thing’s not
lost. No. Take this thing.’ This offers a personal insight into the nature of the
speaker’s strong emotions. Though the speaker is losing her father, the end of the
poem commits her to readily ‘speak her father’s language.’ In ‘Scent’, however,
the speaker uses no dialogue. As the object of the strong emotions is no longer
alive, the speaker sees the ‘jubilating flower’ as his or her ‘disguise’. As such,
just being in its presence (‘I linger’) the speaker is able to communicate without
language. Unlike Flynn’s poem, however, the end of the poem is not optimistic,
as the speaker is left ‘like Orpheus, sober, alone.’ The strong emotions are thus
different as the circumstances differ. This means that the tone of both poems,
too, are largely different.
In conclusion, both poets use different language methods to express strong
emotions. While they both tackle the problem of nostalgia, differences in
structure and language mean that the nature of these strong emotions differ. For
instance, while Flynn deals with loss due to Alzheimer’s, Abse deals with loss due
to death. This means that the tone of the poems largely differ.
Example 3
There is clarity and relevance in this answer, placing it in level 3. The answer starts by summarising the content quite efficiently and identifying the speaking voice of each poem. When it moves on to explore the tone, it is less impressive: differing tones are identified, but Abse's poem is described as being rather "impersonal" and later we are told that in the Flynn poem "they manage to maintain a connection through simple conversations with nouns", when in fact it is the nouns that are missing, and the poignancy of the situation is overlooked. Some structural features are noted - enjambment and stanza length – although the conclusions are less secure.

Example 4
In the poems ‘Scent’ by Dannie Abse and ‘Thinspiration Shots’ by Helen Mort, the contrast between naturalistic imagery and the domestic are used to represent the speaker’s strong emotions [sic].

In both poems, enjambment is used frequently to portray the primal emotions of the speakers, in ‘close up/of’ and ‘open window/if.’ In both of these instances a description is followed by enjambment. This leads the reader to experience the initial description solely before moving on to the practical reality of the object. This also has the effect of demonstrating the reader’s transformation from feeling strong, painful emotions to being aware of the practical realities of their situation.

Sensual and naturalistic imagery are used in both poems- seen in 'one model has a waist just like a snake' and ‘there where the evening midges dance.’ In ‘Thinspiration Shots’, this has the effect of aligning the speaker’s battles with eating disorders with nature, and thus mental illness. The use of the word ‘snake’ also employs usage of dramatic irony in order to inform the reader of the changes of being thin. This is similar to William Blake’s poem, ‘The Guardian of Love’, in which ‘black gowns’ inform the reader of the sinister nature of love. The usage of ‘and’ to begin the line suggests it is part of the story [sic] related to the sensual, naturalistic imagery above it. This means the morbid pathetic fallacy has the effect of shocking the reader: In ‘Scent’, naturalistic imagery is separated from the domestic allusions- ‘gatepost’ and ‘twining’ are separated with hyphens. This has the effect of leading the reader to acknowledge the contrasts between domesticity and the speaker’s sensual fantasies. Furthermore, it also suggests that the speaker’s observance of the sensual [sic] is interrupting their train of thought, thus depicting the speaker as strongly passionate.

The pieces contrast in that ‘Scent’ uses classical references and allusions such as ‘the Great Library in Alexandria’ whilst ‘Thinspiration Shots’ uses extremely modern, topical references such as ‘model’ and ‘camera’ in order to depict strong emotions. ‘Thinspiration Shots’ includes the line ‘These days they put you on the scales’, referencing the modern practices of a rehabilitation clinic in order to relate the speakers self loathing with the modern climate. In ‘scroll down’ and ‘camera’, the internet and the modelling industry are associated with the speaker's distress. This is similar to Andrew Murrell’s poem ‘To his Coy Mistress’ in which topical references to ‘empires’ highlights the speaker’s fear of mortality.
In contrast, ‘Scent’ uses classical references to imply that the speakers sensual feelings have been felt throughout history. In ‘...Adam fell on Eve in delight’, a biblical allusion suggests that the speakers emotions are so strong they could allude to original sin and the damnation of humanity. Alternatively, historical references to the library of Alexandria are likely to have been used to imply the apparently enduring quality of the speaker’s passion. The public and well-known destruction of the library may be associated with the destruction of the speaker’s passion.

Both poems end with short punctuational sentences. These contrast with the earlier enjambment of the poem, suggesting the flowing and free nature of the speaker’s strong emotions have been usurped by reality. The last line of Bishop’s ‘The Fish’ (‘...and I let the fish go’) shows that the exhilaration of the process of catching a fish is contrasted with the speaker’s moral disillusionment with the glamorisation of death. The usage of ‘and’ links the last sentence, thus implying the progression of the speaker from passionate to subdued. To contrast, in ‘Scent’, the line ‘But what do I care about that’ is positioned at the beginning of the stanza, implying that the speakers apparent nonchalance is temporary. Similarly, the structure of ‘you look away- you close the page’ implies that the speaker has been able to remove themselves from their emotions, but their battle with anorexia is still constant.

To conclude, naturalistic imagery and disjointed structure emphasise the rise and fall of the speakers strong emotions and imply the emotional journey of the speakers.

Example 4

This response is clear and logical, and achieves a mark in level 3. This response is very much focused on looking at methods, with the result that the overall sense of the two poems does get somewhat lost. Against the requirements of the task and the mark schemes, references to other works and poets are not really relevant. The response would be improved by considering the voice of the poem and the attitude to these anorexic models, for example.

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Example 5

In both the poems ‘Scent’ by Dannie Abse and ‘The Wreck’ by Don Paterson, emotions are expressed in many ways. The poem ‘The Scent’ depicts the narrative voice reminiscing on a clearly departed person and relating that memory to the scent of a flower. In ‘The Wreck’ the relationship of two lovers is explained after they have broken up. The emotions felt in both is a direct link to the love two people once shared even after separation or through death.

In both the poems ‘Scent’ and ‘The Wreck’ the poets use emotive language to help emphasise the emotion and love showed between the poems personas. In
‘Scent’, Abse chooses to approach the theme of love through the narrative voice of the poem, focusing on ‘the twining shrub.’ Throughout the poem Abse uses emotive language such as ‘alluring’ and ‘delinquent’ in order to describe the scent the ‘shrub’ radiates. This expresses emotion as the persona is enticed by the scent, as it reminds them of a mad and passionate love they once shared with a departed loved one. The paradox of the scent being ‘alluring’ yet ‘delinquent’ helps to convey the enormity of the love the person once has which was lost through death.

In ‘The Wreck’, Paterson uses a similar method of emotive language in order to express emotion. Paterson uses language choices such as ‘candlelight’ and ‘tiny silent blazes’ in order to show the delicate nature of their love as they have now separated and only engage in a physical relationship. As a result of this the persona ‘watched our unreal sober life’ as they cast away all of the shackles they had in the past and instead decide to engage in an electrifying relationship away from any judgement. This helps to express the carefree feeling the two lovers have as they engage in a physical romance raging with excitement for the other. This is a similar emotion Abse expresses as his persona, like Paterson’s, are so captivated with emotions they suggest all the boundaries that prevent their love.

Emotion is also created in both poems through the structure of each poem. In ‘Scent’, Abse expresses emotion through his choice to make the opening stanza four lines longer than the other two. In the first stanza the persona ‘hesitates at the blue pained gatepost’ as a result of the overpowering scent that remind them of a departed love one. The stanza ends with the persona believing the scent would have delighted Adam and Eve in Eden. This structured choice helps to express how the emotion the persona feels makes him get carried away with himself and forgets everything else and instead enters a different state. The impact is to make the persona appear rather happy to be remembering their loved one. However, alternatively the persona also appears rather melancholy as the idea of the dead wraps them in sorrow as they remember their dearly departed.

Paterson also uses structural choices to express emotion in ‘The Wreck’. The poem on the surface is laid out in two line stanzas with half rhyming couplets throughout. Despite the obvious structure, however, the enjambment and punctuation used by Paterson demand that the rhythm of the poem does not flow and are instead disrupted. ‘What lovers, even when it was all over- the deadweight’ demands to be read as one full line. This helps to express emotion as it corresponds with the crazy and erratic love the two lovers shared. It complements the idea of young people breaking the rules and having a physical relationship with no emotion. Therefore the emotions expressed through the structural choice are very different in the two poems as Abse uses it to show the power and distinction of the personas past love, whereas Paterson shows the informality [sic] and recklessness.
A recurring idea throughout both of the poems is the idea that part things remain. In ‘Scent’ Abse addresses this immediately: ‘I sometimes think that the dead have many disguises’ as the persona believes their dead loved one remains in a more spiritualised way. The narrative voice remembers the dead through a scent, a scent so poignant and powerful it could influence Adam and Eve as well as overpower all the flowers in the ‘sacred garden of Athens.’ The idea of past things remaining helps to express emotion as the persona is unable to move on and forget and will always be enticed by the scent to remember love. The enormity of the idea that one smell could influence so much help convey the feeling the persona has for their dead loved one as it so important it can transport them to many places and still be in a world with just each other.

This same idea of past things remaining is used by Paterson in ‘The Wreck’: ‘But what lovers we were, what lovers, even when it was all over.’ Again like Abse, the idea of something continuing after the end is as absolute [sic] at the very beginning. Paterson approaches a continuing physical relationship even after the emotional one is over. Their emotion is expressed as they do continue a mad and passionate love despite separation, therefore having an emotional detachment from each other allowing the persona to enjoy the physical emotions [sic]. This is a direct contrast to Abse’s persona, as they only felt the extreme measure of a cold heart of emotion minus any physical intimacy following death.

In both the poems ‘Scent’ and ‘The Wreck’, emotion is expressed right until the last lines of the poem. In ‘Scent’ Abse uses the last lines to convey the feelings of the persona, as they return from their dreamlike state back to real life ‘sober, alone and a little wretched.’ Through this the scent has evaporated and instead left the persona feeling lonely and melancholic about their dearly departed loved one. Emotion is expressed in these last lines through the wider confusion he felt in the power of the scent of the flower to the feeling it leaves him with. After the scent has gone away he is ‘wretched’ and in a sense of abandonment.

In ‘The Wreck’ Paterson uses the same idea of abandonment to express the live emotion the personas feel, ‘then we made our way alone up the mined beach of dawn.’ Here the mad and crazy intimacy they experience as lovers has faded and has instead been replaced by a tranquil scene. The idea of a ‘mined beach’ shows they have gained what they wanted from each other physically and any emotion or feeling they had for each other has gone. Both of the poets use the final lines to show true emotion different from the power and enormity previously shown. All personas are returned to who they are in the end.

In both poems, emotions are expressed throughout the poem. Both poems grip the reader and express emotions in the title, with ‘scent’ introducing the idea of a pleasant and dominating smell that is nice and pleasing for people to smell. ‘The Wreck’ however, encourages the idea of loss and whether things exist after destruction. Emotion is the pinnacle of both poems as the personas experiences of love is to then suffer the separation, or after someone dies.
### Example 5
This answer has consistent analysis and clear understanding of the writer’s craft and is therefore in level 3. After a clear opening the essay moves on to explore emotive language and make sustained comparisons. Fair points are made about structure, noting half rhyme and enjambment. There are useful links: common to both poems is the theme of past things remaining and passion overstepping boundaries. The statement that the mined beach is “tranquil” however is less convincing.

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### Example 6
Both Donaghy’s ‘Resolution’ and Paterson’s ‘The Wreck’ express strong emotions through the prism of love reaching it’s inexorable end, and the contrastingly liberating and debilitating impact that it has on the protagonist.

Both Donaghy and Paterson express strong emotions through their protagonist’s wilful detachment from reality, with each author utilising the nuances of contrasting imagery to express strong emotions. Donaghy uses the mundane nature of the London backdrop, in which ‘clouds break over Chinatown’ and ‘Soho surrenders to the rain’ to act as an allegory for the disintegration of the protagonists love, with the relentless ‘convex’ of ‘rain’ reflecting the dominance of the loss and inevitable change alluded to through the ‘baptism’ of ‘droplets’ over such a [sic] source of life and vitality as the swollen ‘West End.’

Despite both texts belonging to the post modern era, Paterson conflicts with Donaghy’s era of an urban, contemporary idyll through his use of hyperbole of the norm to represent the desperation with which his protagonists cling to each other, as the normality of ‘candlelight’ is subverted into ‘strange’, ‘coruscations’ of ‘wars’ with the unrelenting rhythm of the sustained half-rhyme- ‘swung’ and ‘ring’- creating the impression of two lovers in opposition against a ‘dark’ and hostile world. This furthers the disparity between the two texts; the exaggerated violence of having ‘blew them out’ and ‘took the stairs’ implies that Paterson is portraying characters attempting to flee from the inevitable end of their relationship, with the sonorous repetition of ‘ran and ran’ reflecting the inescapable obsession with one another, whilst Donaghy’s gradual progress from the co-dependence of the ABAB rhyme scheme- ‘pane’ and ‘rain’- marks the gradual acceptance of their separation, with the nature of ‘rain’ implying that a new, brighter future of solitude awaits.

However, both Donaghy and Paterson address the detachment from reality that is inextricably linked to a failing love. Donaghy detaches the speaker from these pains through the use of the direct address to his lover as he embodies the realism of ‘coffee’ and ‘aspirin’ through his soothing reassurances to his lover, with the placating rhetorical question of ‘see how the winds die down?’ ‘Come... see the day’ illustrates his attempt to transcend the ‘blur’ and blindness of strong emotions in love, and accept their parting. This starkly contrasts the fierce
delusion of Paterson’s poem, in which the protagonists ‘unmoor’ themselves away from a ‘real, sober life’ and thundering ‘back to back’ against the all-encompassing ‘timbered dark.’ The subversion of what is ‘real’ and ‘unreal’, what is ‘drunk’ and ‘sober’ marks the cold clarity that Donaghy displays, with the progression of time as ‘the world begins’ with ‘breakfast bulletins’ and ‘coffee’. Donaghy allows the lover to let go of their strong emotions and Paterson allows them to wallow in their ‘lovely secret wreck.’ However, both poems enjoy a sharp shift in tone that anchors both the poem and their emotion in the pragmatism of reality. Though Paterson maintains the collective pronoun of ‘we’ and ‘us’, he echoes Donaghy’s sharp acceptance- ‘let me make this clear….the rain has stopped’- through his abrupt break from the sustaining half-rhymes, ending with the despondent finality of ‘made our way alone, up the mined beach of the dawn.’

Though Donaghy’s poem may have continuously been centred on the resolution of time passing and washing away ‘last years original sins’, driven by strong emotion, Paterson eventually reaches this same equilibrium, with the gentle, uneven stanza structure reflecting the slow, inexorable movement of the ocean, as though irrespective of ‘what great lovers we were’, they were still being carried to a ‘breathless’ end, echoing Donaghy’s depiction of the futility of attempting to prevent the ending of a ‘day’ ‘we will never see again.’

This somewhat pessimistic outlook of the nature and contingency of love conflicts with Spenser’s transcendental, immortal love depicted in ‘Sonnet 75’. Some would assume that Spenser would adhere to the bloodless realism adopted by postmodern poetry, and to his own rejection of the mawkish sentimentality of the troubadour love displayed in the Sonnets. However, he appears to shun the limitations of Donaghy’s pragmatic outlook, in which the ‘world’ is centred on ‘coffee’ and ‘aspirin’ and ‘rain.’ Instead, he is increasingly influenced by the metaphysical works of Donne, and is convinced that his love will stand the test of time, in which ‘heavens shall write your glorious name’- while others ‘die in the dust’- the love will make them ‘live.’ [sic]
Glossary

**barton** farmyard

**coomb** woods

**Saigon** capital city of South Vietnam during the 1955–75 Vietnam War

**Little Shop of Horrors** a hit musical comedy which depicts a shop worker who raises a flesh-eating plant

**daed-traa** 'the slack of the tide' in Shetland dialect

**sestina** a poem with six stanzas of six lines and a final triplet, known as the 'envoy', all stanzas having the same six words at the line ends in six different sequences

**envoy** short stanza at the end of a poem used either to address an imagined or actual person or to comment on the preceding body of the poem

**augur** foretell

**Orpheus** musician and poet from ancient Greek myth; in his sorrow at his wife's death, he travelled to the underworld to try to retrieve her

**coruscations** bright flashes

**aqualungs** equipment for breathing underwater

**progesterone** a hormone

**cervical incompetence** medical condition which can lead to miscarriage of a foetus

**Anubis** jackal-headed Egyptian god of the dead
Acknowledgements

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