
A-level

ENGLISH LITERATURE A

Hub school network meeting

Resources: Moving from explanation to analysis

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Unseen prose

Some 'ways in' to approaching an unseen extract

The starting point for your response should be a concisely articulated overview of what is happening in the extract **in relation to the question focus** (eg insecurity, alienation).

It is impossible to do this if you read the extract quickly and start writing straight away, picking out the first feature you spot. Take time to absorb the text and develop an overview of what the writer is doing/saying/exploring/conveying in relation to the question focus. Make sure you read the information the exam paper gives you about the extract.

Feedback from examiners suggests that they feel students across the country start writing too soon, without a coherent sense of their overall perspective/argument on the extract in relation to the question focus, and without a coherent sense of how they will work through their response in a logical and ordered way.

Your introduction articulates what is happening in the extract in relation to the particular question focus; the body of your essay should explore **how** the writer achieves this, ie what methods are particularly **significant** in enabling the writer to convey their particular approach to the question focus. 'Significant' here means 'used to convey meanings'.

What might be useful, then, is to have some idea of possible methods which writers use to create meanings, ie elements of a text/textual decisions used by a writer from which meanings arise.

The following tips aim to give you some 'ways in' to the text. Some of these 'ways in' will be more important in creating meanings in some texts than others – ie they will be more **significant** in some texts than others – but having these 'ways in' may be useful, and selecting four or five to explore in detail may provide a useful framework for your response.

The tips use examples from texts that you know, so that you can see how these authorial methods can be 'significant'.

Some 'ways in' to unseen prose

- Voice*
- Sequencing* (including dialogue and description)
- Focus
- Setting and place
- Objects
- Physical descriptions
- Imagery/figurative language
- Agency and power
- Liminal spaces

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- Narrative arc
 - Beginnings and endings

*The 'ways in' marked with an asterisk are often hugely 'significant', but are very often ignored by students: these are key decisions made by the writer before they engage in the more localised details of language, but students often slip into just writing about individual language details.

Sequencing (including dialogue and description)

How are elements of the extract sequenced? Do we get a physical description of a person before a description of setting, or vice versa? Is the extract mostly dialogue or description, and in what order do these things occur? Is the extract chronologically linear, or is it asynchronous? Does it refer back to events in the past, or refer forward to events in the future? What effect do all these narrative and structural decisions have? Why has the writer made these decisions, and what effect do they have?

Voice

From which perspective is the extract being presented: is it a third person omniscient narrator; is it a first-person homodiegetic narrator? Whose thoughts do we hear (if any)? Whose don't we hear? What effect does this have?

Focus

Like a film director, a writer needs to choose which details to focus on, which to mention briefly, and which to ignore, selecting the most 'significant' elements to give attention to. Where does the writer of the extract 'point the lens'? What is described in detail (it can be an action, an expression or a thought process, not just an object)?

Setting and place

How does the writer use setting/place? What does the setting/place signify: what meanings arise out of the setting/place? This could range from the weather (the pathetic fallacy) and representations of nature, to images of confinement/restriction/freedom, to specific descriptions of a room. Don't just focus on **what** is there, but on **how** it is described/depicted. For example, there isn't just ivy on Gatsby's mansion, it is a 'thin beard of raw' ivy; the roses in Tom's garden aren't described as having a pleasant scent, they are 'pungent'. In each case, these descriptive choices are 'significant', ie meanings arise out of them which relate to things **beyond** the ivy and the roses. Look for this kind of detail in your unseen extract, and consider how they are 'significant' in conveying insecurity/alienation etc (whatever the question focus is).

Objects

Are there any objects that may have significance, ie may be meaningful in some way? Perhaps they operate as symbolic of something (in the way that, say, the green light works in *Gatsby*). As with setting and place, don't just focus on what the object is, but how it is described.

In the case of both setting/place and objects, don't just consider them in isolation but see them in terms of how characters interact with them, and what this might signify in terms of the question focus. For example, the stove in *A Doll's House* may have significance in terms of representing the

maternal, nurturing centre of the home, but if this is so, perhaps there is also something significant in the way in which Nora moves closer to or further away from it at different times in the play. Look for this kind of interaction in your unseen prose extract.

Physical description

Consider how characters are described, including their features, how they move, and their clothing. Clothing often has a symbolic function: it can express personality, status, role, and attitude.

‘Dig deep’ into the specifics of descriptions: a character wearing a shirt and tie may signify something about their social status or occupation; the detailed description of the shirt and tie may signify something more specific; and **how** they wear it (tie loosened; tie tied restrictively etc) may signify something about their **attitude** to or **relationship** with their social status or occupation.

Taking *I Am Charlotte Simmons* as an example, someone having a tattoo on their arm may (at the time and place in which the text is set) connote something about their background, occupation or social status; the specific nature of the tattoo may connote something else, eg a mermaid may suggest someone attempting to exist in an environment they may seem ill-equipped for; and then **how** it is described may signify/emphasise/draw attention to particular elements.

When writers show us things, they also tend to show us **how we are supposed to see them**. Look for this in your unseen prose exam: what is the writer pointing us to, and how does the writer want us to see them?

Imagery/figurative language

Similes and metaphors

If a writer uses similes or metaphors, consider the precise terms used, and whether they are significant in relation to the question focus.

Other imagery/figurative language

Students often spot similes and metaphors but miss the multiple other ways in which writers use imagery/figurative language. Look at adjectives and verbs used to describe character/setting/movement etc – often they are loaded with connotations (ie they signify a range of things), and these connotations may be ‘significant’ in the writer’s exploration of the concept outlined in the question focus. You may spot patterns in these adjectives and verbs: they may form a semantic field or a motif, allowing you to pick several examples from across the text, which you can then quote concisely. Eg the verbs used to describe Tom’s movements and demeanour in *The Great Gatsby* tend to suggest, dominance, violence etc.

Agency and power

Agency refers to an individual’s ability to take action, and considering who does and does not have agency is a very useful ‘way in’ to any text. Who is in control, and who is not? Who is active, and who is passive: who is ‘doing the doing’ and who is being acted upon/having things done, who speaks and who is silent? Where does the power lie (sometimes it is less obvious and more subtle than it seems)? Perhaps characters have agency in one sphere and a lack of agency in the other

(eg the public and the domestic). How does the writer use some of the other methods on our list to convey agency/lack of agency?

Narrative arc

Consider the 'journey' of this extract. How are things different at the end from the beginning, in terms of relationship dynamics, feelings etc. Does agency shift: is one person less or more active/passive than they were at the start? Does some kind of realisation take place? Perhaps change seems possible in the extract, but in the end things do not change. How does the writer show all this? Consider how the other things we have mentioned (setting; objects; physical description; clothing etc) may convey the narrative arc through how they change, or the characters' interaction with them changes.

Liminal spaces

Literature tends to happen in 'liminal spaces': border-spaces between two things. Consider your unseen extract in relation to its liminal spaces: is a character in a border-space between two different roles, spheres or states? Perhaps they are caught between childhood and adulthood; between cultures or classes; between public and domestic responsibilities; between their own desires and what society/family desires of them; between two roles (eg daughter and wife; businessman and father etc).

Beginnings and endings

Although this is an extract from a longer text, the exam board will have selected the extract's parameters carefully, so there is likely to be something to say about the opening and closing sentences, ie they are likely to be 'significant'. They may also be a good 'way in' to considering the narrative arc.

A note on typicality

In relation to the different 'ways in' mentioned, consider them in terms of typicality. This approach will enable a clear focus on the passage set rather than being side tracked by various references to other literary texts.

Consider the following.

- In terms of content/theme, is the distribution of agency, activity/passivity typical or atypical of texts and society at this time? Is the exploration of a particular liminal space typical or atypical?
- In terms of literary methods, is the text typical or atypical? Think about sequencing and voice, for example.
- In terms of approach to the question focus, don't just consider whether the question focus itself is typical or atypical of texts written at that time, but consider the extent to which the author's particular approach to the question focus is typical or atypical.

Twelve Days on the Somme by Sidney Rogerson

Introduction

Sidney Rogerson was a company commander in a battalion of the West Yorkshire Regiment. The following extract is part of his account of being relieved in the line, November 1916, Somme. He recounts a journey along the trenches where he encounters a young lance corporal who meets with his displeasure.

Extract

From A Company's sap to that of B Company was only a few yards along Fall Trench, and my visit took the post there, consisting of a young lance-corporal and two men, by surprise. The Corporal had not only allowed his men to take off their equipment, but was minus his own, while there was a general atmosphere of slackness. It was strictly against orders to remove any essential equipment while in the trenches, and the offence naturally became still more heinous in men on what was virtually outpost duty. Still, in view of the youth of the NCO and his good record, I was prepared to let him off this time with a good dressing-down, had he not shown a kind of familiar resentment that I should have taken exception to his indiscipline. This hint of familiarity touched me on a delicate spot. It had always seemed absurd to me to try to adhere rigidly to the conventional formalities of discipline in the trenches where officers lived cheek-by-jowl with their men, shared the same dangers, the same dug-outs, and sometimes the same mess-tins. Quite apart from the absurdity, I believed, and nothing I ever saw subsequently shook me in the belief, that the way to get the best out of the British soldier was for an officer to show that he was the friend of his men, and to treat them as friends. This naturally involved a relaxation of pre-war codes of behaviour, but it did not mean that an officer should rub shoulders with his men at every opportunity, or allow them to become familiar with him. It meant rather that he should step down from the pedestal on which his rank put him, and walk easily among his men, relying on his own personality to give him the superior position he must occupy if he wished to lead. He consequently had to steer a delicate course between treating those under him as equals in humanity if inferiors in status, and losing their respect by becoming too much one of them. He must deal with them sympathetically and at all times interpret the law in the spirit and not in the letter, but he had equally to be jealous of his position, and never allow leniency to be looked upon as a weakness, or friendship to degenerate into familiarity. He had, in short, to discriminate between the men who would appreciate his interest and those who would be foolish enough to try and impose upon his good nature.

This was a case in point. Nothing was left to me but to take disciplinary action, and sending for his platoon commander, Hall, I ordered him to be relieved of his post and brought up for punishment when we got out of the line. For that show of bad manners, he was to lose his lance-stripe.

It was but a few moments before our minds were turned to less serious thoughts. Hall and I had walked a little further along to the right of the sector – we were standing talking in the front line when we noticed a scuffling of earth in the parados [rear crest] of the trench, and out fell a furry, fat little mole. It appeared as one of nature's miracles that this blind, slow creature could have survived in ground so pounded and upturned. After holding him for a few minutes, and marvelling at the strength of his tiny limbs, we put him into his hole again to find his way back whence he had come. A few desperate clawings, and he had easily disappeared. How we wished we could dig ourselves in so easily!

© Rogerson S, *Twelve Days on the Somme: A Memoir of the Trenches, 1916*,
Greenhill Books, London, 2009

Example response to *Twelve Days on the Somme*

Explore the importance of rank and authority presented in the extract.

Band 5 response

The extract is autobiographical in style: it recounts the events of one reasonably unremarkable day in the trenches. Rogerson's main point is about order and respect for one's superior officers in the army and how this ought to be demonstrated in everyday behaviour. There are many such accounts in war literature: a surprising amount of time was spent simply waiting for something to happen, a bombardment, a sentry duty (which in itself was waiting) or the dreaded order to go over the top.

The extract deals with two unrelated events that occur as the company commander travels along the trenches. The first concerns a meeting with a young NCO; the second a meeting with a mole. The first is dealt with in considerable detail as he describes how he is irritated not only by the lance corporal's inappropriate lack of attire, but by the fact that he is setting a bad example to his privates by also going without his equipment in their presence. The disapproving tone continues with the vague, irritated comment: "there was a general atmosphere of slackness." Rogerson's explanatory comment: "It was strictly against orders," with its use of the adverb "strictly" as an intensifier clarifies the position for the reader and demonstrates again Rogerson's belief in the importance of this dictate. The vague quality of this charge is noticeable: Rogerson can't pinpoint exactly what it is about this "atmosphere" that he finds so objectionable, but in a display which clearly demonstrates the importance of rank and authority in wartime, he has the lance-corporal divested of his lance-stripe as he asserts; "For that show of bad manners," the NCO "was to lose his lance-stripe." The structure of this sentence with its dependent clause clearly links the cause and effect of the NCO's behaviour. There is an invitation to the reader to balance out the two halves of the sentence, wondering whether one justifies the other. This is clearly intentional: Rogerson wants the reader to see the importance he places upon good manners, rank and the need for authority. He conveys his belief that when all other distinguishing forms of humanity are lost in war and men are reduced to tearing each other apart on a daily basis, it is such apparently inconsequential things as showing good manners and maintaining a hierarchy of rank and order that reveal the mark of a man.

Rogerson moves on from the specific incident to make a more general point about the importance of respect for one's superiors and, in turn, the responsibility that those in a position of power or authority have to their men to command appropriately and thus earn that respect. He is at pains to emphasise that an officer cannot always "adhere rigidly to the conventional formalities of discipline

in the trenches where officers lived cheek-by-jowl with their men, shared the same dangers, the same dug-outs and sometimes the same mess-tins.” The triadic structure of this sentence emphasises the impossibility of this task. This seems to soften the unyielding attitude that Rogerson has taken thus far and confer upon him a more human quality. This idea is emphasised as he goes on to reinforce that an officer can only attain the best from his men by treating them “as friends.” This does not include, however, becoming “familiar” with his men. Rogerson uses the metaphor of rubbing shoulders with each other to suggest an inappropriate closeness that he feels would be unbeneficial. Another metaphor, suggesting that the officer should voluntarily “step down from the pedestal on which his rank put him,” is used. The metaphor is intentionally vague and the sort of behaviour that might be included under this general umbrella is not evidenced, yet Rogerson seems clear in his own mind at least, using a nautical metaphor to assert that an officer must steer “a delicate course between treating those under him as equals in humanity if inferiors in status.” Unfortunately, this attempt at clarification is yet again impenetrable in its generalised nature. In universal terms, it is indisputably good advice, yet how an officer might put this into practice remains unclear. Further advice, that an officer should distinguish between those who would “appreciate his interest” and those who might merely attempt to “impose upon his good nature,” sounds dangerously close to encouraging favouritism amongst the men. The measured tone Rogerson adopts seems designed to convey the impression that, although the offence was of a personal nature, and Rogerson took exception to it as such, he was not acting in a disproportionate manner. Moreover, the serious punishment administered is not presented as stemming from out of a feeling of pique or hurt pride, but a deep-seated faith in his conviction that good manners formed the basis of the rank and file system of the army which allowed men to command others and thus the entire system of the army to operate. Without respect, the chain of command would break down and the army could not function.

As Rogerson’s account comes to a close he adopts a completely different focus extending the universalisation of man’s experience to the world of nature and investigates the impact, or lack thereof, that man’s war is making upon the natural world. Written and pictorial accounts of the period attest to the widespread devastation of the landscape. However, the men encounter a single mole. The last paragraph marks a shift in tone once more: quickly “our minds were turned to less serious thoughts,” and it is with a tone of wonder that the Commander conveys his account of the encounter with the mole. He describes how, “It appeared as one of nature’s miracles,” clearly conveying this wonder and awe at the power of nature to survive against all the odds in conditions that had defeated so many hardy young men and the verb “marvelling” serves to intensify this tone. The piece ends on a philosophical note: “How we wished we could dig ourselves in so easily!” suggesting a light-hearted envy of the creature’s facility in the earth. There is, however, a slight suggestion of the topsy-turvy nature of warfare in the longing for men to bury themselves in the earth like moles and a reminder of the strange status of the men trapped so in the trenches, living a sort of life-in-death; the living already entombed with the dead.

Thus the passage, not only explores rank and authority but also extends its significance, to include order, politeness and man’s accountability for his own actions. Then, by the device of the mole, Rogerson extends his reflection to include all creation and the universal impact of war.

Stoner by John Williams

Introduction

Stoner, first published in 1965, is the third novel by American writer John Williams (1922–94). The extract comes from the final pages of the novel. William Stoner, the main character, reflects on what his life has been as he nears its end. Stoner has been a lifelong academic, who entered the University of Missouri as a student in 1910, and went on to teach there until his death in 1956. He has endured many disappointments and, in his last lucid moments, he reflects on his position in the world and confronts what he comes to see as a life characterised by failure.

Extract

The voice – was it Gordon's? – was saying something about his life. And though he could not make out the words, could not even be sure that they were being said, his own mind, with the fierceness of a wounded animal, pounced upon that question. Mercilessly he saw his life as it must appear to another.

Dispassionately, reasonably, he contemplated the failure that his life must appear to be. He had wanted friendship and the closeness of friendship that might hold him in the race of mankind; he had had two friends, one of whom had died senselessly before he was known, the other of whom had now withdrawn so distantly into the ranks of the living that ...

He had wanted the singleness and the still connective passion of marriage; he had had that, too, and he had not known what to do with it, and it had died. He had wanted love; and he had had love, and had relinquished it, had let it go into the chaos of potentiality. Katherine, he thought. 'Katherine'.

And he had wanted to be a teacher, and he had become one; yet he knew, he had always known, that for most of his life he had been an indifferent one. He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity that was entire; he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion of triviality. He had conceived wisdom, and at the end of the long years he had found ignorance. And what else? he thought.

What else?

What did you expect? he asked himself.

He opened his eyes. It was dark. Then he saw the sky outside, the deep blue-black of space, and the thin glow of moonlight through a cloud. It must be very late, he thought; it seemed only an instant ago that Gordon and Edith had stood beside him, in the bright afternoon. Or was it long ago? He could not tell.

He had known that his mind must weaken as his body wasted, but he had been unprepared for the suddenness. The flesh is strong, he thought; stronger than we imagine. It wants always to go on.

He heard voices and saw lights and felt the pain come and go. Edith's face hovered above him; he felt his face smile. Sometimes he heard his own voice speak, and he thought that it spoke rationally, though he could not be sure. He felt Edith's hands on him moving him, bathing him. She has her child again, he thought; at last she has her child that she can care for. He wished that he could speak to her; he felt that he had something to say.

What did you expect? he thought.

© Williams J, *Stoner*, Vintage, London, 2012.
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Example responses to *Stoner*

‘Modern literature often reveals characters who suffer from a sense of powerlessness in an ever-changing world.’ Explore the significance of powerlessness in this extract.

Band 5 response

The passage opens with an image of powerlessness as Stoner’s response to an inner question about his life is answered with, ‘the fierceness of a wounded animal’ who ‘pounced upon that question’. Here Williams presents images of vulnerability, suffering and desperation. The idea of pouncing creates an image of attack but, ironically, rather than a form of protection of the self, this pouncing is in fact an assault on his own existence in which Stoner ruthlessly confronts his failures. Through the use of an anaphoric structure Williams sets up a contrast between Stoner’s intentions in life (‘he had wanted ...’) and the reality as he now sees it. Each desire outlined is undermined by the reality of failure and a sense of the character’s inability to change the course of events. He appears lost and alienated from all the important qualities that come to make up human existence. Although not specifically mentioned, the American Dream of achievement and financial success based on one’s own efforts has clearly not been realised by the protagonist. Stoner presents himself as a failure in all areas of life, both in terms of his profession and his emotional encounters. He, like many characters presented in the modern novel, is seen as alienated, lost and powerless.

Throughout this assault on himself he allows for no compromise. Williams presents his main character as having no self-determination; he seems to have fallen short of the mark in every aspect of life. Williams presents us with a catalogue of disappointments, yet there is poignancy and pathos as the narrator accepts that he has never been able to be more than a looker-on at life. He appears as one who has been unable to meet the challenges posed by a disparate world where true love and relationships are hard to find and even harder to maintain. In this extract Williams highlights the emptiness of a life spent trying to embrace the attitudes and values of an uncaring society and the loneliness of death. Stoner is presented as a patient, earnest and enduring man who, it seems, has moved unprepared into the city and the world and, like many others, comes to see himself as a failure when measured against the exacting requirements of corporate America.

Furthermore the use of the rhetorical style and repetition (‘And what else? ... What else?’) reinforces the sense of his life as a void, one that has, it can be suggested, been empty and meaningless. The repetition of ‘what else?’ opens up an unanswered question that establishes the sense of the hollow space that is his life and perhaps, by extension, the life of many who exist in a world characterised by degraded values that offers nothing but a vacuum in which individuals exist and then die. The change from reflection to the immediacy of the moment as the protagonist opens his eyes and describes ‘the sky outside, the deep blue-black of space, and the thin glow of moonlight’ acts a metaphor for his life. The vacuum he has just been deliberating on is now

revealed in the reality of space that is itself 'blue-black', vast, dark and lit only faintly with a sliver of moonlight. It can be argued that Stoner's life has similarly been a dark space with only odd glimmers of light. In this way Williams fuses together the past and the present using pathetic fallacy to draw attention to the way in which the macrocosm of the universe reflects the microcosm of the little world of humanity. The sense of distance the protagonist experiences from the reality of the world is created through the description of what happens around him. Williams describes Edith as a 'face [that] hovered above him', once again reinforcing the sense of disconnection and detachment the protagonist feels. This is furthered by an awareness of his body and yet he appears powerless to control the way it reacts to situations. He describes how 'Sometimes he heard his own voice speak, and thought he spoke rationally, though he could not be sure'. Similarly, he says, 'he felt his face smile' but he appears to be removed from these actions almost an observer and unclear whether his understanding of what is occurring is correct. Williams uses this technique of physical and mental detachment to reinforce the feeble relationship the protagonist has had with life. As he approaches death, his parting from the world is presented as a metaphor for the powerlessness that has characterised his existence. What it seems Williams exposes in this passage is a man who is characterised by innate human awkwardness, one who has a physical and emotional shyness and who has been unable to speak his mind or demonstrate what was in his heart. On the one hand, this can be attributed to his inability to articulate his feelings; on the other hand, however, it can be suggested that it is a result of his alienation from an empty and valueless world which leaves him incapable of understanding what has happened or what is required of him.

Band 3 response

In this passage the main character Stoner is at the end of his life and he is described to the reader as being like a 'wounded animal'. The use of this image creates the idea that he is sad, lonely and feeling powerless to control his life or his death.

He does not recognise the voice he hears and he is also sad about not having any friends as he says, 'He had wanted friendship and the closeness of friendship that might hold him in the race of mankind' however, he is now powerless as he is dying and will never be able to achieve this goal.

He goes on to tell the reader that even his marriage had not been successful as, 'He had wanted love; and he had had love, and had relinquished it'. We are also told that he wanted to be a teacher but he had not been very successful as one and this shows the reader that Stoner sees himself as ignorant.

Williams uses a lot of rhetorical questioning to show the reader how Stoner is questioning himself and how he now sees himself as powerless. As this book is set in America Stoner would have been brought up to believe in the American dream and the author makes it clear that Stoner is a failure and he has not been able to achieve high status and a lot of money that the American dream says you should.

Stoner is seen opening his eyes but all he sees is darkness which might suggest he has lost all hope,' He opened his eyes. It was dark.' He seems to have lost the power of knowing what time of day it is or who has visited him as he says, ' it seemed only an instant ago that Gordon and Edith had stood beside him, in the bright afternoon. Or was it long ago? He could not tell.'

The writer also tells us that Stoner doesn't have any control over his own body, 'he felt his face smile.' Which is another example of how powerless he is. Having no control is one idea that many modern writers use and it shows us how Stoner is like many other characters in modern writing. In the final paragraph Stoner sees himself as a child, 'He felt Edith's hands on him moving him, bathing him. She has her child again, he thought; at last she has her child that she can care for.' Children have no power and he has none either so he uses this image to show this to the reader.

The passage has a circular structure as it begins and ends with a rhetorical question.

'The Going' by Thomas Hardy

Why did you give no hint that night
That quickly after the morrow's dawn,
And calmly, as if indifferent quite,
You would close your term here, up and be gone
Where I could not follow
With wing of swallow
To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!

Never to bid good-bye
Or lip me the softest call,
Or utter a wish for a word, while I
Saw morning harden upon the wall,
Unmoved, unknowing
That your great going
Had place that moment, and altered all.

Why do you make me leave the house
And think for a breath it is you I see
At the end of the alley of bending boughs
Where so often at dusk you used to be;
Till in darkening dankness
The yawning blankness
Of the perspective sickens me!

You were she who abode
By those red-veined rocks far West,
You were the swan-necked one who rode
Along the beetling Beeny Crest,
And, reining nigh me,
Would muse and eye me,
While Life unrolled us its very best.

Why, then, latterly did we not speak,
Did we not think of those days long dead,
And ere your vanishing strive to seek
That time's renewal? We might have said,
"In this bright spring weather
We'll visit together
Those places that once we visited."

Well, well! All's past amend,
Unchangeable. It must go.

I seem but a dead man held on end
To sink down soon. . . . O you could not know
That such swift fleeing
No soul foreseeing—
Not even I—would undo me so!

'In a Garden' by Elizabeth Jennings

When the gardener has gone this garden
Looks wistful and seems waiting an event.
It is so spruce, a metaphor of Eden
And even more so since the gardener went,

Quietly godlike, but of course, he had
Not made me promise anything and I
Had no one tempting me to make the bad
Choice. Yet I still felt lost and wonder why.

Even the beech tree from next door which shares
Its shadow with me, seemed a kind of threat.
Everything was too neat, and someone cares

In the wrong way. I need not have stood long
Mocked by the smell of a mown lawn, and yet
I did. Sickness for Eden was so strong.

© Elizabeth J, *The Collected Poems*,
'Growing Points', Carcanet Press, Manchester, 2012

‘Remembrance’ by Emily Brontë

Cold in the earth—and the deep snow piled above thee,
Far, far removed, cold in the dreary grave!
Have I forgot, my only Love, to love thee,
Severed at last by Time's all-severing wave?

Now, when alone, do my thoughts no longer hover
Over the mountains, on that northern shore,
Resting their wings where heath and fern-leaves cover
Thy noble heart forever, ever more?

Cold in the earth—and fifteen wild Decembers,
From those brown hills, have melted into spring:
Faithful, indeed, is the spirit that remembers
After such years of change and suffering!

Sweet Love of youth, forgive, if I forget thee,
While the world's tide is bearing me along;
Other desires and other hopes beset me,
Hopes which obscure, but cannot do thee wrong!

No later light has lightened up my heaven,
No second morn has ever shone for me;
All my life's bliss from thy dear life was given,
All my life's bliss is in the grave with thee.

But, when the days of golden dreams had perished,
And even Despair was powerless to destroy,
Then did I learn how existence could be cherished,
Strengthened, and fed without the aid of joy.

Then did I check the tears of useless passion—
Weaned my young soul from yearning after thine;
Sternly denied its burning wish to hasten
Down to that tomb already more than mine.

And, even yet, I dare not let it languish,
Dare not indulge in memory's rapturous pain;
Once drinking deep of that divinest anguish,
How could I seek the empty world again?

Example responses to unseen poetry

Q1: To what extent do you agree with the view that, although both poems focus on the loss of love, Jennings in her poem 'In a Garden' focuses more on spiritual loss whereas Hardy in 'The Going' mourns the loss of his wife?

Band 5 introduction

It can be suggested that in Jennings' poem her reference to the gardener may be an allusion to a loss of faith as the poem appears to explore the idea that order and control have replaced real care. However, it is possible to suggest that Jennings' reference to the gardener is in fact a lover and that she, like Hardy, stands bereft in the wake of her loss. What is interesting however, is that although a more modern writer Jennings chooses to distance the reader from the more intimate emotions of her loss at the outset of the poem and to adopt a cold sense of disconnection. In contrast in *The Going* the changes in tone and mood demonstrate the various stages of grieving and create a sense of intimacy with the reader as Hardy mourns the loss of his wife. As the poem moves towards its close there is a suggestion however, that this loss is more than just physical as the speaker reveals the emotional void that has been created by her death. The reader is left with a sense of the raw nature of the grief as the writer appears to bare his soul, 'To sink down so soon.... O you could not know.... Not even I – would undo me so!' It can be argued that, the confessional nature of this assertion appears to challenge typical expectations of Victorian literature as it allows an intimate connection between the reader and the speaker that defies the boundaries of emotional constraint that characterise this era of writing. Thus, it can be suggested that both poets explore the loss of love on a spiritual and temporal level and in some ways resist the conventions of the time of their poems' composition.

Band 3 introduction

I agree that these poets look at love in different ways. Jennings in her poem *In a Garden* says, 'the gardener has gone', which could be a reference to Jesus. This is unusual in a modern writer as religion is not very important in the modern world. In *The Going* by Thomas Hardy, he is sad because his wife has died and he is left alone and he cannot see her again, 'To gain one glimpse of you ever anon!' He is a Victorian writer and he is writing about death, which was a large concern for Victorian people, and so this can be said to be typical of that era. So although both poets look at the loss of love they do it from different angles but both of them regret the loss of their love.

Q2: It has been said that Hardy's poem is weighed down by regret whereas Jennings' poem presents a more nostalgic view of love.

Compare and contrast the presentation of love in the two poems in light of this comment.

Band 5 response

Both poems explore the damaging impact of grief but it could be argued that where Hardy's poem is rooted in regret, Jennings expresses a coldness and sense of disconnection in her first two stanzas that is more typical of modern poetry. Hardy's regret stems from his realisation that he will never see his wife again or have the opportunity to repair their damaged relationship. In contrast, Jennings' visit to a garden (which is ostensibly a 'gentle' place full of 'pleasures') stirs up raw, violent grief instead of nostalgic memories which she perhaps had hoped for.

Band 3 response

In Jennings' poem 'In a Garden' she seems full of nostalgia as she thinks about what life was like before 'the gardener' left. The gardener might be her lover who has left her or cheated on her so she is thinking about what life was like when he was with her. As Jennings is a modern writer it is more typical to hear the views of a woman talking about her relationships. In 'The Going', Thomas Hardy seems to be weighed down with regret as his wife has died and he is left alone and he can't ever see her again. Hardy is a Victorian writer and they were very concerned about death and in his poem he shows this.

Q3: It has been said that 'The Going' is a conventional expression of grief in response to the death of Hardy's wife, Emma, whereas Brontë presents a much more unusual treatment of grief through the fictional persona's (Princess Rosina's) consideration of her feelings 15 years after the death of her husband.

Compare and contrast 'The Going' with 'Remembrance' in light of this comment.

Band 5 introduction

Hardy's thoughts rest in melancholy and anguish at the death of Emma: both typical emotions for an elegy. Hardy is overwhelmed by raw grief exclaiming that her going has 'undo[ne him] so!'. He reveals his disbelief by repeatedly asking 'Why' she has left him and is tormented by a sense of regret about their broken relationship: 'Why, then, latterly did we not speak?'. Brontë's elegy also contains typical ideas related to loss such as memories of her husband's grave and their relationship, yet her thoughts also reveal less obvious emotions such as an anxiety that she may forget him and most unusually, a determination to find 'Other desires and other hopes'.

Band 3 introduction

In his poem 'The Going' Thomas Hardy is seen as very sad and upset by the death of his wife as he explains that now she is dead he will never see her again. This is a conventional expression of grief as a lot of people feel like this when they lose a loved one. Emily Brontë in her poem also says how sad she is that her husband has died but she also thinks about what she might do in the future as she has been able to move on and not be so upset by this loss. We have to remember however, that Emily Brontë was an early Victorian writer and so she would not be able to express her feelings very openly and she was a woman and in Victorian times women were not supposed to have opinions.

Modernism and postmodernism

Literary approaches that first became particularly prevalent in the 20th century

Modernism

Content

- Breakdown of social norms
- Realistic embodiment of social meanings
- Separation of meanings and senses from the context
- Despairing individual behaviours in the face of an unmanageable future
- Existentialism
- Spiritual loneliness
- Alienation
- Frustration when reading the text
- Disillusionment
- Rejection of history
- Rejection of outdated social systems
- Objection to traditional thoughts and traditional moralities
- Objection to religious thoughts
- Substitution of a mythical past
- Two World Wars' effects on humanity

Genres/styles

- Poetry: free verse replaces the more ordered and formal structure used.
- Epiphanies begin to appear in literature; characters are at times seen to have moments of self-awareness.
- Memoirs: again a more self-reflective approach much influenced by the rise in popularity of psycho-analysis.
- Stream of consciousness: again influenced by Freud where authors allow the reader access to the shifting thoughts of the characters.

Postmodernism

It is very difficult to determine the exact beginning or evolution of modernism into the realm of postmodernism. What is important is that the term 'postmodernism' is revealing in the sense that it is not a new movement devoid of links with modernism, but a reaction to it. Below is a list of characteristics displayed within postmodern literature, all of which are in contrast to modern literature.

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- Whereas modernism places faith in the ideas, values, beliefs, culture, and norms of the West, postmodernism rejects Western values and beliefs as only a small part of the human experience and often rejects such ideas, beliefs, culture, and norms.
 - Whereas modernism attempts to reveal profound truths of experience and life, postmodernism is suspicious of being 'profound' because such ideas are based on one particular Western value system.
 - Whereas modernism attempts to find depth and interior meaning beneath the surface of objects and events, postmodernism prefers to dwell on the exterior image and avoids drawing conclusions or suggesting underlying meanings associated with the interior of objects and events.
 - Whereas modernism focuses on central themes and a united vision in a particular piece of literature, postmodernism sees human experience as unstable, internally contradictory, ambiguous, inconclusive, indeterminate, unfinished, fragmented, discontinuous, 'jagged', with no one specific reality possible. Therefore, it focuses on a vision of a contradictory, fragmented, ambiguous, indeterminate, unfinished, 'jagged' world.
 - Whereas modern authors guide and control the reader's response to their work, the postmodern writer creates an 'open' work in which the reader must supply his own connections, work out alternative meanings, and provide his own (unguided) interpretation.

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