

Unseen poetry

Unseen poems with questions to extend learning and practice skills of poetry analysis (IGCSE English Literature Paper 2)

KS4 Poetry

**You Being Born**

*Brian Jones*

I saw you born.

It was remarkable.

You shot out from between your mother’s legs

like a rugby ball from a scrum

and the stocky Geordie midwife caught you neatly

and cried ‘Whoops! She’s come!’

You had a wrinkled jammy head

and spasmy legs like a portly frog’s.

From your belly button a white root waved

that had fed you all the months you’d grown

and ripened in your mother’s womb.

And let me tell you – I’m ashamed –

I forgot your mother completely – she had been

those things to me that one day you’ll discover

in someone else, and think ‘God, this is it!’

– My sweetheart, my warm dear, my red hot lover –

But for those moments, as the doctor

shoved cotton wool up your flat nose

and swabbed your eyes and cleaned your bum

I forgot completely all my life and love

and watched you like a pool of growing light

and whispered to myself ‘She’s come! She’s come!’

**My Parents Kept me from Children who were Rough**

*Stephen Spender*

My parents kept me from children who were rough

and who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes.

Their thighs showed through rags. They ran in the street

And climbed cliffs and stripped by the country streams.

I feared more than tigers their muscles like iron

And their jerking hands and their knees tight on my arms.

I feared the salt coarse pointing of those boys

Who copied my lisp behind me on the road.

They were lithe, they sprang out behind hedges

Like dogs to bark at our world. They threw mud

And I looked another way, pretending to smile,

I longed to forgive them, yet they never smiled.

**Dad**

*Elaine Feinstein*

Your old hat hurts me, and those black

fat raisins you liked to press into

my palm from your soft heavy hand:

I see you staggering back up the path

with sacks of potatoes from some local farm,

 fresh eggs, flowers. Every day I grieve

for your great heart broken and you gone.

You loved to watch the trees. This year

you did not see their Spring.

The sky was freezing over the fen

as on that somewhere secretly appointed day

you beached: cold, white-faced, shivering.

What happened, old bull, my loyal

hoarse-voiced warrior? The hammer

blow that stopped you in your track

and brought you to a hospital monitor

could not destroy your courage

to the end you were

uncowed and unconcerned with pleasing anyone.

I think of you now as once again safely

at my mother's side, the earth as

chosen as a bed, and feel most sorrow for

all that was gentle in

my childhood buried there

already forfeit, now forever lost.

**Brendon Gallacher**

*Jackie Kay*

He was seven and I was six, my Brendon Gallacher.

He was Irish and I was Scottish, my Brendon Gallacher.

His father was in prison; he was a cat burglar.

My father was a communist party full-time worker.

He had six brothers and I had one, my Brendon Gallacher.

He would hold my hand and take me by the river

Where we’d talk all about his family being poor.

He’d get his mum out of Glasgow when he got older.

A wee holiday someplace nice. Some place far.

I’d tell my mum about Brendon Gallacher.

How his mum drank and his daddy was a cat burglar.

And she’d say, ‘why not have him round for dinner?’

No, no, I’d say he’s got big holes in his trousers.

I like meeting him by the burn in the open air.

Then one day after we’d been friends for two years,

One day when it was pouring and I was indoors,

My mum says to me, ‘I was talking to Mrs Moir

Who lives next door to your Brendon Gallacher

Didn’t you say his address was 24 Novar?

She says here are No Gallachers at 24 Novar

There never have been any Gallachers next door.’

And he died then, my Brendon Gallacher,

Flat out on my bedroom floor, his spiky hair,

His impish grin, his funny flapping ear.

Oh Brendon. Oh my Brendon Gallacher.

**Medusa**

*Carol Ann Duffy*

A suspicion, a doubt, a jealousy

grew in my mind,

which turned the hairs on my head to filthy snakes

as though my thoughts

hissed and spat on my scalp.

My bride’s breath soured, stank

in the grey bags of my lungs.

I’m foul mouthed now, foul tongued,

yellow fanged.

There are bullet tears in my eyes.

Are you terrified?

Be terrified.

It’s you I love,

perfect man, Greek God, my own;

but I know you’ll go, betray me, stray

from home.

So better by for me if you were stone.

I glanced at a buzzing bee,

a dull grey pebbly fell

to the ground.

I glanced at a singing bird,

a handful of dusty gravel

spattered down

I looked at a ginger cat,

a housebrick

shattered a bowl of milk.

I looked at a snuffling pig,

a boulder rolled

in a heap of shit.

I stared in the mirror.

Love gone bad

showed me a Gorgon.

I stared at a dragon.

Fire spewed

from the mouth of a mountain.

And here you come

with a shield for a heart

and a sword for a tongue

and your girls, your girls.

Wasn’t I beautiful

Wasn’t I fragrant and young?

Look at me now.

**The Falling Leaves**

*Margaret Postgate Cole*

Today, as I rode by,

I saw the brown leaves dropping from their tree

In a still afternoon,

When no wind whirled them whistling to the sky,

But thickly, silently,

They fell, like snowflakes wiping out the noon;

And wandered slowly thence

For thinking of a gallant multitude

Which now all withering lay,

Slain by no wind of age or pestilence,

But in their beauty strewed

Like snowflakes falling on the Flemish clay

**Come On, Come Back**

*Stevie Smith*

(incident in a future war)

Left by the ebbing tide of battle

On the field of Austerlitz

The girl soldier Vaudevue sits

Her fingers tap the ground, she is alone

At midnight in the moonlight she is sitting alone on a round flat stone.

Graded by the Memel Conference first

Of all human exterminators

M L 5

Has left her just alive

Only her memory is dead for evermore.

She fears and cries, Ah me, why am I here?

Sitting alone on a round flat stone on a hummock there.

Rising, staggering, over the ground she goes

Over the seeming miles of rutted meadow

To the margin of a lake

The sand beneath her feet

Is cold and damp and firm to the waves' beat.

Quickly - as a child, an idiot, as one without memory -

She strips her uniform off, strips, stands and lunges

Into the icy waters of the adorable lake.

On the surface of the water lies

A ribbon of white moonlight

The waters on either side of the moony track

Are black as her mind,

Her mind is as secret from her

As the water on which she swims,

As secret as profound as ominous.

Weeping bitterly for her ominous mind, her plight,

Up the river of white moonlight she swims

Until a treacherous undercurrent

Seizing her in an icy amorous embrace

Dives with her, swiftly severing

The waters which close above her head.

An enemy sentinel

Finding the abandoned clothes

Waits for the swimmer's return

('Come on, come back')

Waiting, whiling away the hour

Whittling a shepherd's pipe from the hollow reeds.

In the chill light of dawn

Ring out the pipe's wild notes

'Come on, come back.'

Vaudevue

In the swift and subtle current's close embrace

Sleeps on, stirs not, hears not the familiar tune

Favourite of all the troops of all the armies

Favourite of Vaudevue

For she had sung it too

Marching to Austerlitz,

'Come on, come back'.

**Hawk Roosting**

*Ted Hughes*

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

Inaction, no falsifying dream

Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!

The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray

Are of advantage to me;

And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.

It took the whole of Creation

To produce my foot, my each feather:

Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -

I kill where I please because it is all mine.

There is no sophistry in my body:

My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.

For the one path of my flight is direct

Through the bones of the living.

No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.

Nothing has changed since I began.

My eye has permitted no change.

I am going to keep things like this.

**Born Yesterday**

*Philip Larkin*

*For Sally Amis*

Tightly-folded bud,

I have wished you something

None of the others would:

Not the usual stuff

About being beautiful,

Or running off a spring

Of innocence and love —

They will all wish you that,

And should it prove possible,

Well, you’re a lucky girl.

But if it shouldn’t, then

May you be ordinary;

Have, like other women,

An average of talents:

Not ugly, not good-looking,

Nothing uncustomary

To pull you off your balance,

That, unworkable itself,

Stops all the rest from working.

In fact, may you be dull —

If that is what a skilled,

Vigilant, flexible,

Unemphasised, enthralled

Catching of happiness is called.

**Praise Song for My Mother**

*Grace Nichols*

You were

water to me

deep and bold and fathoming

You were

moon’s eye to me

pull and grained and mantling

You were

sunrise to me

rise and warm and streaming

You were

the fishes red gill to me

the flame tree’s spread to me

the crab’s leg/the fried plantain smell

replenishing replenishing

Go to your wide futures, you said

Questions for ‘You Being Born’

1. What picture do you get of the narrator as you read the poem? Think about what he is like and what are his feelings.
2. What emotions is he experiencing?
3. What effect do the following similes and metaphors have on the reader/listener? Pay particular attention to the words that have been underlined:
	1. “You shot out from between your mother’s legs

like a rugby ball from a scrum”

* 1. “You had a wrinkled jammy head

and spasmy legs like a portly frog’s”

* 1. “From your bellybutton a white root waved

that had fed you all the month’s you’d grown”

1. What is the effect of the caesura in the opening lines of the poem? How does this contrast with the enjambment in the rest of the poem?
2. How does the poet show his love and admiration for his new born daughter?
3. What is the poet “ashamed” of in this poem? Why do you think this is?

Questions for ‘My Parents Kept me from Children who were Rough’

1. What impression do you get of the narrator in this poem (clue: look at his background, his behaviour and why he wants to forgive the rough children)?
2. How does your impression of the narrator contrast with your impression of the rough children (clue: how they speak, their clothes, their behaviour)?
3. Look at the imagery used to describe the rough children. Choose some examples and explain how they strengthen your impression.
4. Why is the narrator so fascinated by the rough children? Why is he keen to be a part of their lives?
5. Who do you think the poet is writing this poem for – the rough children, himself or an unknown audience? Explain your answer fully.
6. What is the purpose of this poem – to warn against bullying, to describe what happened to him, to entertain us…? Explain your ideas fully.

Questions for ‘Dad’

1. What do you think the writer means in line 1 when she says: “Your old hat hurts me”?
2. What impression do you get of the father from the lines “… old bull, my loyal / hoarse-voiced warrior?”
3. What was the father like, even to the end of his life?
4. Choose a phrase or line that you think shows the writer’s emotions. What effect does this have on the reader/listener?
5. Who do you think the writer is writing the poem for – an unknown audience, or for herself? What is the purpose of her poem?
6. What impressions do you get of the narrator? What has her relationship with her father been like?

Questions for ‘Brendan Gallagher’

1. What does Brendon look like?
2. What type of home life did he have?
3. What words/phrases are repeated through the poem?
4. How is Brendon presented as ‘real’ in the poem?
5. Why do you think he is presented this way?
6. Why do you think the narrator wanted Brendon as a friend?
7. Is there one specific character, or is the poet focusing on a ‘character type’?
8. What is the poet using this character for – do they represent something about human nature in general?

Questions for ‘Medusa’

1. Who is speaking in the poem?
2. What imagery is being created? What/how is it effective?
3. What are the main themes featured in the poem?
4. Who is the poem addressed to? Why?
5. What types of language/devices are used in this poem? What effect do they have on the reader/listener?
6. How is the poem laid out? What is the structure of the stanzas? Why has Duffy chosen to structure it in this way?

Questions for ‘The Falling Leaves’

1. This poem was written in November 1915. What is significant about this date?
2. What sort of afternoon is it? Do you think this is important for setting the mood of the poem?
3. Describe how the poet conveys the leaves falling from the tree in your own words.
4. Why are the leaves falling “silently” and what does this seem to indicate?
5. What effect does the line “like snowflakes wiping out the noon” have on you?
6. What does “gallant” mean? Who is the poet referring to here?
7. What does “multitude” mean, and why do you think this word has been used?
8. Why do you think the poet has used the word “withering”?
9. What is the effect of the word “slain”?
10. Why do you think the poet refers to the leaves as “strewed”?

Questions for ‘Come On, Come Back’

1. Do any of the words strike you as peculiar in the context of the poem? Why is this?
2. Read the poem again. Identify:
3. simile
4. metaphor
5. repetition
6. alliteration
7. personification.
8. Explain in your own words what each of these quotations mean.
9. What impact would these quotations have on the reader?
10. In the first stanza, the word ‘ebbing’ is used to describe the battle retreating. Are there any other words in the poem you find an odd choice? Identify them and explain why you think the poet chose them.
11. Where does the poem rhyme, and what is the effect of this?
12. The poem is set in a ‘future war’: do you think this makes it more or less effective? Explain why.
13. What views do you think the poet holds about conflict at war, and why?
14. What tense is the poem written in, and what effect does this have on you?

Questions on ‘Hawk Roosting’

1. What is ‘roosting’, and why do you think Hughes chooses to write about the hawk in this state rather than attacking/killing?
2. How does Hughes make the hawk sound violent and intimidating in the first stanza?
3. Why do you think the high trees are “convenient”?
4. What is the effect of the exclamation mark at the end of this statement?
5. What does ‘buoyancy’ mean, and how does this and the “sun’s rays” put the hawk at an “advantage”?
6. Why do you think Hughes uses the word “inspection” at the end of the second stanza?
7. Why does Hughes use the word “locked” in the third stanza?
8. What do you think is meant by, “It took the whole of Creation / To produce my foot, my each feather”?
9. In turn, what is meant by, “Now I hold Creation in my foot”?
10. What sort of image does “revolve it all slowly” give you?
11. What impression does Hughes give of the hawk’s character in the fourth stanza?
12. “My manners are tearing off heads” – in your own words, explain what this line suggests to you about Hughes’ depiction of the hawk.
13. Describe what you think is happening in the fifth stanza.
14. The final stanza begins, “The sun is behind me.” What sort of image does this give you?
15. What do you think, “Nothing has changed since I began” means?
16. What is suggested in the final line of the poem?
17. Read the poem as a whole. Hughes has the ‘hawk’ repeatedly using pronouns – “me, mine, I.” What is the effect of this?
18. Is the bird presented in a largely positive or negative light?
19. What particular images does Hughes give of the bird that are striking?

Questions for ‘Born Yesterday’

1. Explain in detail a couple of levels of the metaphor “Tightly closed bud” in Line 1.
2. What is curious about the address (the ‘I’ and the ‘you’) of the poem? Why do you think Larkin chose this structure?
3. Much of the first stanza is written in colloquial language – pick out some of these phrases and explain the effect which Larkin is seeking.
4. How does Larkin widen and shift the reader’s understanding of what ‘ordinary’ means in the first part of the stanza?
5. How does Larkin redefine the way in which the reader views the word “dull” in the final part of the stanza? Discuss the use of consonance and alliteration here.
6. The lines are quite short in both stanzas. The longest lines are at the end of the poem. Meanwhile, the first stanza is one full sentence. Comment on how these features support the message of the poem.

Questions for ‘Praise Song for my Mother’

1. This poem is written in free verse. Using your knowledge of this poem’s context, give a few reasons why this is appropriate here (clues: Africa, praise song, childhood).
2. Despite being in free verse, repetition and structure are key parts of this poem. Why do you think Nichols repeats the phrase “You were… to me” in every stanza?
3. The pattern of three descriptive words is repeated through the first three stanzas. Explain how these work and the possible reasons behind this technique (clue: nouns/verbs).
4. The idea of “moon” is intriguing in the context of a mother and child. Can you say why this might be an appropriate metaphor? How does “mantling” continue and extend this?
5. In the fourth stanza, the references become more immediate. Discuss the pattern and arrangement of the images here (clue: associations of memory/colour/theme of nourishment)
6. The final stanza switches voice to the mother’s message to her daughter: why is this an emotional ending to the poem?
7. The poem is written in the past tense, alluding to the fact that Nichol’s mother has died. Why was it important for her to write this poem in the way she did as a tribute?

Further Practice

Have a look at The Guardian newspaper’s online interactive collection of love poems (http://www.theguardian.com/books/interactive/2012/feb/13/best-love-poems-interactive ) and practise your responses to unseen poems. To get you thinking about the poem, choose one from the collection and answer these questions:

1. What does the title tell you?

2. Who is speaking?

3. Who is being addressed?

4. Who/what is it about?

5. What do you think of the person or people it is about? What do you think the poet feels about them?

6. Where is it taking place?

7. When is it taking place?

8. What happens in the poem?

9. What does it look like on the page?

10. How is it arranged? Why do you think it’s arranged this way?

11. Does it rhyme? Can you identify a pattern?

12. What difference does the rhyme or lack of rhyme make?

13. Is there a regular rhythm or beat? Can you identify it?

14. What difference do the rhyme and rhythm make to the mood of the poem?

15. What would you say the mood is?

16. Is there anything interesting about the language the poet uses?

17. Does the poet use particular literary techniques, such as alliteration, repetition or onomatopoeia? If so, what effect do they have?

18. Is there any interesting imagery, e.g. similes and metaphors?

19. What does the choice of imagery tell you about the poets feelings?

20. What is the poem really about?

21. What is the poet’s attitude to his/her subject?

22. Has the poet made his/her point successfully?

23. What do you think about the subject?

24. Does the poem remind you in any way of any other poems you have read?



  