

Guide to Unseen Comparison

Cambridge IGCSE® (9–1)

English Literature **0477**

For examination from 2017



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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to support teachers when teaching Paper 3 Unseen Comparison of the Cambridge IGCSE (9–1) English Literature 0477 syllabus. It is intended for those who have previously taught a Cambridge IGCSE syllabus and also for those who are new to it. Advice is given on how to approach the requirements of the qualification and how to manage time across the course. There is a section on context and what it means in this paper, as well as an appendix with examples of note-making and discussion of potential candidate responses to two sample comparative exercises.

Rationale

Whether or not learners go on to more advanced studies in English literature or English language, the practice and techniques of close reading will benefit all the subjects they go on to study and every area of their future lives. In English literature, these skills are essential to the subject. Devoid of the imperative to learn extraneous material such as the biography of writers and the history and sociology of the 20th and 21st century, the new paper focuses on the writers' methods and the effects they create.

The specific exercise of comparing and contrasting aids observation, analysis and discrimination.

Component 3 Unseen Comparison

Component 3 of Cambridge IGCSE (9–1) English Literature is an unseen comparison paper, for which 1 hour and 30 minutes is allocated. Candidates must answer one question which requires them to compare two unseen pieces of post-1800 literary writing, either poetry or prose. There is a choice of two questions; drama extracts will not be used.

Candidates will be presented with a choice of either two poems or two prose extracts to compare; no comparison between a poem and a piece of prose will be offered.

Details of the five assessment objectives (AOs) are given in the syllabus and the mark scheme is available on **Teacher Support**. AO1–AO4 are equally weighted and in common with Paper 1 and Paper 2. AO5 relates to the assessment of spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG).

Advantages for teaching

- The format of Paper 3 Unseen Comparison establishes fairness for all candidates: they start from the same background position with the same prompts, allowing for objective, reliable assessment of their analytical skills in an unseen task.
- Any difficult or unusual words and phrases are covered in the glossary.
- Comparison and contrast exercises illuminate by immediate cross reference. The juxtaposition of two texts throws into clear relief the similarities and differences of cultural and literary context and form between them.
- No contextual guesswork is necessary; candidates can feel confident about their close examination of the issues in the texts in question, on the basis of the evidence before them.
- Simplistic or irrelevant biographical material is avoided; there is a clear focus on the text itself.
- Candidates cannot resort to limited historical knowledge (such as attribution of all 20th century texts to the influence of World War I or World War II).
- The task will always encourage close focus on the words of the poem/prose and provides a secure basis for analysis.
- You can easily dovetail work on Paper 1 (Poetry and Prose) with the work for Paper 3 (Unseen Comparison), extending and reinforcing both.
- Your learners are given appropriate scaffolding and plenty of practice means confidence in the format of the paper and its requirements.

What needs to be done?

Paper 3 Unseen Comparison provides an effective forum to develop learners' confidence in the following areas:

- Sharpening skills for tackling unseen work in both poetry and prose
- Introducing and developing techniques for comparing and contrasting
- Practising appropriate essay strategies to incorporate these techniques
 - how to plan and make notes before writing
 - suitable essay structure, with discourse markers
 - varied critical vocabulary
 - attention to supporting examples and quotations

It allows you to:

- Manage the timetable and pattern of lessons within your own Centre's imperatives
- Build a bank of useful resources for practice, incorporating those provided by Cambridge.

Using the set text work resourcefully

All the set text work you are doing for the Poetry and Prose (Paper 1) will be valuable here. Work on individual poems in an anthology is best initiated by concentration on the details of language; equally, longer prose works can be made appealing by highlighting close passage work so that how the novel creates its

effects takes precedence over the historical, social and biographical background of the work, which can be addressed afterwards.

Additionally, work on the language of Shakespeare and other drama (Paper 2) will advance literary insights and augment critical vocabulary.

In this way, the skills of close reading and analysis are being reinforced in the work for the other components, and vice versa

Approaching unseen poetry and prose – practical advice

You may already have a checklist of elements to consider when tackling unseen poetry and prose and these should now include drawing inferences about social, cultural and literary contexts of poetry and prose texts. Remind learners that approaching one piece on its own is actually more difficult than two, as in a comparison exercise the contexts, themes and style of each are thrown into clearer relief by the presence of the second text.

Poetry

A useful starting point might be to consider the subject matter, situation and voice or point of view in the texts. (For example, first person memory poem in the past tense about an elderly relative in England set in the 1940s and a present-day, third person, present tense poem presenting the relationship between a parent and child in India).

A consideration of how the relationships are portrayed or presented might be a useful way into considering the social or cultural contexts, for example. One poem may present an alienation between the characters and the other a relationship full of deference, respect and tenderness. One may be written in a strongly narrative fashion, the other in a more disjointed, less structured form. It is always helpful to have a general overview before getting into detail. This boosts confidence by giving a sense of control.

Imagery, symbolism and figures of speech may also suggest context. The connotations of particular colours, references to the natural world or the seasons, classical/religious/mythological allusions may be characteristic of a particular culture or literary tradition.

Imagery used to convey a setting or sense of place will be a useful point of comparison. One setting may be in the rural past, the other modern and urban; one domestic, the other set in a natural wilderness. Such figures of speech can be identified in learners' work by a system of colour highlighting, underlining and so on. Sense images (sight, sound, smell, for example) which are not necessarily metaphorical should not be forgotten. The more common figures of speech should be revised and reinforced constantly; new terminology can be introduced at regular intervals. Wall posters in the classroom can be effective visual cues.

Parallelism, repetition and antithesis or contrast are in a sense structural, but they are also figures of speech. Remind learners that consideration of the writer's methods must lead to an evaluation of the effects created.

Diction (some prefer the word 'lexis') – identifies words which have a particular effect, of course, but words such as verbs (Tense? Active or passive? Present participles?), nouns (perhaps abstract), descriptive words and modifiers of various kinds can be central to analysis. Place names, names of characters, colloquialisms, dialect words, and archaisms may connect the text to a particular time or place. There may be use of gender specific diction or semantic fields which convey a rural setting, for example. Alertness to words and their connotations is vital. Class discussion will reinforce consideration of the implications of words, so that an enquiring approach becomes second nature.

Verse form – Inferences about literary context and the poet's intentions may be drawn from the verse form. Is the poem a known form such as a sonnet or ballad or in a tradition such as an ode or eulogy? Is it regular in rhythm? Syllabic verse? Does it rhyme? Is it free verse? Are there repeated lines or refrains? (Be careful with the distinction between free verse and blank verse – a common learner mistake. Read aloud all poems to encourage awareness of contrasting use of rhythm and rhyme (or lack thereof) in the two texts.

Sound effects – such as alliteration and assonance – bind words in sound as well as meaning. Such effects may place the text in a certain literary tradition though some contemporary verse uses effects of assonance extremely skilfully.

Tone – this is more difficult for some learners and needs plenty of scaffolding – introduce useful words such as angry, wistful, despairing, objective, emotional, measured etc. This may provide another useful point of comparison.

Mood or atmosphere – created by all the elements working together to create an overall effect.

Prose

Learners may be more familiar with looking at the social and cultural contexts of prose texts from their work on Paper One. It is worth remembering that, as with poetry, they can also compare and contrast the literary context of the passages. Just as a ballad can be contrasted to a sonnet, a conventional third-person prose narration could be contrasted to a first person stream-of-consciousness narrative, perhaps in diary form. Recent unseen passages, for example, have included a passage from D.H Lawrence's novel *The Rainbow* (Father and child relationship, rural English early twentieth century setting, male central character, third person narrative with passages of description and dialogue/monologue in local dialect) and a passage from a short story *The Finest Story in the World* by Annie Saumont (Mother's relationship with husband and children, contemporary French setting, female central character, mixture of third person narrative from the mother's perspective and indirect discourse, unpunctuated dialogue and use of lists set apart from the main body of the text, feminist issues.) So prose offers ample opportunities to infer context.

Useful points to consider in approaching the context of prose passages:

Remind learners that they should always think of *the effects* created when they answer these questions:

- Who is the voice of the passage and what situation/setting is she/he in? What is the narrator's or voice's gender/age/class/nationality/ethnicity? What is happening – are there specific incidents? Is this a third person narrative? A first person narrative? What tense are the verbs in? Try to consider the point of view from which the story is told and the reader's response to the narrator, whether first or third person. How has the writer made the reader respond in this way?
- Is the passage from a particular literary genre such as travel, thriller, ghost story, autobiography or in a particular form, such as diary, epistolary, multiple narratives?
- Characterisation – are there characters other than the narrator? How are they presented/described?
- What kind of relationships are portrayed? Is there any dominance or subservience? Can any cultural inferences be drawn from this?
- Structure – how many paragraphs? How are they divided? Is there any direct speech? Does this suggest a particular context? Has indirect or free indirect discourse been used? What effect does this have? Are there passages of description or dialogue? What is their effect or function?
- Language elements such as figures of speech and diction should be examined for contextual connotations as in poetry.
- Sentence structure: there are of course no lines or rhymes or regular metrical effects as in poetry. However, variety and contrast of sentence structures should be looked at. Are there any particularly long sentences building to a climax? Are there any short emphatic sentences, or 'sentences' without verbs? Is there repetition of, or parallelism in, words, phrases or structures? Does the sentence construction reflect a particular literary genre?
- Tone and atmosphere need to be considered, as for poetry. The reflective and peaceful tone of a passage from a travelogue, for example, might be contrasted to the frenetic, active atmosphere of a contemporary urban context.

Teaching context

The word 'context', as defined in the syllabus, may mean the immediate surroundings of a word or phrase in a sentence, paragraph or stanza; or, in the case of a short text such as a poem or prose extract, its relatedness to other texts in immediate juxtaposition with it. 'Context' may also refer to the world in which the text was written, as well as its interweaving with the contemporary world of the twenty first century in which we receive and appreciate it. This relatedness is complex and wide-ranging, especially where it touches on other disciplines such as history, sociology or biography. The 0477 syllabus centres on the study of imaginative literature and its concerns, with its primary focus on personal response to, and literary analysis of, genre, form, structure and language. Information from other disciplines may be interesting and even useful, but it is background to the core subject and its values.

The contextual background to a text is not only to be defined as historical, social or biographical: it may also be personal, cultural or literary. A candidate may be superficially familiar with 'facts' about the historical or social background to a text, or indeed the life of the writer, but she/he should also be alert to gender attitudes,

family tensions, class conflicts or other universal human experiences explored by writers, such as the contrast between town and country, or the importance of the seasons. Moreover, previous study of literary works of all kinds develops an appreciation of literary context: genre, traditional conventions and formal characteristics.

In Paper 1 and Paper 2, candidates will have some historical and social background to inform their work, though the syllabus clearly advises that any contextual comment of a historical, social or biographical nature should be accurate, economical and fully integrated into essay responses and that it should be demonstrably necessary to the answering of a specific question.

The contextual focus for Paper 3 Unseen Comparison specifically emphasises the cultural and those literary elements that can be adduced *from the set task*. It requires the comparison and contrast of two unseen poems or two literary prose passages which are linked through subject matter and/or style, forming an immediate context of juxtaposition. A reminder – the authors and dates of the writers will NOT be given, so no extrinsic biographical or historical information (or guesswork) is necessary. A short preamble will always introduce the topic and directed bullet points will guide the answer.

Here is a list of suggestions for the sort of contextual areas that could be relevant for the questions set on Paper 3 Unseen Comparison. This list is for guidance and not exhaustive, but it shows clearly that most cultural context is accessible to learners if they read with care and follow the given prompts.

- Personal, familial, age, gender, nationality, language, class, relative wealth/poverty, freedom/restriction, health/illness
- Everyday life in a particular era and geographical location: school, work, leisure, holidays, personal and professional relationships
- Rituals of birth/marriage/death which differ across ages and cultures
- Environment – city/country, the natural world, weather, animals
- Politics, religion, wider conflicts
- Language and style characteristic of different genres: verse forms, conventions, narrative approach, for example
- References to the Bible, the classics, the visual arts, science, music, folk literature, philosophy: these would be glossed.

Study of the exemplar material provided will reassure you that the kind of cultural context envisaged is well within the range of the average candidate and that helpful glosses to unusual words or references will ensure that your learners can feel confident about their work.

However, it will always be an advantage for a learner to read widely and to take an interest in the world around them. All classroom exercises should include discussion of cultural context, using the list above as a starting point. The immediate contexts of gender, age and family are not only readily accessible to all learners, but the stuff of much literature – the well-known phrase ‘the battle of the sexes’ springs to mind. Both of the exercises in the appendix suggest what would constitute appropriate contextual comment.

Comparison exercises

Tackling a specific question

The question should be read through carefully and key words highlighted. The wording of the task will include helpful bullet points given as a prompt for what must be incorporated in answers, though these do not necessarily have to be followed in order. They are not an essay plan, but a guide and reminder. The Specimen Paper and mark scheme are helpful exemplar documents, showing clearly the likely qualities of response.

How to plan and make notes

About 20 minutes is advised for reading and planning before writing. Each poem or passage should be read carefully more than once.

Candidates should use rough paper or the first page of their answer booklet to make a comparative diagram, with a line down the centre, poem/prose 1 on the left and poem/prose 2 on the right. Headings (such as figures of speech, tone etc.) should be used and observations for one of the pieces noted. Looking at the other, it will be easy for the learner to include the related point from the second piece and to see clearly where the two differ. **Check carefully that the question’s bullet points have been addressed.** This method is very helpful for structuring the final written response.

Making a 'mind map' or 'spider plan' is not advised here: these are free-form and 'three-dimensional' diagrams. The specific exercise, relating two works to each other in terms of similarities and differences, demands a binary approach which can be advanced from the beginning by using a comparative diagram.

In the Appendix you will find **two examples** of paired poems and a discussion of some potential candidate responses to them. The second example is for the specimen question provided for this component.

Writing a comparative essay

Some learners find it difficult to handle two separate poems or passages. They should be reminded that the instruction given is to 'compare' or 'compare and contrast', so they must be seen to be answering the question from the word go. ('Compare and contrast' is a favourite formula – reassure them that it just means discuss the similarities and differences. Even if they just have the word 'compare', they should still also contrast, and it is important to consider similarities as well as differences.)

Method 1

This is the method which the note making section above most obviously leads to:

- An introduction, with reference in general terms to the focus of the question in both poems or prose passages – perhaps referring to similar concerns or subject matter
- The main body of the essay is organised thematically, with a topic for each paragraph that refers to both poems/passages and compares them from the outset (for example use of extended metaphor, repetitive structure, verse form/rhyme and so on). The question's bullet points must be included
- A conclusion which sums up the comparative argument and perhaps includes personal response.

This clearly tackles the question's focus on comparison from the outset but could lead to a muddled essay structure if the learner finds essay structuring difficult. On the other hand, the planning and note making advice could, over time, help such learners.

Method 2

This method should perhaps only be recommended for learners who continue to find the 'interweaving' of comments difficult.

- An introduction, with reference in general terms to the focus of the question in both poems/passages – perhaps to similar concerns or subject matter
- The first paragraph of the essay deals with the first poem/passage, referring to all the elements of language, structure tone etc. The next paragraph deals with the second poem, comparing with the first poem as it goes, and from that point on, the essay is entirely comparative. It is possible to move from one piece to the other in successive paragraphs but they must give equal weight to each and they must compare and contrast. The question's bullet points must be included
- A conclusion which sums up the comparative argument and perhaps includes personal response.

Developing writing skills for comparison

Useful words and phrases for comparison exercises (discourse markers)

These phrases are useful to help learners to point the structure of their essays logically and can ultimately help to include personal response comments in a comparative way.

Poem A uses whereas poem B

The two prose passages are similar in the way that

Poem A is On the other hand Poem B

Passage B has a great deal of which has aeffect, whilst Passage A

Both poems have an effective

Passage A However, in contrast, Passage B

Considering that they deal with the same subject, the two poems differ considerably in the methods they use.

I find Poem A but I think Poem B is more

Although Passage A , Passage B

(This list could be extended as you work through examples).

Incorporating appropriate examples

Remind learners that successful quotation from the text is to give:

- Evidence that they have read the texts really thoroughly
- Evidence to support detailed points in their argument
- Evidence that they appreciate how the writer's use of language and style contributes to the effect.

They do not need to quote at length. Two lines is the absolute maximum for poetry; a few words would be better. If they can integrate the quotation within their own sentence, this is probably the most effective.

The well-known formula PEE (Point, Evidence, Explain) can lead to a paraphrase, which is never helpful. Point, evidence, explore would be better advice. Make the point, illustrate it and then discuss it.

The advantage of this method is that a more anxious learner may feel confident that s/he has the material under control, dealing first with one and then with the other, making comparative interpretations and evaluations only as they get into the second poem or passage. The disadvantage of this method is that the learner might get carried away with Poem/Passage A and then not write much about Poem/Passage B; or forget to compare and write two almost separate mini-analyses with very little comparison. If this happens, the point of the question will have been lost and the relevance of the essay will suffer accordingly.

Practical considerations

Guided learning hours

The syllabus suggests that Cambridge International Level 1/Level 2 syllabuses certificates are designed on the assumption that learners have about 130 guided learning hours per subject over the duration of the course, but that these may vary according to local curricular practice and the learners' prior experience of the subject. In the case of the English subjects, most learners will have undertaken Key Stage 3 work in literature. However, English literature is not always timetabled separately from English Language.

Whatever your own situation, regular and consistent practice – at least half an hour a week preparing for Paper 3 Unseen Comparison over the duration of the course, using the widest possible range of material – is recommended. Work on poetry and prose set texts from Paper 1 and Paper 2 can be helpful in the reinforcement of basic approaches and poems from the set anthology compared and contrasted.

Building a bank of resources

Suitable poems and passages for comparison should be sought by all members of staff involved in the teaching of the subject and filed centrally. Their relevance will outlast the set texts on Paper 1 and Paper 2, so all work done here will be useful. Prose exemplars should be chosen from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

- Textbooks:

Cambridge IGCSE Literature in English, Carey R, (2012)

Cambridge IGCSE Literature in English Workbook, Carey R, (2015)

English Literature for Cambridge IGCSE (with CD), Pedroz M, (2014)

Cambridge IGCSE Exam Skills Builder English Literature (with CD), Oxford University Press (2013)

Stories of Ourselves, Cambridge International Examinations (2008)

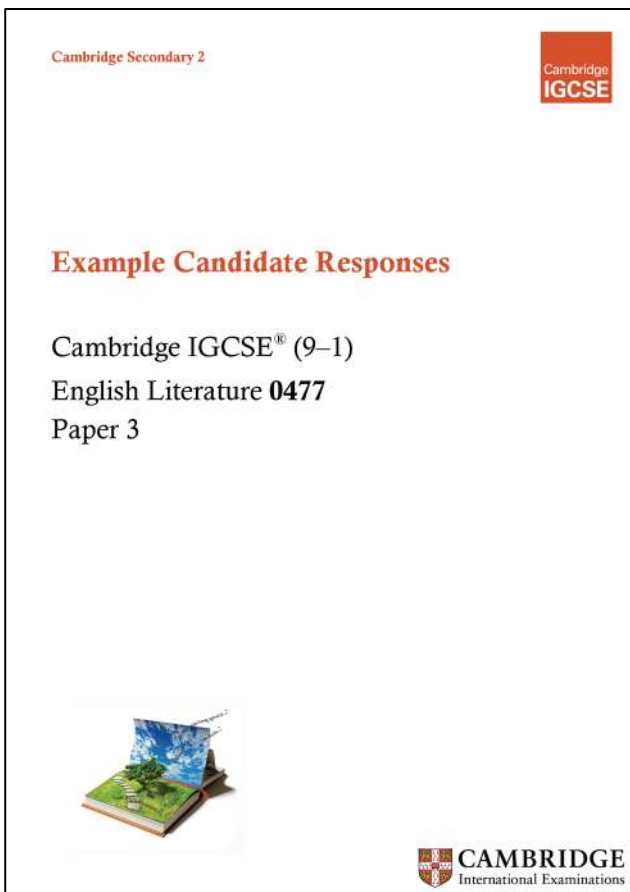
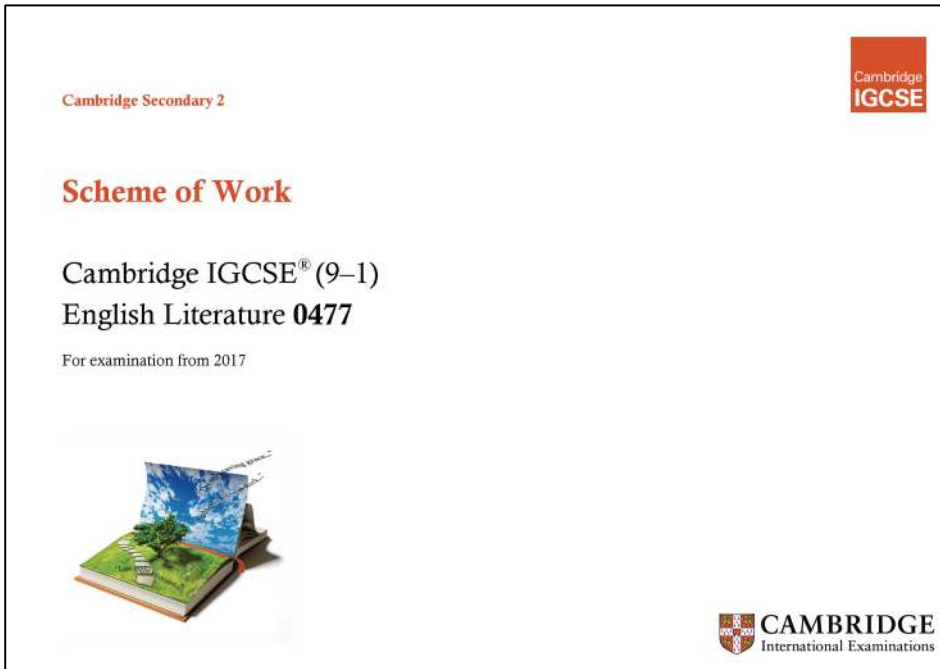
Songs of Ourselves, Cambridge International Examinations (2005)

Songs of Ourselves Volume 2, Cambridge International Examinations (2014)

Cambridge support

Materials to support the syllabus can be found at **Teacher Support** and include:

- Scheme of work
- Example Candidate Responses
- Syllabus summary document
- Mapping to 0486 syllabus



Appendix

The following exercises are designed to give a practical illustration of the way in which candidates might approach two poems for a comparative exercise. Exercise 1 has been chosen as a particularly straightforward example to help in the scaffolding of comparative responses, with question wording very similar to that in the Specimen paper. Exercise 2 is the Specimen Paper exercise provided for teachers to use.

Exercise 1

Read carefully the following poems about poets. Compare the ways in which activities are described and the writing of a poem is portrayed.

In your answer you should comment closely on the effects of language, style and form and how contexts are suggested by the writing.

To help you answer this question you might consider:

- The images of the seasons
- The ways in which the human figures are portrayed
- The differences suggested in the creative process and attitudes of the two poet characters in the poems.

Poem A: *Snapshot* by Ronald Duncan

Autumn like a pheasant's tail
Lifts over the hedge.

An old man sits in a deckchair
A paperbacked novel on his knees
not reading;

His worried wife forks
Feely round her border of michaelmas daisies;
not hoping.

Along the lane, a small girl with a pink bow
Runs home looking as contained as an apple:
not knowing.

Poem B: *Ice on the Round Pond* by Paul Dehn

This was a dog's day, when the land
Lay black and shite as a Dalmatian
And kite chased terrier kite
In a Kerry Blue sky.

This was a boy's day, when the wind
Cut tracks in the sky on skates
And noon leaned over like a snowman
To melt in the sun.

This was a poet's day, when the mind
Lay paper-white in a winter's peace
And watched the printed bird-tracks
Turn into words.

Approaches to commenting on and comparing the contexts of the poems

The question and bullet points in this specimen exercise direct the candidates towards the poems being about the creative process and thus very much in a literary context. The focus on the seasons should help candidates to look at the use of nature in the poems. This is, of course, very much in the traditions of English literature and something with which they may be familiar from their reading of set texts for Paper One.

A useful starting point might be a consideration of setting. The poems are set in a temperate climate zone – in Poem A – a clearly defined autumn, where leaves change colour and fall, and in Poem B a winter setting with ice and snow. *Snapshot* is set in a rural village and *Ice on the Round Pond* in the urban park of London's Kensington Gardens. This is very much England and not the tropics. Flora and fauna (pheasant, Michaelmas

daisies, apple, beech) typical of Northern Europe are referred to in *Snapshot* and the dog breeds in *Ice on the Round Pond* (Dalmatian, Kerry Blue) are domestic, not wild.

Both landscapes are seen from a poet's perspective. Both the humans and the scenery are fuel for the poet's imagination. The title *Snapshot* contains the idea of a poem being a short, quick capturing and preserving of a moment in time and space. *Ice on the Round Pond* could easily be the title of a painting rather than a poem.

Below are some suggestion of how candidates at different levels might approach the issues of context and comparison:

At a basic level candidates may look at the autumn setting in one poem and the winter setting in the other. There may be some response to the people in *Snapshot* – to what they are doing and to the everyday village context. Candidates may track the references to winter in *Ice on the Round Pond* citing the references to skates, snowmen and bird tracks in the snow but probably without reference to their figurative use. More developed answers in this range might look at the contrasting activities in the two poems but may comment on these separately.

Mid-range responses might develop the seasonal contrast with some comment on the colours suggested by the pheasant's tail and apple similes and the 'copper pavilion' metaphor in *Snapshot* and the black and white imagery of *Ice on the Round Pond*, along with the clear blue sky of an icy day. There may be more implicit awareness of the symbolism of autumn and the negatives of the old man 'not reading', his wife being 'worried' and the child and labourer 'not knowing' and 'not seeing' respectively. Candidates might begin to explore the connotations of the 'poet as pickpocket' image. At the top end of the range this autumnal lassitude might be contrasted with the activeness in *Ice on the Round Pond* and the use of personification to suggest the winter weather may be explored.

Stronger responses may show more awareness of the symbolism of autumn in English literature. As in Keats' *Ode to Autumn* there is beauty but things are beginning to die. Winter is presented in a contrasting way. The poem is in the past tense but still suggests vibrant activity with the repetition in 'kite chased terrier kite' and the personification of the wind which alliteratively 'cut tracks in the sky on skates'. Candidates at this level may be expected to pay more attention to the ideas of poetic creativity. The poet in *Snapshot* does not belong but observes and steals moments of other's lives in an underhand fashion. The image of the poet is more peaceful and less self-critical in *Ice on the Round Pond*. The snow creates a blank canvas on which to work and nature informs art. Verse form may be contrasted and linked to theme at this level. The effects of the refrain in *Snapshot* and the repetition in *Ice on the Round Pond* may be explored and candidates may comment on how the structures of both poems build up to a climax, ending with the poet himself and reflect upon the effect this has on reader response.

There are many poems, for example, by Seamus Heaney or Tony Harrison, which write about writing and the candidates' wider reading may help inform their response to this theme here. The poet of *Ice on the Round Pond* seems more at home with his creative process, whereas there is a sense of guilt and alienation in *Snapshot* which may be explored in sophisticated responses.

Exercise 2

Read carefully the following poems about women (also used in the Paper 3 Specimen Paper). Compare the ways in which the poets strikingly portray the women and their lives in these two poems. In your answer you should comment closely on the effects of language, style and form and how contexts are suggested by the writing.

To help you answer this question, you might consider:

- the images of the tigers and of the breakfast table
- the ways in which the poets present the two women
- how the poets convey to you the differences between the lives of the two women.

Poem A

In the following poem, the poet writes about her Aunt Jennifer whose hobby is to weave tapestry. One of these tapestries includes tigers in a hunting scene.

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers by Adrienne Rich

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen¹,
Bright topaz² denizens³ of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric⁴ certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool 5
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie 10
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

Poem B

In the following poem a young woman arrives at breakfast after an early morning walk.

Still-Life by Elizabeth Daryush

*Still-Life*¹

Through the open French window the warm sun
lights up the polished breakfast-table, laid
round a bowl of crimson roses, for one –
a service of Worcester porcelain², arrayed 5
near it a melon, peaches, figs, small hot
rolls in a napkin, fairy rack of toast,
butter in ice, high silver coffee-pot,
and, heaped on a salver³, the morning's post.

She comes over the lawn, the young heiress,
from her early walk in her garden-wood 10
feeling that life's a table set to bless
her delicate desires with all that's good,

that even the unopened future lies
like a love-letter, full of sweet surprise.

Approaches to commenting on and comparing the contexts of the poems

The question and bullet points on this specimen question aim to support the candidates in adducing the cultural and literary context of the poems by focussing their attention on gender, the use of symbolism and the suggestions of differences in age, class and lifestyle.

A useful starting point would be to begin with an overview of how the writers portray the two women and their lives and to note the striking differences between them. This then covers the key areas of context and comparison.

Aunt Jennifer's Tigers portrays a rather fearful and oppressed married woman, presumably in late middle age, whereas *Still-life* concerns a young, single, heiress with the world at her feet. Both women are strikingly symbolised by the objects surrounding them. Aunt Jennifer seems imprisoned by marriage as suggested by

the 'massive weight' of Uncle's wedding ring which 'sits heavily' on her hand. The tigers she creates, however, seem to be her legacy or representatives of her inner artistry and fearless spirit.

Still-life begins with the perfect breakfast table symbolising a luxurious, privileged, charmed existence. The details tell us much about the context. There is a literary stereotype in the sophistication of the setting, with French Window, roses, silver utensils and Worcester porcelain. The woman is alone but has many letters, suggesting the context of a vibrant social life and the focus is all on the future. *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers*, on the other hand, suggests that the protagonist is nearing the end of her life, and unlike the freedom the young heiress seems to have in front of her, Aunt Jennifer is 'terrified', trapped and 'mastered'.

Contextually the lives of women here are from an earlier, less liberated era. The young heiress's life may seem idyllic but the title may suggest that it is idle and static, a prison of its own kind. Aunt Jennifer is imprisoned and trapped by the unspecified 'ordeals' she has been subject to and is fearful of men. She is somewhat in the literary tradition of Penelope or The Lady of Shallot but with the prancing tigers in her soul.

There is ample opportunity for exploration of context and comparison of the striking ways in which the poets present their subjects to us. The verse forms contrast with *Aunt Jennifer's Tigers* being written in tight couplets in regular quatrains, suggesting the Aunt's constrained life and *Still-life* in the form of a Shakespearean sonnet, with the heiress making a striking entrance in the sestet, after her environment has been clearly conveyed to us. Both poems have striking, optimistic final couplets.

Below are some suggestion of how candidates at different levels might approach the issues of context and comparison:

At a basic level there may be a response to Aunt Jennifer's situation, perhaps picking up on the gender/era/age implications of her tapestry hobby and to the depiction of the tigers. The basic narrative of *Still-life* might be considered with an appreciation of the luxury of the breakfast .There may be a little response to the diction such as: 'prance...proud...warm sun...polished' in stronger answers in this range and some basic engagement with the content. Candidates may make intermittent comment on both poems. There may be some response to imagery or the use of rhyme with some quotation. Some responses may consider only one poem, whereas stronger answers may make some broad descriptions of both or some simple comparisons such as the contrast between the age and lifestyle of the two women.

Mid-range responses would directly address the stem question and show some understanding of the deeper contextual issues such as Aunt Jennifer's oppression and the contrast between her life and the tigers she creates and/or the charmed existence of the heiress in *Still-life* as symbolised by the breakfast table. Candidates may begin to analyse how the poet's language conveys the vivid glory of the tigers using techniques such as imagery, listing and alliteration: 'bright topaz' and 'prancing, proud and unafraid'. There may be response to how Aunt Jennifer's fear is conveyed by 'terrified hands' or the effects of the repetition of 'silver', or the implications of 'fairy' in *Still-life*. Candidates may make a personal response to the type of lifestyle portrayed or to the way in which the poets use the objects that surround them to portray the two women.

Stronger answers might be expected to show some appreciation of the historical and cultural context in terms of the role of women and the kind of lives they lead. They may consider these separately though they may make some comparisons or engage with the striking contrast between the two portrayals.

Such responses should show clear understanding of the portrayals of the women and their lives in both poems and make a comparison between them. The striking depiction of Aunt Jennifer's oppression as in the 'massive weight' of the wedding band which 'rings' her with ordeals and 'sits heavily' may be considered. There may be a response to what the tigers in their 'sleek, chivalric certainty' represent in terms of what the poet wishes to convey about her Aunt. The contrast between this and the 'charmed life' in *Still-life* created by diction such as 'arrayed' and the soft sounds, metaphors and similes in the sestet, may feature. There may be a considered personal response to the fierceness and intensity of the portrayal of Aunt Jennifer's life and to the implicit criticism of that of the heiress as implicit in the ambiguity of the title and 'future lies' and in the lack of individualisation – she has no name unlike Aunt Jennifer. Answers in this range may be strongly grounded in an awareness of the gender and class issues underlying these poems and very strong responses might also refer to the literary traditions of ballad and sonnet, myth and legend which may

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