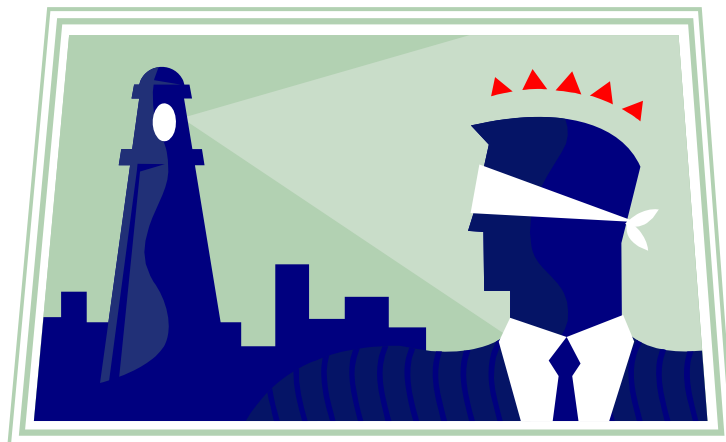


# UNSEEN POEMS



[a guide To answering literature exam questions on unseen poetry]

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# **DON'T PANIC**

– *Douglas Adams The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

A cautionary note:

**A POEM IS NOT A  
RIDDLE, IT DOES  
NOT HAVE TO BE  
SOLVED!**

All you need to do is explain your reactions to it  
and explain how it caused those reactions.

# What will the exam question look like?

**SECTION C**

*Spend about 30 minutes on this section. Think carefully about the poem before you write your answer.*

**17. Write about the poem and its effect on you.**

*You may wish to include some or all of these points:*

- the poem's content – what it is about;
- the ideas the poet may have wanted us to think about;
- the mood or atmosphere of the poem;
- how it is written – words or phrases you find interesting, the way the poem is structured or organised, and so on;
- your response to the poem.

[10]

**A London Thoroughfare\* Two A.M.**

They have watered the street,  
It shines in the glare of lamps,  
Cold, white lamps, — dislike "cold"  
And lies  
Like a slow-moving river,  
Barred with silver and black.  
Cabs go down it,  
One,  
And then another.  
Between them I hear the shuffling of feet,  
Tramps doze on the window-ledges,  
Night walkers pass along the sidewalks. — alliteration  
The city is squalid and sinister. — negative attitude  
With the silver-barred street in the midst,  
Slow moving.  
A river leading nowhere.

Opposite my window,  
The moon cuts,  
Clear and round,  
Through the plum-coloured night  
She cannot light the city;  
It is too bright.  
It has white lamps, — "cold"  
And glitters coldly.

I stand in the window and watch the moon.  
She is thin and lustreless,  
But I love her.  
I know the moon.  
And this is an alien city.

AMY LOWELL

\* a main road

(153-02)

*Handwritten annotations:*  
- isolated  
- simile  
- one line effective  
- pathetic tone / moment  
- personification  
- metaphor  
- "cold"

## Key features:

The question is always the same!

It is a good idea to annotate (write notes) upon the poem.

Difficult vocabulary is often footnoted at the bottom.

Remember the title is a key part of the poem.

The question always looks like this:

### SECTION C

*Spend about 30 minutes on this section. Think carefully about the poem before you write your answer.*

**17. Write about the poem and its effect on you.**

*You may wish to include some or all of these points:*

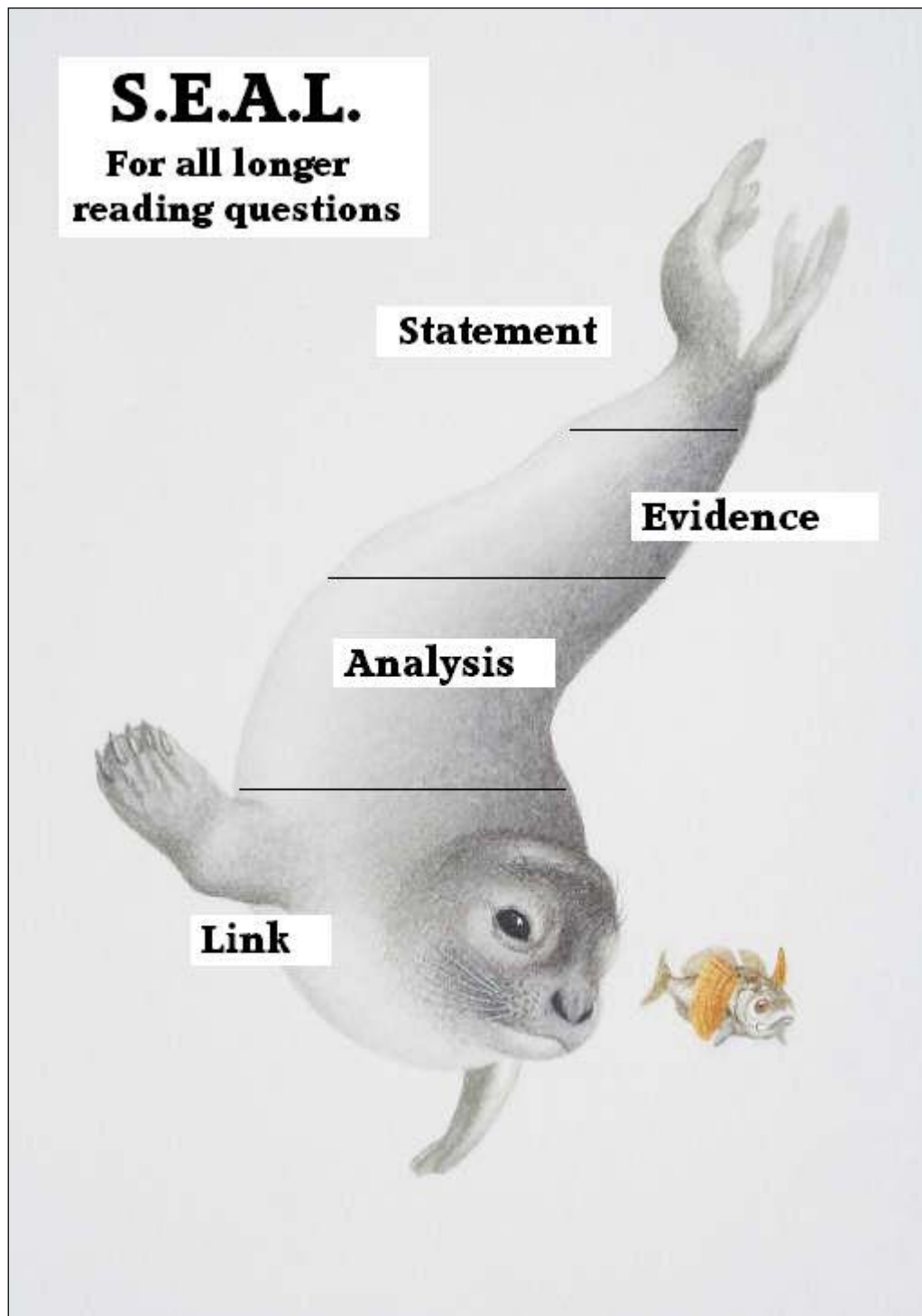
- *the poem's content — what it is about;*
- *the ideas the poet may have wanted us to think about;*
- *the mood or atmosphere of the poem;*
- *how it is written — words or phrases you find interesting, the way the poem is structured or organised, and so on;*
- *your response to the poem. [10]*

*What do I need to know about the format of the exam?*

Key facts about the exam question:

- It is the last section of the exam.
- You will not have seen the poem before.
- The question is always the same; the only thing that changes each year is the poem.
- Your answer will be an essay of about a side.
- It is worth 10 marks (the other sections are out of 30).
- You have 30 minutes to complete the question.
- 5-10 minutes should be spent reading and planning, 15-20 writing and 5 checking.

Remember your answer should be written in analytical paragraphs. Make sure you revise SEAL.



*What does the mark scheme look like?*

**E/D** Answers will be dependent on paraphrase, with awareness of mood and atmosphere, and some awareness of subtext, perhaps, at D.

**C** Candidates will select and highlight detail in order to probe the text. There will be some appreciation of some stylistic features and a clear personal response.

**B** Candidates will discuss the poem thoroughly and with some confidence. Some stylistic features will be addressed with some insight.

**A** Answers at this level will be typified by overview, sensitivity of response, and appreciation of a range of features and their contribution to the overall meaning.

**A\*** All the above, in a cogent and confident response, with analysis and appreciation of stylistic features.



What should I do first?

**READ THE  
POEM  
CAREFULLY**

**(twice)**

## 5 Things

A good technique to help you to get into the poem is to think about what it is actually about before you start. This will give you something to hang your answer on. The best way to do this is before you do anything else after reading the poem is to write down 5 words which sum it up.

**They can be connected words  
or separate ones.**

**They can be from the poem  
or from your reaction.**

Then select the most important ones.

*The important thing is that this gives you a handle on the poem which you can base your answer on.*

## PART 2: THEMES

### ***What is a theme?***

*A theme is a concept, or idea, that the poem explores.*

*Often the themes will be contained in the 5 words you initially came up with.*

**TASK:** Read each of the poems at the back of this booklet and identify the five key words for each.

### Match the Theme Exercise

Try to match the list of themes to the poems in the back of this booklet. Try to find a quotation for each pair which backs up your choice.

- ❖ Isolation
- ❖ Loneliness
- ❖ Nature's triumph
- ❖ Hope
- ❖ Change
- ❖ Nature reflecting Love

[illegible]

## A model SEAL paragraph for theme

One of the poem's key themes is isolation. "...this is an alien city". The Persona of the poem finds the city to be "alien" this suggests he/she is lonely and does not fit in. This is strange because "city" suggests that there are lots of people around. The poet seems to be exploring the idea that you can be isolated and alone even in a crowd.

***What can I do to revise?***

*Write a paragraph about the theme of any of the poems.*

***What can I do to practise even more?***

*Write about the themes of the other poems.*

## PART 3: Language

### *A Glossary of language terminology*

<b>Irony</b>	Expressing something by using words that mean the opposite (humorous or sarcastic).
<b>Analogy</b>	Comparing the likeness of two things.
<b>Personification</b>	Giving an inanimate object human characteristics.
<b>Simile</b>	Comparing two objects as they have something in common (e.g. as white as snow).
<b>Alliteration</b>	Repetition of a consonant in a phrase (e.g. Harry had a hole in his hard hat).
<b>Assonance</b>	Repetition of vowel sound (e.g. cold, told, bold).
<b>Parataxis</b>	Use of very short, sharp sentences.
<b>Metaphor</b>	Comparisons which don't use "like" or "as", but say that something "is" something else because it is similar.
<b>Imagery</b>	Using language to convey an atmosphere.
<b>Onomatopoeia</b>	When spoken, a word which sounds the same as its meaning (e.g. "hiss" - a snake).
<b>Hyperbole</b>	Exaggerating something so much that it cannot be taken literally.

*A cautionary note:*

**WHEN WE TALK  
ABOUT COMMENTING  
ON LANGUAGE WE  
MEAN COMMENTING  
ON ITS EFFECT ON  
THE READER.**



**Task:** Underline key words in the quotations.

Often these will be the words used in an usual way.

*“The moon cuts,/Clear and round,”*

*“At every desk a still child stared at me”*

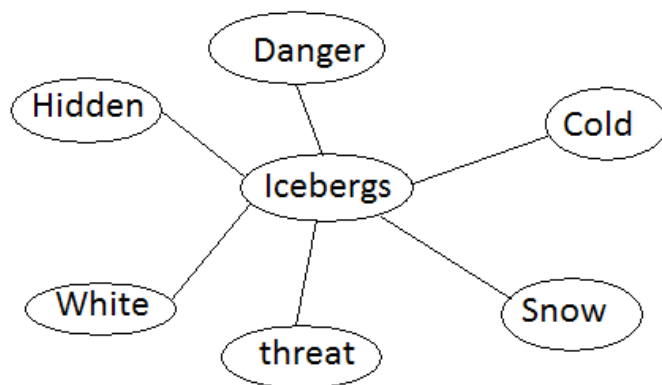
*“...of snowdrops blooming between daffodil shoots”*

*...a field of sorrow/ that seemed hard frozen...”*

*“Like an experienced robber”*

*“icebergs of white feather,”*

## ***Webs of connotations.***



This example shows a set of connotations (related words and ideas) for the word “icebergs”.

Draw two more word-webs for these other quotations from the poems.

Still Child

Moon cuts

## A model SEAL paragraph

Language is used in a dramatic and unsettling way with the line:

“At every desk a still child stared at me”

The phrase “still child” seems strange as we would expect children in a school to be full of life and energy. The fact they are staring at the narrator as if they are inspecting him/her makes them sound quite hostile. They seem to be very strange, ghostly and unsettling children.



***What can I do to revise?[part 1]:***

*Learn the technical vocabulary:*

*Look/Cover/Write/Check.*

**YOU WILL GAIN MORE MARKS IF YOU USE THE  
TECHNICAL VOCABULARY!**

***What can I do to revise? [part 2]***

Write a paragraph for any of the other quotations describing the effects of the language on the reader. Compare it to the model paragraph.

***What can I do to practise even further?***

Being able to comment on language is the key skill in English, you should practice this over and over again with the poems at the back of this booklet.

**PART 4: Structure: *The Golden rule:***

**FORM  
REFLECTS  
CONTENT**

## *A glossary of structure terminology*

<b>Enjambment</b>	Continuing a sentence beyond the end of a line, couplet, or stanza.
<b>Assonance</b>	The same / similar sound used in syllables of words near each other.
<b>Ballad</b>	Ancient poem telling a story.
<b>Couplet</b>	A pair of lines of verse usually the same length.
<b>Octet / Octave</b>	First 8 lines in a sonnet.
<b>Pentameter</b>	A line of 10 syllables.
<b>Quatrain</b>	A stanza / group of 4 lines usually with alternate rhymes.
<b>Sonnet</b>	A 14-line poem.
<b>Stanza</b>	Four or more rhymed lines repeated as a unit.
<b>Verse</b>	A group of lines in a poem.

### ***The key questions:***

*Is the structure regular or irregular?*

*How does this fit in with what the poem is about?*

## A model paragraph on structure

The structure of the poem is regular. There are six stanzas with each one being made up of three lines. The first and third line of each stanza rhyme. This regular structure suggests two things. Firstly, it seems to reflect the shopkeeper's straight forward, black and white view of the world. Secondly, it creates a sense of straight forward honesty on the part of the narrator who seems aware of the things that sadly the shopkeeper has missed.



## ***What can I do to revise? [part 1]***

*Learn the structure terminology: Look/ Cover/  
Write/ Check.*

## ***What can I do to revise [part 2]***

*Practice writing a paragraph on structure for one or more of the poems in the back of this booklet. Have in mind the theme of the poems before you do this as this will give you clues as to why the poet has structured the poem in this way.*

## PART 5: Tone

### A definition of tone.

*When we say tone we mean the emotions expressed and explored in the poem.*

### What are the key questions?

*What is the tone of the poem?*



*Does the tone change?*



*Where does it change?*



*What does it change to?*

**Task 1**: Identify the tone of any of the poems.

**Task 2**: identify one of the poems where the tone changes

## A model tone paragraph

The tone of the poem remains constant. It seems to be hopeful

"Sometimes a man aims high and all goes well."

Although it is quiet sad as it acknowledges bad things can happen it seems positive that it does not have to be that way. It is as if it is saying we should be positive despite the possibility that things can, and often do, go wrong. It could almost be describes as a poem about desperately clinging on to hope.

## ***What can I do to revise? [part 1]***

*Write your own tone paragraph about one of the poems. Then compare it to the model paragraph.*

## ***What can I do to revise? [part 2]***

*Try and identify the tone, and any changes in it, of the remaining poems.*

PART 6:

# THE POEMS

## **A London Thoroughfare\* Two A.M.**

They have watered the street,  
It shines in the glare of lamps,  
Cold, white lamps,  
And lies  
Like a slow-moving river,  
Barred with silver and black.  
Cabs go down it,  
One,  
And then another.  
Between them I hear the shuffling of feet,  
Tramps doze on the window-ledges,  
Night walkers pass along the sidewalks.  
The city is squalid and sinister,  
With the silver-barred street in the midst,  
Slow moving,  
A river leading nowhere.

Opposite my window,  
The moon cuts,  
Clear and round,  
Through the plum-coloured night  
She cannot light the city;  
It is too bright.  
It has white lamps,  
And glitters coldly.

I stand in the window and watch the moon.  
She is thin and lustreless,  
But I love her.  
I know the moon,  
And this is an alien city.

AMY LOWELL

## **Quieter than Snow**

I went to school a day too soon  
And couldn't understand  
Why silence hung in the yard like sheets  
Nothing to flap or spin, no creaks  
Or shocks of voices, only air.

And the car park empty of teachers' cars  
Only the first September leaves  
Dropping like paper. No racks of bikes,  
No kicking legs, no fights,  
No voices, laughter, anything.

Yet the door was open. My feet  
Sucked down the corridor. My reflection  
Walked with me past the hall.  
My classroom smelt of nothing. And the silence  
Rolled like thunder in my ears.

At every desk a still child stared at me  
Teachers walked through walls and back again  
Cupboard doors swung open, and out crept  
More silent children, and still more.

They tiptoed round me  
Touched me with ice-cold hands  
And opened up their mouths with laughter  
That was

Quieter than snow.

BERLIE DOHERTY



## Shopkeeper

*What a quiet time of year*  
he told me, for it was February  
and the trees were bare.

Storms had blown even beech leaves  
from hedges not a week before  
and trees were down at the forest eaves.

What he meant by quiet was a lack  
of visitors coming and going on the forest road  
stopping to buy in his shop full of tack.

He said it with his foot just inches  
from patches of snowdrops blooming between daffodil shoots  
and yards from the bird-table flurry of tits and finches.

In the distance the mountains glittered with snow.  
His van was in neutral, its engine revving  
with gathering speed. I watched him go.

I thought *yes, how quiet it seems.*  
The sun glistened a dew-wet web in the hedge  
and hushed the cold rush of the roaring streams.

GREG HILL

*By permission of the author*

## Sometimes

Sometimes things don't go, after all,  
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadel\*  
faces down frost; green thrives: the crops don't fail,  
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.

A people sometimes will step back from war;  
elect an honest man; decide they care  
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.  
Some men become what they were born for.

Sometimes our best efforts do not go  
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.  
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow,  
that seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.

SHEENAGH PUGH

## AUTUMN

Autumn arrives  
Like an experienced robber  
Grabbing the green stuff  
Then cunningly covering his tracks  
With a deep multitude  
Of colourful distractions.  
And the wind,  
The wind is his accomplice  
Putting an air of chaos  
Into the careful diversions  
So branches shake  
And dead leaves are suddenly blown  
In the faces of inquisitive strangers.  
The theft chills the world  
Changes the temper of the earth  
Till the normally placid sky grows red with a quiet rage.

ALAN BOLD

## Winter Swans

The clouds had given their all -  
two days of rain and then a break  
in which we walked,

the waterlogged earth  
gulping for breath at our feet  
as we skirted the lake, silent and apart,

until the swans came and stopped us  
with a show of tipping in unison.  
As if rolling weights down their bodies to their heads

they halved themselves in the dark water,  
icebergs of white feather, paused before returning again  
like boats righting in rough weather.

'They mate for life' you said as they left,  
porcelain\* over the stilling water. I didn't reply  
but as we moved on through the afternoon light,

slow stepping in the lake's shingle and sand,  
I noticed our hands, that had, somehow,  
swum the distance between us

and folded, one after the other,  
like a pair of wings settling after flight.

OWEN SHEERS