# How to approach your poetry exam (unseen poetry)

Don't be flustered by the 'unseen poem' section of your exam: if you know how to approach the poem and questions, you will be fine!

- ➢ Read the poem through once; then read it again slowly.
- ➢ If you are still unsure about the meaning of the poem, read the questions set on it as they will often help you to work out the theme of the poem. Jot down ideas and notes as you go through the questions.
- ➢ Now start to answer the questions. (The mark allocation for each question will give you an indication of the length of answer required.)
- ➢ *Take your time*, and *think* before you write; but if you change your mind about an answer, don't hesitate to cross out and rewrite.
- ➢ Finally, read through the poem and the questions again to make sure there is nothing you have missed; often an obscure question will become clear at this point.

So how can you prepare for this part of the exam? Each poem is individual so there isn't one great formula which will fit every poem you come across. But there are certain guidelines you can follow to help you when faced with an unseen poem.

You need to consider the technical aspects that apply to most poems.

## 1. Imagery and Figurative language

**Imagery** is the use of descriptive language that engages the human senses, i.e. words which evoke feelings and images whereas **figurative language** uses words or expressions with meanings that are different from the literal interpretation.

At least one question in an unseen poem test is devoted to this area, so in your reading of poetry look out for imagery, often expressed by using figurative language.

You should be quite familiar with at least two specific areas of figurative language:
- ~ figures of speech which rely on comparison, i.e. simile, metaphor and personification AND
- ~ sound devices, i.e. onomatopoeia, alliteration and assonance.

You should be able to identify the use of figures of speech and sound devices, as well as be able to write about them, discussing their effect <u>in the context in which they are used.</u>

First we look at the **COMPARISON figures of speech:**
- ➢ A **<u>simile</u>** is the easiest comparison to recognize because it uses the comparing words 'like' and 'as'. (e.g. He is as quiet as a mouse.)
- ➢ A **<u>metaphor</u>** is a much closer comparison – it says that the one <u>is</u> the other. It is often not so easy to recognize because we tend to use metaphors in our everyday speech and they are so integrated into our language that we don't realise that we are making comparisons. For example, we can talk about someone <u>being a cat</u> – rather than <u>like a cat</u> – or we might say to a timid person, "Don't be a mouse."
- ➢ A **<u>personification</u>** is a special form of metaphor in which human qualities are given to inanimate objects. Personification is often found in the verb, e.g. the sun <u>laughs</u> in the summer sky



Similes and Metaphors

As sly as a fox
A sly old fox
He's a real fox
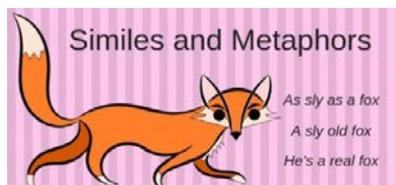
***N.B.*** When dealing with any of these **figures of speech** think through the comparisons by following THREE STEPS:

1. State what two things are being compared.
2. Decide what qualities they have in common, always taking the context (where they appear in the poem) into account.
3. Discuss whether, in your opinion, the comparison works/is effective. Remember that you must be able to support your view by referring to the text.

Now we look at **sound devices:**

*Z-Z-Z*

➢ <u>**onomatopoeia**</u> is when the word says the sound. (the bee buzzed)
➢ <u>**alliteration**</u> is when two or more words closely placed begin with the same sound, which links them even more closely.("Fair is foul and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air."
➢ <u>**assonance**</u> is when sounds inside words (mostly vowels) are repeated. (It beats, it sweeps, it cleans!)

***N.B.*** When dealing with sound imagery look at HOW the sound works in the linked words and how this can affect the meaning and the movement/rhythm of the lines, always keeping in mind the context.
It's no good saying that a particular sound <u>always</u> creates the same emotion, effect or image. The words themselves, their connotations (what they imply as well as mean), **and** their context must be taken into account.

**2. Style and Form**
'Style' refers to all the choices made in order to create the poem's meaning. It can include technical choices, such as short vs. long lines, varying punctuation or omitting punctuation, or using a set rhythm or rhyme scheme.
'Form' refers to the shape and type of poem – sometimes important, especially if dealing with a sonnet.

This is another area that is often the subject of a question as it adds meaning, rhythm and emotion to the words, especially so in free verse, in which the poet is not working to a standard pattern, but choosing where each line and stanza begins and ends. Be aware of rhyme schemes, such as rhyming couplets, quatrains etc. if applicable. Consider the use of end-stopped versus run-on lines. Look out for breaks within lines.

All these techniques have been included for a certain effect or feeling. Think about their impact.

**3. Tone**
This is often the most difficult part of analyzing a poem.  In some poems one can detect an overall tone but more often tone changes from one line to another.  Think of <u>tone of voice</u> when considering tone – *in what tone of voice would a speaker say the words?* – and put into words your choice (often an adjective) in this way:  S/he uses an <u>aggressive tone</u> or The tone is/The voice sounds <u>thoughtful</u> etc.

Good luck!

For more notes and practice on answering questions on unseen poems, you will find Macrat's resource 'Approaches to Unseen Poetry' very useful:
https://www.digital.macrat.co.za/product/approaches-to-unseen-poetry/