

ANSWERS BOOKLET



Writing Unseen Commentaries: A Student Help Book



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Remember that all answers to important questions about literature are open to further debate, and that there is rarely a single 'right' answer. If your answers don't match the ones we suggest here, that doesn't mean you've wholly failed: your thinking, in arriving at them, will have been valuable in itself; and this booklet gives you the opportunity to go through that thinking again to see if it can take you in a different direction.

It's quite possible, also, that some of your answers may have turned out to be sounder, or more perceptive, than ours. If that's the case...well done (and we'd like to hear about them: wordsmith@litworks.com).

'There is no
Road that is right entirely.'

Louis MacNeice

Passage 1: Maiden Voyage

Box 1

- a) Young people used to stay there, but haven't done so for some time: the house is no longer set up for a young (and adventurous) visitor.
- b) They represent the regimentation and European orderliness that the boy wants to escape from.
- c) The grass is '*tall*' (maybe difficult to see over, and someone could be hiding in it) and '*rank*' (which can mean both wild and evil-smelling); it is growing in the '*shadow*' of the wall (and therefore darker than the sunlit countryside around); and the fact that it is '*sharp as knives*' makes it seem dangerous. It resists him, so that he has to push through it. The connection with *line 17* is in the phrase '*harsh spears of grass*' in that line.
- d) It reminds us of the severed head, around which flies were also buzzing; it might suggest that the flies have pursued him here; and the fact that the insects are banging into the wall as if they want to get through it emphasises the fact that he too is trapped outside the city.

Box 2

- a) The second. The first one tells us how he likes to be thought of (as independent); the second one reveals that he really just prefers to get his own way.
- b) '*fiercely*' and '*brooding*'. You could also argue that the phrase '*for all I could see*' is sarcastic.
- c) '*quickly*'

Box 3

- a) The boy is in an alien environment '*here*', in China; but the '*European villa*' itself is unwelcoming; Mr Butler's attitude is restrictive; the boy is rebellious by nature; and in any case he badly wants to explore the area. Something's got to give!
- b) It takes the boy some time to reach the '*black speck*' in the road. As he walks he speculates about what it might be. The '*haze*' of flies suggests that it may be something decaying. The flies rise and are now described as '*loathsome*', and that word taken together with the pinkness of the object just revealed suggests that something horrible is lying there. Then in lines *27* and *28* the writer describes the boy's physical reaction, but he makes us wait until the next paragraph before telling us what it is that the boy has seen. The timing of all of that is carefully controlled.

Box 4

- a) The landscape is in a state of '*torpor*' (as if it feels sleepy); the bushes emit sounds like harsh human speech (they '*squeaked and grated linguistically*'); the dust and sand behave as if they can control their movements ('*eddy and swirling themselves into flat sheets*'); and the grass is like '*spears*' which '*stuck up through the sand*' (also as if they were doing it of their own volition, as an act of aggression).
- b) Colour
- c) They're short, indicating the speed at which things are happening.

Box 5

All of them. We should possibly call them themes rather than ideas (we'll talk later about the difference between the two).

Passage 2: Testing the Reality

Box 6

- a) The poem is about life and death, and the church is seen here as a kind of platform (of faith) from which the birds soar into the sky and the poet's mother departs for what may be an after-life.
- b) Reference to the cycle of night and day (*lines 6-7*), and time passing (*lines 8-10*; see also *lines 11-12*); and the phrase '*the light of what they steered their course by*' (*lines 14 and 15*) – the sun, or her religious belief. We thus learn that the poem is about 'bigger' things than the departure of a flock of birds, or even the death of a single person.
- c) In the final line we are brought back to the poet as both a child and a man, standing alone in the church, which has been a kind of nest for the birds. (The similarity in sound – called assonance – between *clutch*' and *'church*' emphasises the connection.)

Box 7

- a) He could count only to 20, and it was a '*ragged*' 20 at that, which suggests that he did it very unevenly and hesitantly. That puts him at about – what, four years old?
- b) He feels alone, bereft, and condemned to ignorance because he is now shut off from the light of the sun (belief in God? knowledge of what comes after death?)

Box 8

- a) The death of his mother has been (in the end) as sudden and complete as he remembers the departure of the birds being when he was a child. He imagines himself as an unhatched egg left behind when the rest of the flock depart for warmer weather.
- b) We have to think that it is at least thirty years, if we consider the likely age of the poet's mother when he was a young child and her age when she died. So when she does die he remembers the earlier episode and sees the connection. (The way the poem is written brings the two things together as if they happen in quick succession. You could ask yourself whether that is effective or just confusing.)

Box 9

- a) They were '*flocking*' (*line 2*), which in itself indicates large numbers. They '*crammed*' the church roof etc. as if there was no room for any more. Their noise was very loud. There were so many that he could only guess at their numbers (*line 5*). And still those numbers grew (*line 8*).
- b) The poet remains alone in the '*clutch*' while all the others (his mother, the birds) have gone '*beyond... touch*': the rhyme emphasises the idea that he has been left behind and feels desolate.

Box 10

Life and death? Loss through death? They're a bit vague – again we'd have to call them themes, or topics, rather than ideas. A more precise idea would be something like, 'How an early memory can take on greater significance when something happens to us later in life.' That's a long phrase, however!

Passage 3: The Moonstone

Box 11

- o Beautiful, romantic (*'coast...sea...beautiful walks'* 1-2)
- o Ugly, forbidding (*'but one...That one...horrid...melancholy...low cliffs...ugliest little bay'* 1-2)

The writer thus quickly narrows his focus onto a part of the overall setting which will match the mood of the story he is telling.

Box 12

It is

- o a mysterious and treacherous place (*'the most horrible quicksand...the unknown deeps...shivering and trembling...remarkable'* 8-10)
- o a place where nothing is certain (*'you lose sight of them...something goes on...seems to leave the waves behind'* 6-13)
- o silent and isolated (*'silence...lonesome...No boat...No children...The very birds of the air...berth'* 14-16)

Box 13

She is a servant in what seems to be a large household.

Box 14

- o She works within a set schedule (*'Her turn out'* 18) and the household is very structured (the storyteller has been sent to bring her in to dinner, and much is made of the fact that he is *'head of the servants'* 29).
- o She therefore enjoys security of a sort; and her workplace seems friendly – the storyteller acts in a fatherly way towards her (31-34), and he in his turn is well looked after by *'the women'* (46).

Box 15

The writer establishes a contradiction in the two settings and uses it to point up the puzzle of Rosanna's past: why does she frequently forsake the friendly place for the inhospitable one? Because, it seems, the gloomy and dangerous shoreline reminds her of, and allows her to dwell on, the previous unhappy events of her life.

Box 16

- | Bay | Rosanna |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| o <i>'melancholy'</i> (3) | o wears a plain grey cloak and mopes |
| o undistinguished - <i>'low cliffs'</i> (3) | o undistinguished – <i>'little straw bonnet'</i> (25) |
| o <i>'loneliest'</i> (4) | o <i>'all alone'</i> (twice – 18,26) |
| o <i>'ugliest'</i> (4) | o Rosanna is deformed |
| o a source of mystery – <i>'unknown deeps'</i> (19) | o a source of mystery – her present behaviour (<i>'account for it as you may'</i> , 19) and her past |

Box 17

'The people in our parts...our fishing village called Cobb's Hole...our neighbourhood...golden rule...a new composition, warranted to remove anything.'

Box 18

That she has only one friend in the neighbourhood (*lines 20-21*). So the people she works with are not really close to her, it seems. This emphasises her isolation and adds to our interest in the one friend '*of whom more anon*'.

Box 19

The writer narrows down the temporal (time) setting: he begins with an account of what is always the case (features of the landscape), moves to what is usually the case (Rosanna's habit of coming here alone) and then describes this single occasion.

Box 20

The writer's use of the first and second person ('*our...we ...you*').

Box 21

Beautiful and ugly.

Passage 4: My Father's Garden

Box 22

a)

His father's place of work:

- o probably a steel mill, or foundry
- o holds powerful forces waiting to break free
- o a hellish place ('demons', 'satanic')
- o dangerous ('dragons', 'tyger' – do you have any idea why it's spelt like that? 'Burning bright' in line 20 is a clue, if you know the poem by William Blake).
- o a place of both destruction and creation (lines 15-18)

The scrapyard:

- o a romantic and 'natural' place ('rockeries', 'grottoes', 'flowers', 'stalks', 'grapes', 'vegetables') – made so by time and the elements ('rusty')
- o a place where the products of the foundry eventually end up ('stoves', 'brake drums', 'sewing machines', 'refrigerators', 'gears', 'cogwheels', 'ball bearings', 'sewer grills')

b)

The place of work: His mind was harmed by the glare, the heat, the repetitive tasks ('over and over') and the meaninglessness of it all ('reborn in the fire as something better or worse').

The scrapyard: A kind of garden for him, where he stopped each day to find presents for his children. It was a place where he could use his imagination to see the beauty and the usefulness of discarded objects. It acted as an antidote to the horror of his work and was a source of pride – the things he brought home were like his 'prize vegetables'.

Box 23

a) His father had power over the molten steel (it had to 'wait for his lance'). He was imaginative and generous, and cared for his children. He struggled to keep his mind alive and to use what little education he had.

b) He gave his children not only ingenious presents but also an appreciation of the beauty to be found in unexpected places and things.

c) In the end he failed to achieve anything of note and may have died (if he *has* died) a rather sad death.

Box 24

What is important is that the poet has lost him in one way or the other. The poem therefore is both a tribute to him and a lament at his passing (even if it's just passing into madness or senility). The quality and power of the feeling are more significant than its precise cause.

Box 25

The poet's admiration for the way his father fought to keep his imagination and his mind (and his love for his children) alive despite the harrowing nature of his job – a struggle symbolised by the vividly contrasted steel mill and scrapyard.

Passage 6: Walter Llywarch

Box 26

- o Age: Middle?
- o Parentage: Respectable – his parents were ‘*approved*’ in the community.
- o Appearance: Unhealthy, partly as a result of the conditions of his working life
- o Early hopes: Of escape to a better existence
- o Job: Quarryman?
- o Marriage: To a woman equally trapped
- o Later life: Disillusioned, defensive; had several children

Box 27

- o ‘*I am*’: The poem is a declaration – by Walter, of his existence, however unsatisfying. In effect he presents himself (defiantly? Self-pityingly?)
- o ‘*As you know*’: We are included as members of the same community who ‘*approved*’ his parents. Walter addresses us directly and expects us to know him. R S Thomas thus draws us into the poem and establishes a relationship between us and his subject.
- o ‘*Born in Wales*’: He is a product of the place where he was born (and about which we learn much as the poem progresses).
- o ‘*Well goitred*’: That this is something that has been *done* to him (by his environment).
- o ‘*Round in the bum*’: Grimly light-hearted? (A man making a jest of his physical shortcomings, as best he can.)
- o ‘*Sure prey of the slow virus*’: Probably; but has the virus attacked his spirit also?
- o Victim.

Box 28

- o ‘*The bare hearth of my own fancy*’: His imagination was starved, and he had to make do with other people’s dreams and stories, and the promises of religion.
- o ‘*Achieved only the smoke’s acid*’: He failed to bring the stories alive, even in his imagination.
- o ‘*Acid*’: His failure was corrosive, and ate into his spirit.
- o ‘*False tears*’: Because they were caused by smoke not sorrow; because the stories themselves were false, could not be turned into reality.

Box 29

- o ‘*Cocoon...wings*’: Walter’s young thoughts were like a pupa enclosed in a restrictive chrysalis; and when he grew (when ‘summer’ came) and they emerged in butterfly form, he found there was nowhere they could fly to. There was no escape from the routine (school, chapel) of his life.

Box 30

- o People who had travelled there sent back evidence (‘*fruit*’). The idea of ‘a better life’ includes that of heaven on earth, which can be reached ‘*without the grave’s passport*’.

Box 31

- o ‘*Walter Llywarch!*’: Despair? Exasperation? Defiance? Wonderment that so little can have come of his life? All of those?
- o We might be tempted to say, ‘He should have got on his bike,’ in other words taken his future in his own hands. But the whole point of the poem is that Walter *had* no bike, no means of taking an initiative. The tragedy of his life is not that he *didn’t* but that he *couldn’t*.

- o *'The long queue /Of life'*: He was only one of many who had similar dreams; he was submissive, willing to wait his turn for an opportunity which never came.
- o Loneliness.
- o Some comfort (*'we lay /For warmth together'*); some laughter; children...but...

Box 32

Setting

- o Maybe that life for the whole community had to be carved out of what amounted to a looming hillside of rain – all that their climate offered.
- o *'Striking'*

Action

- o Autobiography

Style

- o The long echoes of *'Sure prey of the slow virus /Bred in quarries of grey rain.'*

Ideas

- o Perhaps, in the cruelty of the parents' laughter at the thought that their children will be trapped as they were; but perhaps not if we can see the laughter as warm, as an *inclusion* of the children in the life they have all been given. It's the grim and brave humour of *'round in the bum'* once more.

Passage 7: A Fine Balance

Box 33

- a) It's likely that it was Omprakash's parents. He seems to be an orphan – Ishvar and Ashraf feel responsible for his future and Ashraf calls Ishvar '*his father*' (line 44) – who has suffered much (line 12); and there is talk of him wanting revenge (lines 7-8) back in the village, where the murders may have taken place.
- b) Omprakash (look at lines 36-38 – he is clearly part of their 'unemployment' problem).

Box 34

- c) Ishvar doesn't want to move, and Ashraf has to insist. In spite of Ashraf's claim that there is plenty of room he has to partition his own bedroom to make the move possible. All of that emphasises (in a small way) the devastating nature of the things that have happened.
- d) Ashraf wanted Ishvar and Omprakash to be with him in the final years of his life (lines 54-55).
- e) Ashraf and Ishvar are worried that Omprakash will return to the village where his parents were murdered and end up in trouble. It would clearly be a good idea to get him away from the area altogether, but there seems to be no way of doing that. Then they are forced to look for a way by the failure of their business.
- f) '*in time*' (line 14)
'*A year had passed*' (line 16)
'*Soon*' (line 24)
'*Before long*' (line 36)

Box 35

- g) Passage A: '*after breakfast...After lunch...an early afternoon torpor*'
Passage B: '*I could count to a ragged 20...the passing of each day...on a Sunday morning...The day that fledged her*'
Passage F: '*Born in Autumn... Months of fog, months of drizzle... when the sun came...Each new child*'

Box 36

Setting

Ashraf considers the possibility (although he says he is only joking) of abandoning his traditional independence and going to work in a clothing factory; Ishvar thinks more seriously about doing so; and according to him Omprakash has '*too many foolish* (modern?) *ideas*' in his head.

Character

'*Traitors*', '*Maybe I'll have to go and work for them in my old age*', '*swatting flies*', '*You can even sell ready-made clothes*'. They're barely amusing, and serve mainly to convey a sense of the writer's warmth towards his characters.

Style

They have just spent hours worrying fruitlessly about the boy's future. Even the simple act of going to bed, after all of that, becomes a deliberate and difficult process – a fact reflected in the formality of the language.

Ideas

That a family should stay together and share what it has. The detail that it is a *worktable* carries the extra suggestion that they will pull through by working together at their trade.

Passage 8: The Interrogation

Box 37

We'd probably call this an incident, since there's an element of chance in it and we aren't sure that it's going to lead to something important...so it may not be a large enough occurrence to qualify as an 'episode', which is a more self-contained part of a bigger story, with a beginning, a middle and an end of its own.

Box 38

- a) *'could have...but'* ; *'And then came'*
b) It makes the interrogation itself seem more immediate, as if it's happening *'now'*.
c)
o He repeats the word *'stood'* and also uses *'standing'* to describe the day itself (*'standing'* is what *'static'* basically means).
o He gives a list (of questions).
o The questions are not answered.
o The story-teller is distracted (twice) by things he sees happening across the road, as if there is no great urgency in what is happening to *him*.
o He repeats the word *'still'*.
d) By the use of an image (*'on the edge'*) and the phrase *'Endurance almost done'*. We learn for the first time how harrowing the whole interrogation (and perhaps what has gone before it) has been for the men: they are near breaking point.

Box 39

Setting

- o It separates what might have been (if they had crossed it – their liberty?) from what is (their capture).
- o Beyond it carefree lovers – in themselves symbols of human freedom – can be seen. They are *'wandering'* (as if they can go where they please) and they make the land over the road seem like *'another star'*, even though they are physically close – the other side of the road is so near and yet so far.
- o The field over the road is both near and *'thoughtless'* – it and the people in it (the lovers) are not aware of the detainees and their plight; and also if the captured men had escaped across to it they would have been freed from their thoughts (cares).

Character

It underlines our perception that this is happening to a *group* of men who have stuck closely together and continue to do so. This encourages us to have sympathy for them, and in any case we more readily identify with them because we feel partly included in the *'We'*.

Style

It emphasises the contrast between the leader and his men: *'intent'* and *'indifferent'* are opposites in this context.

Ideas

If we think they are refugees we are likely to see them as victims. If they are soldiers we may just think they have been unlucky (or inefficient). Part of the impact of the passage lies in the fact that we do not know why they have come there, and we do not therefore know what the outcome of the interrogation may be.

Passage 9: 'He charged upon her.'

Box 40

Impressions of

- o Violence
- o Ridiculousness
- o Confusion
- o Fear
- o Sadness
- o Joy and excitement
- o Indecision

Box 41

Violence:

- *'More like a lion' (line 1)* – animal image
- *'charging' (line 2)* – note the repetition
- *'slammed' (line 2)*
- *'violently' (line 5)*
- *'exclaimed' (line 9)* – speech can be violent, too.
- *'panting fiercely' (lines 11-12)*
- *'jumped out of her' (line 27)* – *'jumped'* is used in an unusual way (as a transitive rather than an intransitive verb, if you want the technical term) and in the sense of 'forced to jump'.

Diction (choice of words) clearly plays an important part here.

Box 42

Ridiculousness:

- *'carting' (line 3)* – a colloquial (almost slang) term which has the effect of trivialising both what is carried and the carrier...reinforced by *'this thing' (line 11)*
- *'clumsy stride' (line 5)*
- *'fishily' (line 6)*
- *'too pink...too white' (line 7)* – his face is almost clown-like, or like that of a painted (*'wooden'*) doll.
- *'fumbling...clumsy' (line 9)* – clown-like again
- *'slightly grating, slightly gasping voice'*
- *'Like tending your baby!'* (line 15) – the man, in spite of his threatening behaviour, is helpless.
- *'repeating that ridiculous thing!'* – she, too, is beginning to behave oddly.

Here the emphasis is on details of appearance, speech and movement.

Box 43

Confusion:

- *'Like having a fit' (line 4)* – loss of control and consciousness
- *'tottered' (line 4)* – as if they couldn't make up their minds whether or not to fall (maybe belongs with 'Indecision' below).
- *'Presumably' (line 5)* – she isn't sure, *'because of the tottering of the houses'*
- *'What was he doing?' (line 9)*
- *'if he were mad' (line 13)*
- *'Perhaps he did not recognize her!'* (lines 13-14)
- *'She had forgotten' (line 19)* – under the influence of these powerful events, even though something

important is due to happen to her today

Her confusion about what is happening helps explain her difficulty in deciding what to do, which is the crux of the passage.

Box 44

Fear:

- *'sheer nerves' (line 27)*
- *'She was afraid' (line 27)* – did the writer need to make this plain statement?
- *'A madman....an empty house' (line 28)* – the stuff of horror stories
- *'Noises whispered up the empty stairway' (line 28)* – 'atmosphere'

Except for her shaking in *line 10*, her fear emerges only towards the end of the passage, increasing the suspense at that point.

Box 45

Sadness:

- References to his (possible) madness
- The alternative to staying here – being cloistered *'nun-like' (line 24)*
- The emptiness of the house (*line 28*) – has he sold everything else?

Box 46

Joy and excitement:

- The thought that he may become a baby she can look after
- *'My beloved is mine and I am his'* (several references) – why is *'His'* capitalised the second time? You'll only know if you've read the biblical *Song of Solomon*: the quotation takes on a religious significance and reminds us of the alternative life she perhaps faces, as a nun – a bride to Jesus Christ – or something similar.
- *'The most exciting spot on the earth' (lines 23-24)*

Box 47

Indecision:

- She can't make up her mind whether he's mad or not (as we noted earlier).
- She can't make up her mind whether to stay or go.
- She can't make up her mind whether to give her life to this (possible) madman or to the Church (perhaps).

All of that is reflected in the structure of some of the sentences, beginning of course with the antithesis (balance) of our original example, *'She stepped irresolutely into the shadows, she turned irresolutely to the light' (line 18)*. Find more antithesis in *lines 19-20* and *line 22* (the balance isn't so clear-cut; try to apply the phrase 'on the one hand...on the other' to parts of those lines).

Box 48

- o It makes the man seem, by comparison, larger and more powerful.
- o There are too many to list here. Should you list them all in your commentary? Yes, if you feel you have time: they will demonstrate your eye for detail.
- o Perhaps *'My beloved is...Why does one go on repeating that ridiculous thing!' (line 26)*. The descent is from poetry to petty frustration, expressed stiffly (*'Why does one'*). Note that what is grammatically a question is punctuated as an exclamation – it is actually an outburst.
- o Very jerky: the sentences (when they are that – there are lots of independent phrases) are short, often very short. That allows sudden changes of direction and produces a zig-zag effect.
- o Eight (all in the second half, where the emphasis is on what she is feeling rather than on what is happening)

Box 49

- o Natural and spontaneous (with a sense of having been written ‘on the spot’, as events happen and the woman responds in thought and feeling)
- o Informal (language of the kind that is spoken rather than written – colloquial)
- o Incorrect (not in ‘proper’ sentences: its syntax, or sentence structure, is ragged) – goes hand in hand with the last point
- o Unstructured (lacking formal organisation): even the paragraphs are put together randomly.
- o Original
- o Varied (poetry and plainness mixed)
- o Appropriate (created to fit the situation described)
- o Authentic (believable: this is how *this* woman in *this* situation would think and speak – and write, if she had to write)
- o Vivid (note, among other things, the use of colour and sound)
- o Powerful and vigorous (it carries us forward on a tide of impression and emotion)
- o Dramatic (conveys a sense of immediacy and unexpectedness)

Passage 10: Childe Harold's Pilgrimage

Box 50

- o nomatter how much damage Man does to the earth, he is powerless to harm the sea.
- o how much it means to the poet to wander in desolate places where he can feel one with nature.
- o Man can damage the land.....the only signs of harm on the sea are the momentary ones when men are shipwrecked.
- o powerful.....it treats man as a plaything and destroys him at will.

Box 51

- o Unnatural, contrived
- o Formal, stiff (to the point of being rigid?)
- o Very correct (closely following the rules of grammar and syntax)
- o Tightly organised
- o Conventional (that doesn't mean 'ordinary' here: it means 'following poetic convention')
- o Consistent – it's the same throughout.

Box 52

- a) first line of the second verse
- b) Byron's life was breathless in a way, but he obviously had lots of time to write very measured and polished poetry (and letters) – he never *expresses* himself breathlessly...So we have to look for another reason for, and another consequence of, these long sentences.
- Perhaps they indicate that Byron has been carried forward (but not carried away) by his feelings, and that his ideas as a result roll out onto the paper, not in a spontaneous way but with *momentum* – the momentum of his emotions. We can, can't we, describe his feelings as massive (of great weight, or *moment*)? And his subject matter is massive in the same sense...and his language too.
- c)
- o There are examples of two phrases balanced against each other (antithesis again) in each of *lines 5, 7 and 9*.
 - o '*Roll...roll!*' (the opening and closing of *line 10*)
 - o The patterning of *line 18* is really an effect of its diction (Byron has chosen words which don't rhyme but which have sounds in common – the technical term, again, is *assonance*); but it is the syntax of the sentence that holds those words together in a list.
 - o The structure of two parts of *lines 19 and 20*, '*His steps...paths*' and '*thy fields...for him*' is the same, with a cross-over between '*His...thy*' and '*thy...him*'.

Box 53

Each long line (six stressed, or emphasised, syllables instead of four) slows the verse down at its end, allows weight to be placed on important phrases and ideas, and gives a sense of climax, or finality, to the verse.

Box 54

The power of Man's destructiveness is negated by the fact that the sea despises it. The repeated hissing sounds of *lines 23-4* convey the strength of the sea's scornful anger. Man howls to his Gods but his hope of rescue will be justified only haply ('perhaps').

Box 55

Onomatopoeia...but you won't get any marks just for labelling it, even if you spell it right.

Box 56

It diminishes Man, by copying the sound of the animal noise he makes in his fear and despair.

Box 57

2. Character

Byron scorns Man because of the '*vile strength*' (line 21) he uses against the earth, and is glad to see him brought low by the power of the sea. Man deserves his fate. Compare, however, '*I love not Man the less*' (line 5). Can you see any way of explaining the contradiction?

3. Action

Probably...but try to avoid saying things like 'the writer should have done it this way' – you must work with what you are given.

5. Ideas

Man sets out boldly across the sea but is reduced to a '*shivering...howling*' creature who runs for safety in a '*port or bay*' (line 26) and is dashed against the rocks as he does so. This is not irony of language but of action – the irony of sudden reversal, pride going before a fall.

Passage 11: The Open Boat, A Tale of the Sea

Box 58

- o The power of nature
- o Man's determination to survive
- o His anger at life's stupidities and cruelties
- o The irony of being close to and yet far away from safety

Box 59

The coast is *'lowly'* – a more normal word would have been 'low', or 'low-lying': *'lowly'* suggests meanness, meagreness. That suggestion is reinforced by the colourlessness of the landscape – *'black'*, *'gray'* – and the smallness of its features (the house is *'tiny'* and the lighthouse *'slim'* and *'little'*).

Note that we've started our study of the ideas of the passage by looking at *Setting*...

Box 60

Lines 9 and 17; then 18-21, 50-51; and finally 55

Box 61

- o The people on shore – coastguards or lifeboatmen: they are not within sight of this part of the coast so it's not fair to accuse them of incompetence; but also...
- o The sailors themselves who, since they *'did not know this fact'*, are driven to curse those they feel ought to have noticed their plight

Box 62

Because it becomes central later on in the passage.

Box 63

self-reliance; prepared

Box 64

- a) It underlines the struggle the men have to face their impending death, and also to voice their thoughts and their outrage about it. These are large, difficult ideas for these simple men.
- b) Because there seems to be neither rhyme nor reason in how the sea behaves.
- c) Scornful and bitter: the land they have almost reached has turned out to be both pitiful and unhelpful. The world, in the end, is as unreliable as the people in it can be.
- d) Senseless. Fate is not purposeful and vindictive but an *'old ninny-woman...an old hen who knows not her intention'*.
- e) *'absurd'* (line 36)
- f) The skill of the oiler who is rowing the boat...and the captain's promptness in following his suggestion that they turn back. In the end (and this extends the main idea a little: the point has already been made, as we saw, in *lines 22-23*) we must in our struggle to survive be ready to fall back on our own resources.

Box 65

Setting

Gulls fly by, ignoring them, towards the east, which is still *'gray and desolate'*; and a squall appears. There is no

sign from the shore.

Character

It's right at the end of the paragraph: *'Just you drown me, now, and then hear what I call you.'* It also contributes to the general sense of absurdity in what is happening to them.

Action

It allows us to imagine the depth of their despair. They have perhaps run out of both words and the will to resist.

Style

No. It adds to our sense of the struggle they have to explain what they feel. Remember what we said earlier (pages 42 and 45) about the authenticity of language. Find some other examples of comic expression in the passage, and consider their impact on the reader also.

Passage 12: Heritage

Box 66

- a) *'Your hard blue eyes'*. Have you perhaps come across this cliché (over-used phrase) before? Maybe in a love story?
- b) Keep *safe* (from giving it away prematurely)
- c) Verse 1: They stir in their sleep when the girl feels the first hint of attraction to a man (boy?)
Verse 2: They wake, are pleased when the girl responds physically, and by flushing show that they remember what sexual attraction is like – they too were lovers once.
Verse 3: They teach the girl to hide what she is feeling.
Verse 4: They know what this beginning love will blossom into. So they are...the girl's female ancestors? All the women who have ever loved? Womankind?
- d) 'When a young girl feels the first stirrings of love she is responding in the way women have always responded to men, and in a manner all women who have loved would remember with pleasure and approve of.'

Box 67

1. Setting

Graveyard. When we read a poem its images intermingle in our minds to produce a total effect.

2. Character

'All that summer knows' – the climax of the poem

3. Action

'On the day'; *'I was a child'*; *'it was years before'*; *'springtime...snows...summer'*

4. Style

Purity and innocence

‘Write Your Own Guiding Questions’

Box 68

PASSAGE 4 ‘My Father’s Garden’ (page 16 – **Setting**): How does the poet’s description of his father’s place of work help explain the use his father makes of the scrapyard?

PASSAGE 5 ‘The Way We Live Now’ (page 19 – **Character**): By what different methods does the writer reveal the personalities of his characters?

PASSAGE 8 ‘The Interrogation’ (page 36 – **Action**): This poem describes a long, balanced moment in time. How does the writer convey both the sense of balance and the length of the moment?

PASSAGE 9 ‘Source Unknown’ (page 39 – **Style**): Discuss the effect of the passage’s repetitions and echoes.

PASSAGE 12 ‘Heritage’ (page 54 - **Ideas**): ‘A poem about the mysteries of Womanhood’. What are these mysteries, according to the poet?

Passage 13: The Bean Trees

Box 69

- a) That there's a kind of randomness about both her journey and her selection of a name.
- b) She has only looked at '*some maps*' (a rather vague phrase), has never been outside Kentucky before, and cannot distinguish between one town and another. That adds to the feeling that she is gambling with her future.
- c) Some of the claims ('*the Show-Me State*') appear to be meaningless; most of them are supported by standardised and romanticised pictures; the brochures themselves are flimsy things which flutter away when she throws them out of the car window (if she does); her home town, Pittman, had been given a high-sounding but empty title; and she knows how ready people are to boast without good reason. The world in her view is not a place to be trusted.
- d) It's rural, small, small-minded and basically dull.
- e) It is '*Great*' (very large) and she has to get to the other side. There is no way round it. It's empty, and flat, and utterly unpromising. It symbolises her own future.
- f) '*a great emptiness*'. The place where she stops is owned by the Cherokee tribe only '*according to the road signs*' – she is cautious about accepting the fact.
- g) He could be an Indian – a Cherokee. He seems to be honest: he hasn't overcharged her, even though she's vulnerable.
- h) They have been badly treated ('*marched*' off their lands). They are now protected, or protective – you have to qualify to be '*let in*'.
- i) She realises that its emptiness and treelessness make it a wholly unsuitable environment for the Cherokees: her ancestors have been forcibly relocated to an area where their culture could not survive. The world is not just an untrustworthy place, therefore, it is also a cruel and unfair one.
- j) '*godless*'

Box 70

- 6-8 She thinks people shouldn't be able to choose their own names and is willing to let chance do that for her.
- 9-10 She continues to believe that even when it seems that she will end up with a ridiculous name: she keeps her fingers crossed superstitiously as if it's all a matter of luck.
- 12 She even *needs* to feel that '*destiny*' is in control of her life.
- 25-26 She is prepared to put an even more important decision – about where she will spend the rest of her life – in the hands of fate (in the form of her car).
- 33 She preferred the view in Kentucky, where she could imagine something good was going to happen to her '*just over the next hill*'.
- 35-36 Her despair at the emptiness of Oklahoma arises out of the fact that, clearly, no nice surprises lie ahead.
- 39 She sees her escape from a crash as being the result of a miracle rather than her own actions.
- 44-45 She almost gives up when she finds she has had to use up much of her money, as if she has been dealt too harsh a blow.
- 53-54 The implication, even though the expression is humorous, is that people can be made to do things against their will (which of course is true).
- 55-56 One reason for bringing the Cherokees to this hopeless place (she says) was to get them to accept that what had been done to them was inevitable.

None of that is very exciting; but you have to admit it's convincing, just by its very extensiveness. Writing a commentary is largely about presenting good evidence.

Box 71

- o Her negative attitude towards herself and also towards her life so far
- o Her desire for change

- o Her fatalism (of course)
- o Her cynicism
- o Her rather bitter sense of humour
- o Her vulnerability to despair
- o Her practical sense (reflected in her knowledge about cars and the way she talks herself out of giving up)
- o Her sense of justice, or rather injustice
- o Her sense of adventure when she was a child...which perhaps still underlies her behaviour now

Box 72

- a) That she is taking a decisive step, and there may be no going back
- b) We have the sense that the woman is not at all in control of events and has no idea where she is headed – on her journey and in her life.

Box 73

She is part Cherokee, and has arrived in an area apparently owned by the Cherokees. Her resources are running low and she may have to seek help. She has grown up with strong feelings about the way the Cherokees have been treated. Her mother has taught her some skills for survival, one of them being that you can claim *'rights'* arising out of your heritage. All of these things may come together in the next stage of the narrative (but don't play guessing games beyond what the examiner asks of you).

Box 74

You probably don't need much help with this question. *'Pretty close...kept pushing it' (line 9)* are the next examples in the passage. There are a dozen or so altogether.

The Geranium

Box 75

a) The first one, surely. The poodle is presented as a warm-blooded animal with feelings, and the comparison therefore supports the personification of the geranium; the geranium and the poodle share four adjectives, which together present a clear visual picture; the poet's own feelings are involved (*'foolish'* suggest that he is making a judgement). The aster on the other hand is described only as *'wizened'*, and that word carries little emotional weight. Similes (and metaphors) are often more powerful when the two things compared are largely unlike: two flowers have too much in common for a comparison between them to add much. (Why use it, then? Fair question.)

b) A part of the man's life

c) *'wizened'* (line 4 - do the two adjectives reinforce each other?) Further reinforcement: *'dried-out'* (line 13)

d) Geranium leaves are, so this is a very accurate adjective. Sometimes description is just description; but does *'fuzzy'* carry the additional idea of 'not looked after'?

e) flower comparison. This one is different because it adds sound, and suggests that the geranium is suffering from the stiffening effects of age.

f) Admiration? Guilt?

g) Going to seed (as all flowers do towards the end of their life); and he is both unhealthy and unwholesome

h) 19 Desire to survive, and distaste for the poet's way of life

20 The ability to hear him

26 The ability to provide companionship

Gorilla, My Love

Box 76

'Hits the stand...here comes your momma...messin around with that nasty boy' etc etc. Much of the passage, in fact, would fit that description.

Box 77

- a) Is it that the writer's whole existence is as breathless as the language in which she describes it, with no time for pauses?
- b) The people in these episodes say things right out, as they are: there's no distinction between what is thought, said or written. That's one of the features of life as it is lived by the author, and she acknowledges it in her decision not to use speech marks, which would be an artificial demarcation.
- c) To emphasise the earliness of the hour and the drama of the clash between mother and daughter, which attracts a *'sleepy-eyed'* family audience.

Box 78

1. Setting

Her mother's three jobs; the laundry cart/laundromat; her friend's attempt to get money out of her.

2. Character

The friend is mightily offended by what has been written about her, but that doesn't stop her from asking for a share of the profit from the book (*lines 21-22*). The contradiction is emphasised by the humorous contrast between the exaggerated language in which she describes her hurt and the slickness of the phrase in which she may have asked for money – *'spin off half the royalties her way'*.

3. Action

It makes them seem universal: this is *always* what happens when you write autobiography, so you'd better not. It gives more point, in other words, to her argument.

4. Style

a). *'snatches'*, *'grill'*, *'the floor show'*, *'stabs you in the back'*, *'walked off with a piece of her flesh'*. (Another term you could use for some of them is 'mock heroic' – phrases from much more heavyweight pieces of writing are used to describe comparatively trivial events, for humorous effect. *'Death where is thy sting'* was a good example. *'Plundered her soul'* is another.)

b). *'plundered her soul and walked off with a piece of her flesh'* (It's alright, by the way, to use the same quotation to illustrate two different points in your commentary.)

5. Ideas

Her mother sees money as an important pre-requisite (which is why she took three jobs to support the family); but choosing your friends carefully also matters (*'that nasty boy up the block'* was something of a problem for her); and discipline (having *'your ass whipped'* at times) is necessary to preserve standards.

The writer herself regards friendship and family as all-important...and perhaps doing what comes naturally (lying, in her case – which is what fiction in a sense is; but also being honest, since her fiction is *'straight-up'* – not disguised autobiography).

Passage 16: The Getting of Wisdom

Box 79

Q1

- o Sensitive and timid (bursts into tears when told to stand up)
- o Frightened (pale, frozen – rabbit simile)
- o Unattractive (*'ugly'*)
- o Unhealthy looking (pasty face, lank hair)
- o Unkempt (long hair which *'dangled'*)
- o Stupid-looking (open mouth)
- o Pathetic and unhappy (*'miserable'* means both)
- o Guilty (*'thief'* – there seems to be no doubt about that)
- o Pitiful and weak-willed (Laura's understanding of her situation brings that out)

Q2

- o Oppressive and authoritarian (emphasises his power by signalling silence unnecessarily)
- o Enjoys frightening the children (he speaks in a threateningly *'low and impressive tone'*)
- o Dictatorial (*'Will Miss Johns stand up!'* is grammatically a question but there's an exclamation mark where the question mark should be – he's effectively turned it into an order)
- o Likes to preach to the children, who are a captive audience (he begins with *'a few introductory remarks about crime in general'*), and enjoys his own skill in speaking (*'oratory'*)
- o Lacks understanding or sympathy (his account of Annie's motives is in contrast to Laura's much kinder analysis of them)
- o Believes the worst of the children (his explanation of why Annie stole only from better-off students is harsher than Laura's)

Q3

- o Signs of heightened emotion in the four children – flushed cheeks, whispering and wondering
- o Metaphor – Laura was *'on the tiptoe of expectation'*
- o Further physical symptoms in Laura (difficulty in breathing, cold hands and feet, nervous hand gestures, dry mouth)
- o A silence which is full of foreboding (*'ominous hush'*)
- o Mr Strachey's dramatic entry (he *'strode'* to his desk)
- o Laura's intense observation (she took note of *'everything that passed'*)
- o The 'double' silence (when Mr Strachey raises his hand)
- o The downcast eyes of the children after Annie has stood up – they dare not look up again
- o The size of the gathering (*'hundreds'* of eyes watch Annie rise)
- o The rabbit and snake image
- o The movement of Laura's eyes back and forward between Annie and Mr Strachey
- o The rise and fall of Mr Strachey's oratory, and the length of his speech
- o Uncertainty about the outcome

Q4

- o Detail (reflects intensity of episode – heightened observation)
- o Emphasis on physical sensations (as in Q3; but in addition her eyes are *'burning'* with curiosity in *line 18* and she shivers in *line 27*).
- o Formal language (*'These few foregoing minutes'*, *'a few introductory remarks'*, *'the present case'* etc) emphasising the formality of the assembly and the seriousness of the incident
- o Simple language in the description of the simple girl Annie (*'a very ugly girl of fourteen'*)
- o Imagery of preying creatures (snake, octopus): the world is full of danger for children.

Other points of note

Setting

- o The shabbiness of the schoolroom (desks and ink-wells) reflecting the poverty of the education the children

are likely to be receiving

- o The lay-out of the room – the children and the teachers sit in rows, underlining the formality of the relationships and the drama of what is happening.

Character

Laura is central, and key, to the narrative. If you had been asked to write about her rather than Annie Johns you would have been expected to include some of the following details.

- o Her independence, both as a perceptive observer (once she has become '*calm*'), and as a thinker – she has her own opinions about why Annie stole and why she stole only from better-off children.
- o The phrase '*while the others only whispered and wondered, Laura...*', which sets her apart from the beginning
- o She is imaginative and sympathetic (she easily puts herself in Annie's place).
- o She is intellectually lively and enjoys the finer points of Mr Strachey's rhetoric.
- o She is interested in the issues raised by the charge against Annie, and looks at the faces of the teachers to see how far they agree with Mr Strachey.
- o She thus acts as the reader's eyes and ears and as a link between us and what is happening in the story, interpreting events and directing our attention towards their underlying significance.

Ideas

- o Adult power over children and how it can be abused
- o How people in a group respond when an individual is singled out and exposed
- o Crime and punishment
- o Social and economic inequality

(None of these is a 'big' issue in the passage: they are very much in the background of events.)

Passage 3 (again): The Moonstone

Box 80

Character

o Rosanna

Remember what we said about her when we discussed the passage's setting, in particular the connections we found between her frame of mind and the scenery. The passage goes on to amplify what we learnt about her in those parallels. She is crying – her general unhappiness has spilled over. Her handkerchief is very ordinary (*'cheap cambric' 41*) compared with the storyteller's (and there is a further touch of pathos in that detail). It is her *'past life'* which troubles her (*46*).

But she is not just a sad little creature. She:

- shows some independence (dries her own eyes)
- has done a kindness for the storyteller in sponging his coat
- speaks to him quietly and calmly (*line 46*)
- picks up very quickly on his phrase *'all sponged out'*, using it to explain graphically why she can not forget her past
- shows herself overall to be a young woman of strong feelings, sensitivity and intelligence...and we want to know more about her.

o Mr Betteredge. He:

- 'belongs' – *'our house...we...our fishing village...our neighbourhood'*
- is a man of some standing within his household and from this position of security can act with both authority (*'I never allow...'* 34) and kindness (*'I'll dry your eyes for you'* 37)
- is a thinker and an observer (*'as it seems to me'* 19)
- is careful in his descriptions almost to the point of fussiness (*'One is called the North Spit, and one the South'* 7-8)
- is also careful to be fair-minded in his judgements and allow the readers their own points of view (*'I acknowledge...I grant you...account for it as you may...It's true...It's also true...a much longer job than you think it now'*)
- is objective, honest and capable of smiling at himself (*'I am a slovenly old man'* 50)
- is experienced, a man of the world in his own way (*'six beauties given to me by my lady...my age...when you want to comfort a woman'*). You may want to think twice about whom he is referring to in 'my lady', however...
- is kindly.

All of the above make him ideally suited to the task of telling Rosanna's story – with understanding and sympathy but also with perception and perspective.

So we see again, in this analysis of **Character**, how different aspects of a piece of writing work together: we learn much about Rosanna from the episode's setting; and Mr Betteredge's personal qualities allow him to tell the story in a skilled and insightful way...as we shall now see.

Action (remember, again, that this has to do as much with how the story is told as with what the story is).

- o We noted earlier how Mr Betteredge narrows his focus on place, eventually concentrating on only *'that one'* walk. He then takes the reader *on* that walk (*'brings you out...you lose sight of them'*)
- o He thus shares with us his knowledge of the area and his feelings about the bay (*'A lonesome and horrid retreat, I can tell you'*) – all part of the process of drawing us into the story
- o He is in control of the narrative in that and other ways – he knows where it is going (*'of whom more anon'*)
- o He takes pride in the way he is shaping the tale (*'which brings us happily to our former point, and starts us fair again on our way to the sands'*)
- o He introduces Rosanna with some drama (*'I saw no sign of the girl...there she was...there she was, all alone'*)

- o He keeps the reader alongside him while he sets about dealing with Rosanna (*'you will find sitting down on the slope of the beach an easier job than you think it now'*)
- o He asks the question to which by now the reader too wants an answer (*'what are you crying about?'*)
- o The answer we are given (*'My past life'*) maintains our curiosity. Mr Betteredge seems to know what it is that troubles Rosanna, but for the moment he is withholding that information from us...and we read on.

The strength of the **Action** in this passage, then, lies not in dramatic events but in the way we are led slowly towards a greater understanding of Rosanna and her situation. And of course although we've just given Mr Betteredge the credit for that, the true storyteller is Wilkie Collins, the shadowy figure behind his narrator.

Style

- o We've talked about the passage's readers, but this piece of writing is half-way to being an oral account and we should perhaps say 'listeners' instead. Why?
 - Mainly because of the informality of Mr Betteredge's language, in particular his use of the second person (i.e. he addresses us directly – *'brings you out'* etc)
 - He also uses colloquialisms and exclamations (*'nigh...I can tell you!...her turn out...starts us fair...but there!...cleans me of my grease'*).
- o There are hints of extremes, opposition and conflict in the very diction of the passage (*'loneliest and ugliest...two spits of rock jutting out opposite each other'* – note the abrupt sound of those phrases – *'the force of the main ocean...No boat...No children...passes belief'*).
- o Mr Betteredge's authority in all matters relating to this seaside neighbourhood is conveyed by his care in naming the various places and by the nautical flavour his language has on occasion (*'spits...a great bank...the main ocean...the offing...starts us fair...the slope of the beach along'*).
- o His is authoritative in the household; but his relationship with those who work under him is friendly, his attitude to them paternal. That balance is reflected in the range of his language – its formality when he speaks of his job (*'another of the proceedings which, as head of the servants, I never allow, on principle, to pass without inquiry'*), and its simplicity and warmth in his dealings with Rosanna (*'she sat down beside me like a good girl'*).
- o Then there is the dialogue. The passage comes more alive when the characters talk to each other, as you might expect. But speech is used sparingly: it comes in right at the end, is reserved for the crux of the matter – the source of Rosanna's unhappiness. It is given strength by its naturalness (largely monosyllabic and colloquial) but more by the powerful metaphor (*'The stain is taken off...'*) Rosanna takes up to express her hurt, and the repetition of the climactic statement (*'the place shows'*). It is in this metaphor that we begin to see the deeper significance of Rosanna's connection to the bay. She comes to an ugly place to think about ugly things.

Ideas

- o The metaphor says it all. We can never wholly escape, or forget, our past. The bad things that happen to us or which we have done always leave a mark.
- o The other issues that show themselves in the passage are of little importance compared with this, which is central to the story – the story of what these bad things in Rosanna's life have been, and perhaps of how she does in the end escape them, or at least come to terms with them.
- o There are *some* other ideas, however...
 - Nature (and therefore life) as a source of threat
 - The strangeness of human behaviour
 - The importance of structure, social or otherwise, as a foundation to our lives
 - The idea of principles (and golden rules) guiding our behaviour

Passage 17: My Father

Box 81

We haven't analysed the poem in full here, we've just pointed up some of the really unusual and effective things about it.

- o The startling contrast between, on the one hand, the details which suggest that the boy admires his father (*'muscular...well-curved...groomed show man...laughing so deep...stallion'*) and, on the other, the hatred he actually feels for him.
- o The sentence-structure. Each verse is (grammatically) a sentence, but the main clause in each case, the central statement, is held back until the last two lines of the verse. The poem's vehemence can therefore take us by surprise – particularly in the first and last verses.
- o The distortion in meaning of the *'For'* which opens each verse (one of the things which makes the poem difficult to understand at first). The sense it carries is really 'By', e.g. he attracted children to him *by (lines 23-24)* giving them things to eat; but the fact that the fruit was hardly edible is one of the things the poet blames his father *for*. That technique gives much force to the list of other, more important, things he holds against his father.
- o How the poet conveys the gap between how his father is viewed in the community and how he behaves at home.
- o The fact that the sons' rage at their father is tempered by their grudging admission that he does struggle to break free of the limitations of his life: he cannot sign his name and his head is *'locked'*; but he tries to *'explain stars'*, and he is *'like a treetop pointing'* – and they must therefore acknowledge him as well as hate him.

Overall, the poem's tremendous power comes from its sense of struggle, and the tension between love and hate it conveys.

Passage 18: The Good Soldier

Box 82

Points of special note:

Setting

- o The contrast between *'that convent school'* where Nancy was possibly not happy and Branshaw Teleragh, where she was...and between the latter and the wider world where terrible things happen
- o The moral setting therefore, in which issues like gambling and more importantly colonialism and inhumanity matter, and in particular matter to Nancy.

Character

- o Relationships: in particular the narrator's strong and complex feelings towards Nancy

Action

- o The time markers
- o The shift from the general to the particular
- o The hints of impending tragedy, and the way the writer controls their flow...and the flow of other information (about, for instance, Mrs Rufford's fate). Is there, however, a touch of melodrama in the writing?

Style

- o The narrator's tentative style: he is continually adjusting what he says, as if he is reliving the events and exploring the story once more as he tells it, both discovering and perhaps trying to hide some of his feelings for Nancy (*'At any rate...I think that...I mean...she always even kissed me...I fancy...I remember...You have no idea...'* and so on).
- o The detailed description of Nancy's appearance, which conveys both her loveliness and the narrator's appreciation of it. Note particularly the use of light, shade and stillness, as if this is a painting capturing her at a moment in time.

Ideas

- o The vulnerability of beauty to the harshness of life (the discussion of lotteries is perhaps more relevant than it at first seems...)

Passage 19: A Death in the Family

Box 83

Setting

- o List 1: Details in the opening paragraph which emphasise the ordinariness of everything in Knoxville. Nothing is extreme, everything is middling. The kind of detail we're thinking about? *'little bit...mixed...sort of...fairly...middle class...'* – and that's only in *lines 2 and 3!* You may have been able to find as many as a dozen, in addition to the ones we've just noted.

Style

- o List 2: Figures of speech (tricks of language used for effect). If you haven't found examples of each of the following, look again:
 - Imagery (sound, taste, colour)
 - Simile
 - Personification
 - Onomatopoeia
 - Alliteration
 - Repetition
 - Rhyme
 - Assonance
 - Coinage (invention of a new word)

(Remember what we said earlier, however, about it not being enough just to name such things. Try to explain how they work and what they add.)

- o You will no doubt also have tackled the questions of how, and why, the straightforward prose of the opening paragraph moves into the poetry of the section beginning *line 13*; and of how, and why, the writer then actually sets the poetry out as verse in *lines 24-30*...then returns to an even simpler form of prose later in the passage. A clue? Maybe the statement in the opening sentence: *'I lived there so successfully disguised as a child'*. The writer sees, and writes, with the plain innocence of a child; but within the child there is a grown-up who perceives and records things in a more penetrating, subtle and sophisticated way.

Ideas

- o List 3: The things life is...
 - Trivial
 - Rich
 - Warm
 - Sorrowful
 - Full of significance (to an observant child)
 - Meaningless

(arising out of all of the above) Paradoxical

Box 84

This is a view of a small-town community through the eyes of a child who sees like a grown-up, and who is therefore able to record both the ordinariness and the unusualness of what he perceives around him – in light, colour and sound...and who struggles to understand his place in it all.

Passage 20: Entirely

Box 85

V1. We can never know the whole truth about anything.

V2. Life is too short, and there are too many distractions, for us to achieve complete happiness.

V3. If life were simpler it would be easier but less interesting.

Passage 31: Musée Des Beaux Arts

Box 86	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Similarities</u></p> <p>Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Both poems are set within a series of paintings of important events (historical, mythological, military, religious), mainly involving human suffering. <p>Character</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Both poems are about the ordinary men and women who find themselves on the edge of these important events. <p>Action</p> <p>The events described are similar in their significance.</p> <p>Style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Both poems consist of lists of examples. o Neither poem uses figurative language – each is a straightforward description of what is to be seen in the paintings. o Both poems rhyme. <p>Ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The general idea is the same in each poem. Every important event in the story of the world has ordinary people on its perimeter who are not directly affected by it and may barely notice what is happening o Both poems pay tribute to the skill of the painters 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Differences</u></p> <p>Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The religious events in <i>The Bystander</i> (the birth of Christ, the Last Supper) have greater prominence. o There is an additional, physical setting in <i>Musée Des Beaux Arts</i> – the art gallery where the paintings hang and through which we feel the poet is walking. <p>Character</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The poet in <i>The Bystander</i> writes as if he is this ‘Universal Person’; W H Auden is in the role of a lecturer on The Old Masters. <p>Action</p> <p>There is a little more detail in Auden’s accounts (the horse scratching its behind, the colour of Icarus’ legs).</p> <p>Style</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o The style of <i>The Bystander</i> is more intimate (Rosemary Dobson uses the first and second person verb forms). o Auden’s sentence-structure is looser and more fluent – each verse consists of one long sentence, and we have the impression that this is someone talking with ease and at length on a topic which he knows a lot about. o Auden’s rhyme-scheme is less rigid – and has the same effect as his looser sentence structure. o There is very brief dialogue in <i>The Bystander</i>, which helps to bring that episode – the climactic one – to life. <p>Ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Rosemary Dobson sees our failure to understand the importance of events as a shortcoming, or at least a missed opportunity: we are silly souls or dullards, distracted by petty detail. o Auden on the other hand recognises the reality that life must go on, and that we all have the right to decide what is ‘important’ to us and therefore worthy of our attention – the right to turn away in ‘leisurely’ fashion if we choose. o <i>The Bystander</i>, in other words, is judgemental, <i>Musée Des Beaux Arts</i> more philosophical.
<p>You will note that we have gone beyond just listing the similarities and differences, and have attempted to explain their effect. You need to do that.</p>	

Mock Examinations

Mock Examination A

1. (a) *The Shipping News*

Assessing Your Commentary

The examiner will assess your commentary in five areas:

- o Understanding of the text
- o Interpretation of the text
- o Appreciation of literary features
- o Presentation
- o Formal use of language

You'll find it difficult to assess the last two, but it's worth asking yourself:

- o Presentation: 'Have I organised my answer well and used plenty of relevant examples to support what I have said?'
- o Formal use of language: 'Have I expressed myself clearly and avoided sloppy or casual language?'

What about the first three?

Standard Level Candidates

We've made notes below (in response to each guiding question) on things you could have said to show how well you have understood, interpreted and appreciated the passage. You may wish to tick off the ideas you did include in your commentary. (Don't worry if you've missed quite a lot – our list is a full one.)

Higher Level Candidates

You can use the same notes, even though you were not given the guiding questions. Taken together, the questions cover much of what you would want to say about the passage.

As far as organising your commentary is concerned, you may have taken a simple 'word-by-word, line-by-line' approach, rather than using the *SCASI* layout. If you did, check that some larger ideas have emerged from your comments on the passage's detail.

'Explore both the house's character and its setting' (*Setting*)

It might have helped you to deal with each item (character, setting) separately (always look for ways of breaking questions down into smaller parts).

Character:

- o *gaunt* (line 1): uncared-for, weak through lack of nourishment
- o *bristled with broken wires* (line 10): mildly threatening
- o *Rusted twenty-penny nails* (line 19): weakened by time
- o *clenched* (line 36): resistant to intrusion
- o *Echo of boards dropping on rock* (lines 39-40) empty, hollow; holding nothing of interest or use
- o *mean and hopeless* (line 48): permanently, inherently miserable
- o *stovepipe...rusted through...table on ruined legs...chairs unfit* (lines 55-56): wholly without promise, beyond redemption

Setting:

- o *the bay rolled and rolled* (line 4): image of the sea as a symbol of nature's inexorable force
- o *a store at Capsize...big thing...Catspaw...off to the States* (lines 16-17): the wider, more attractive world
- o *Killick-Claw...cooking breakfasts over there. Porridge and hotcakes* (lines 29-30): as above (on a smaller scale)
- o *fishing boat* (line 30): life, and work, pass the house by
- o *cool plain of sea* (line 50): uncaring nature at large
- o *memorial photograph* (line 58): setting in time as well as place – a strong sense of the house's past (lots of similar details)
- o *rock smoothed by the sea* (line 68): the effects of time, even on rock (so no wonder it's had an effect on the house)

'What do we learn about the people in the passage from their differing reactions in and to the house?'

(Character)

Aunt:

- o *That roofline...ruler* (line 5): sees only what she wants to see.
- o *Trembling...calm down* (lines 5, 18): easily given to emotion.
- o Her past closely interlinked with the house's (lines 8-15, and later)
- o *joyfully*: child-like in her enthusiasm for what they have found.
- o *coughing and half-crying* (line 52): overcome with memories
- o *Couldn't bear to look* (line 66): pained by some of what she recalls of her own past

Quoyle:

- o *Quoyle noticed* (lots of things wrong, lines 3-4): realistic
- o *For all we know...* (lines 6-7): pessimistic, even
- o *gave no answers* (lines 34-35): like the house, he feels
- o *wrenched...forced* (lines 37-38): demands entry
- o *Huu huu huu* (line 43): creates a sense of fun and adventure, for the sake of the children
- o *testing...careful, careful* (lines 43-44): untrusting.

Sunshine and Bunny:

- o *Me too* (line 25): Sunshine wants to be part of this event, to establish a past here.
- o *Harder than necessary* (lines 25-26): Bunny resentful of something – Sunshine's attempt to stake a claim in the house?
- o *rushed from room to room...whirling* (lines 47, 49): excited.

'What contribution do the writer's comparisons make to the passage?' (Style)

There are lots of them! (You may have identified more than ten, and as many as fifteen if you have included both similes and metaphors.) Here are the first four, just to indicate what kind of comment would be appropriate in answer to the question.

- o *as an adult...shoulders* (line 2): the house as a place which once afforded protection against the violent elements (ties in with Quoyle's protectiveness towards the children).
- o *roofline...straight as a ruler* (line 5): the defiance of the house, or perhaps the defiance of the aunt in insisting that what man built has endured.
- o *notched foot-holes like steps* (lines 9-10): the idea of man having to cut a foothold in the rock in order to maintain his place.
- o *her sentences...pole* (line 11): a sense of celebration at their return.

The others, in case you've missed some (add your own comments now if need be):

- o *rocked in storms like a big rocking chair, back and forth* (line 12)
- o *Like a moaning* (line 15)
- o *The house was garlanded with wind* (line 15)
- o *Like pulling on the edge of the world* (line 20)
- o *light charged the sea like blue neon* (line 35)
- o *Light...landed on the dusty floors like strips of yellow canvas* (lines 44-41)
- o *mapped with stains* (lines 46-47)

- o *the cool plain of the sea* (line 50)
- o *sweet in his nose as spring water in a thirsty mouth* (line 51)
- o *Light dribbled like water* (line 64)
- o *foot knobs...worn to rinds* (line 67)
- o *wood as bare as skin* (line 68)

‘How adequate would *A Return to the Past* be as a title for the extract?’ (*Ideas*)

You might be expected to have agreed, generally, with the suggestion, but to have added some ideas that go beyond ‘A Return to the Past’, eg:

- o The struggle between man-made things and the elements
- o The resilience of the human spirit (the aunt’s excitement and hope)
- o Realism versus misplaced optimism
- o The implications of this visit for the family’s future

1.(b) Twice Shy

Assessing Your Commentary

The examiner will assess your commentary in five areas:

- o Understanding of the text
- o Interpretation of the text
- o Appreciation of literary features
- o Presentation
- o Formal use of language

You'll find it difficult to assess the last two, but it's worth asking yourself:

- o Presentation: 'Have I organised my answer well and used plenty of relevant examples to support what I have said?'
- o Formal use of language: 'Have I expressed myself clearly and avoided sloppy or casual language?'

What about the first three?

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Higher Level Candidates

You can use the same notes, even though you were not given the guiding questions. Taken together, the questions cover much of what you would want to say about the passage.

As far as organising your commentary is concerned, you may have taken a simple 'word-by-word, line-by-line' approach, rather than using the *SCASI* layout. If you did, check that some larger ideas have emerged from your comments on the passage's detail.

'In what ways are the details of the poem's setting important?' (*Setting*)

They are important because:

- o They convey a sense of the stillness and gentleness (*quiet river, swan*) which is also a feature of the relationship between the characters.
- o They suggest the normality in some ways of what is happening (the two characters take *the embankment walk*, which many have taken before them).
- o The mention of spring (*March*) is symbolic; so is *twilight* – the young people are out walking between day and night, and also moving from one kind of relationship into another.
- o The waters of the river run still and deep – like, proverbially, their relationship.

'Show how the poet captures the tension and uncertainty in the relationship between the two characters.' (*Character*)

In:

- o The paradoxical way the girl is dressed (stylishly *à la Bardot* and sensibly in flat shoes)
- o The personification of the traffic and the sky (both holding their breath)
- o The sense of drama evoked by the *backcloth*, as on a stage, which is *Tremulous* – note the meaning and effect of

the hawk image.

- o The suggestion, in *vacuum of need*, that powerful natural forces are at work
- o The extension (twice) of the hawk image
- o The formal diction of *Preserved classic decorum*
- o The association of *Deployed* with the idea of strategy (reinforced in *with art*)

‘Show how elements in the poem’s style help bind it together.’ (*Style*)

- o Repetition and echo (lines 3 and 27, 4 and 28, 5 and 29, 6 and 30)
- o Extended images (*hawk...hunting; juvenilia...childish talk*)
- o Rhyme and rhythm – you should have said as much as you could about the patterns they create, and how those help connect everything in the poem.

‘What does the poem’s title suggest as its central idea?’ (*The question on Ideas*)

- o The boy and girl have both had earlier and unhappy experiences with love. The poet makes use of the proverb *Once bitten, twice shy* to give this fact a central position in the poem and to explain why they are so cautious.
- o You could then have expanded your answer to show how the following two images develop that idea:
Our juvenilia...too late
Mushroom loves...hate

So how *can* you assess how well you’ve done?

Only in broad terms:

- o If what we have included above is the sort of thing you’ve said in your commentary, you’ve probably done well.
- o If you have managed to include half, or more than half, of the actual ideas we have listed, you have probably done very well.

Mock Examination B

1. (a) *The Bell Jar*

Assessing Your Commentary

The examiner will assess your commentary in five areas:

- o Understanding of the text
- o Interpretation of the text
- o Appreciation of literary features
- o Presentation
- o Formal use of language

You'll find it difficult to assess the last two, but it's worth asking yourself:

- o Presentation: 'Have I organised my answer well and used plenty of examples to support what I have said?'
- o Formal use of language: 'Have I expressed myself clearly and avoided sloppy or casual language?'

What about the first three?

Standard Level Candidates

We've made notes below (in response to each guiding question) on things you could have said to show how well you have understood, interpreted and appreciated the passage. You may wish to tick off the ideas you did include in your commentary. (Don't worry if you've missed quite a lot – our list is a full one.)

Higher Level Candidates

You can use the same notes, even though you were not given the guiding questions. Taken together, the questions cover much of what you would want to say about the passages.

As far as organising your commentary is concerned, you may have taken a simple 'word-by-word, line-by-line' approach, rather than using the *SCASI* layout. If you did, check that some larger ideas have emerged from your comments on the passage's detail.

'What do we learn from the passage about the two central characters, and about their relationship?'

(Character)

The best way of dealing with multi-part questions like this is to take each item separately (in this case, the characters first, one by one, and their relationship next). Always look for ways of breaking questions down into smaller parts.

You should base the majority of your points on details you can point to in the text. Sometimes, however, you will be able to make a general, or introductory, comment without supporting it, as in the first bullet below:

Esther:

- o Our overall impression of Esther: timid and unsure of herself.
- o *'All those people coming down from the top know how to zigzag'*: Compares herself unfavourably (but perhaps, in this case, sensibly) with others.
- o *It never occurred to me to say no*: Unquestioning.
- o *I'd have been knocked over and stuck full of skis and poles the minute I let go*: Prone to exaggerate her own weakness and vulnerability.
- o *I didn't want to make trouble*: Self-effacing, unassertive, shy.

- o *The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower*: Faces the possibility of a serious accident in a detached way. Is more realistic than Buddy? Has a self-destructive tendency?
- o *I aimed straight down*: Supports the previous suggestion.
- o *'I'm going up,' I said. 'I'm going to do it again'*: Determined, easily carried away.

Buddy:

- o Overall impression of Buddy: very confident, rather overbearing.
- o *His persistence in the face of mulishness*: Determined, but in a different way from Esther: he is in competition with other people, she with herself.
- o *persuading the most relatives... smiling and bowing and talking*: Takes satisfaction from the control he exercises over others; does that in a manipulative way.
- o *Buddy had never skied before either, but*: Very sure of his own knowledge.
- o *Buddy seemed pleased with my progress*: Is he in fact more pleased with his abilities as a teacher than with Esther's performance in itself?
- o *'Oh, you need only go half-way'*: Very quick to supply an answer which will allow him to retain control (even if it's an inadequate answer).
- o *A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face*: Having been proved wrong (about the safety of what Esther was attempting) he is pleased to be able to speak with certainty about her injuries.

Their relationship:

- o He seems to want to help her.
- o She seems to trust him, is perhaps slightly in awe of him.
- o *For the first half-hour I obediently herring-boned*: She is willing to take instructions from him, and is only driven to question them through fear (*'But Buddy...'*)
- o *'You were doing fine...until that man stepped into your path'*: Is he trying to make her feel better or shift the blame from himself?
- o *'No, you're not,' he repeated with a final smile*: The fact that she will be partially immobilised will give him even more control over her. The repetition and the smile both emphasise his satisfaction.
- o By the end of the episode she is perhaps beginning to question her reliance on him: we would expect her to ask herself the reason for his *queer* expression and his *final smile*.

Note that there may well be some overlap between your answers. There's no reason why you shouldn't use the same quotation to make two different points.

It's also acceptable to leave a question open, as in 'Is he trying to make her feel better or...?', when there's some uncertainty in the passage itself. (The uncertainty may in fact be part of the writer's technique.)

'By what means does the writer control the narrative, and give it shape?' (Action)

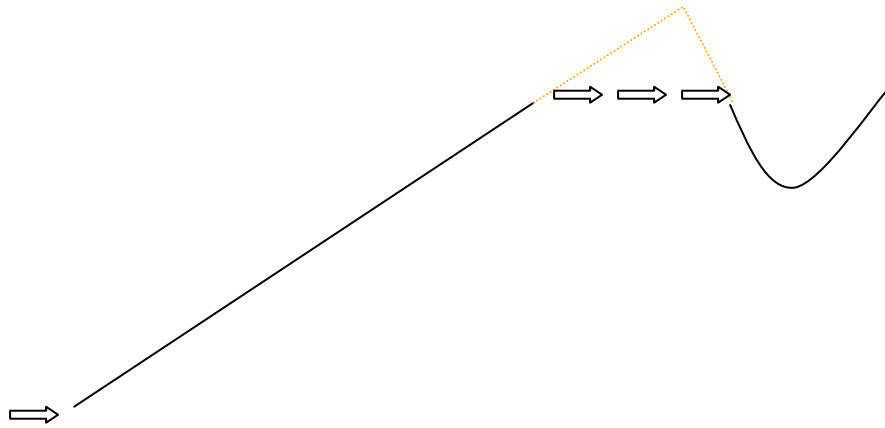
Control:

- o The first paragraph gives us a time-context (*All morning*).
- o We are then taken right back to the beginning of the episode, and four of the next five paragraphs open with order-markers (*First...Then...Next...For the first half-hour*).
- o The very short paragraphs which follow break up the narrative, each one taking us one more step towards what we increasingly feel will be a disaster.
- o Plath holds us at the top of the slope, along with her central character, for eight paragraphs, while Esther has her *second thoughts*.

Shape:

- o The start and finish points of the episode are clearly delineated (*All morning Buddy had been teaching me how to ski... 'You'll be stuck in a cast for months'*); and there's a degree of contrast between them (mobility/immobility, endeavour/failure, time periods).
- o Just as the action is about to reach its height (*I hurtled on to the still, bright point*) Plath jumps to the aftermath of Esther's fall (*My teeth crunched a gravelly mouthful*). She thus withholds the climax we have been expecting, deliberately flattening the apex of the narrative.
- o She then replaces the missing climax with a secondary one, when we learn the extent of Esther's injuries. There

is therefore a lift in intensity at the end of the passage after what has been, in its effect, an anti-climax. (You probably shouldn't include diagrams in your exam answer, but it may help you to draw one in your notes, representing the shape of the passage you're writing about. The one for this passage might look something like:



Try adding line numbers (or phrases) from the passage matching the points at which the line changes direction.

‘What contribution do the comparisons make to the passage?’ (Style)

You may have identified as many as fifteen, if you have included both similes and metaphors. Here are the first four, just to indicate what kind of comment would be appropriate in answer to the question.

- o *his stethoscope sticking out of a side pocket like part of his anatomy*: Macabre image which sets the pattern for Plath's representation of Buddy as a slightly absurd but also dangerous figure.
- o *the rough, bruising snake of a rope that slithered through them*: Mainly suggests the danger Esther faces, but with a secondary suggestion of the surprises in store for her: we would expect a snake to be smooth and slippery.
- o *His arms chopped the air like khaki windmills*: Buddy, like a windmill, is out of place on a ski slope; and once more he is seen as slightly ridiculous. The jerkiness of his movements also suggests his agitation.
- o *Buddy's arms went on waving feebly as antennae*: Buddy has been reduced to the proportions of a distant insect, trying and failing to communicate with Esther. He is now of no more help to her than the other skiers, *animalcules* (tiny creatures) no bigger than *germs*.

The other comparisons, in case you've missed some (add your own comments now if need be, but look at the context of each example first):

- o *tiny moving animalcules like germs, or bent, bright exclamation marks*
- o *that churning amphitheatre*
- o *The great, grey eye of the sky*
- o *fled like a disconsolate mosquito*
- o *formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower*
- o *he seemed of a piece with the split-rail fence behind him – numb, brown and inconsequential*
- o *receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel*
- o *near and huge, like a distracted planet.*
- o *as at the strokes of a dull godmother's wand*
- o *as if feeling for a concealed weapon*
- o *saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife.*

(It's not clear, in the last example, where the comparison begins. Does Plath see the blade of the knife as saintly and thin as well as essential? Food for discussion...)

Don't forget that the guiding question is a general one. You will be expected to examine each comparison separately, but only within the context of some overall comment such as: 'The intensity of Esther's experience is reflected in the sharpness and originality – even oddity – of the similes and metaphors she uses to express it.'

In addition, if you notice links among some of the comparisons, or the images they evoke, note that. The insect similes, for instance, indicate how the other people on the ski slope (including Buddy) and Esther's own *interior voice*, shrink to insignificance as she sets off down the slope. (The other skiers later become *black dots swarming on a plane of whiteness* – not in itself a very strong comparison, but you could point out the connection with the insect images.)

'The episode carries a significance for Esther which goes beyond the events themselves. Explore it.' (*Ideas*)

- o *Buddy borrowed a car from his own doctor, who'd had TB himself and was very understanding, and we drove off as the buzzer for walk-hour rasped along the sunless sanatorium corridors:* First hint of significant context for what becomes in Esther's mind more than a simple skiing lesson. Are she and Buddy in the sanatorium to receive treatment for an illness? Is her reckless flight down the mountain a symbolic escape, or even the expression of a death-wish?
- o *The great, grey eye of the sky looked back at me, its mist-shrouded sun focusing all the white and silent distances that poured from every point of the compass, hill after pale hill, to stall at my feet.* She feels to be at the centre of things, in a vast *amphitheatre*, where her performance over the next several minutes is going to be closely observed, as if this is a momentous occasion.
- o The two paragraphs beginning *line 60* present the rush down the slope as a journey back into Esther's own life, to its earliest point – her birth, and life since then, in reverse. It is a process of purification, as she leaves behind the years of *doubleness and smiles and compromise*. In her imagination she is about to become unborn; but the crash happens first.
- o Her wish to go back up the mountain, then, comes perhaps from a desire to complete the process of escape and purification, to become *saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife*. (Depending on how full your analysis of this simile was, in your answer to the third guiding question, you may have been able to build on it here.)

1. (b) The Woman at the Washington Zoo

Assessing Your Commentary

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What significance lies in the poem's Washington setting? (*Setting*)

- o *The saris go by me from the embassies*: Washington is a very international city, and the central character compares herself unfavourably with the exotically-dressed women she meets at the zoo.
- o *neither from my chief, /The Deputy Chief Assistant, nor his chief*: She herself is only a cog in the capital's bureaucratic machinery.
- o *dome-shadowed, withering among columns, /Wavy beneath fountains*: The distinctive architectural landmarks of Washington loom over and oppress her, causing her to dry up and lose her substance, shape and certainty.

What do we learn from the poem about the life the woman leads, and her feelings towards it? (*Character*)

You can use again some of the material you included in the previous answer, but do so only briefly, and put a slightly different slant on it if possible. Additional points:

- o *this dull null /Navy I wear to work, and wear from work*: Her life is colourless and repetitive.
- o *So /To my bed, so to my grave*: She fears it will stay that way until she dies. Neither her lonely bed nor her equally lonely grave will offer her anything more.
- o *no /Complaints, no comment*: The men in her professional life do not even take enough interest in her to criticise her; and she seems to have no men in her private life.

- o *these beings trapped /As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap*: She blames herself for creating her own cage by giving away her freedom to habit and low expectation.
- o *Aging, but without knowledge of their age, /Kept safe here, knowing not of death*: Her pain is all the greater because, unlike the animals, she knows what is happening to her.
- o *The world goes by my cage and never sees me*: She feels unacknowledged, even by the birds and the people going about their daily business around her.
- o The depth of her desperation is revealed when she calls out to the vulture, a symbol to her of natural power and sexuality, to free her from her imprisonment.

Give a detailed account of the poem's structure and development. (Action)

- o The opening stanza (one line only) establishes a dual base from which the woman will judge the quality of her own existence. (The women she sees passing by are colourful in appearance, and come from countries with romantic associations.)
- o This duality carries on into the next stanza (two lines only). The women's rich dress (*Cloth from the moon...from another planet*) gives them equal status in the woman's eyes with the most exotic animals in the zoo (*They look back at the leopard like the leopard*).
- o The short, broken line that follows introduces a long rambling stanza setting the woman's life in contrast to what has gone before. At first sight the stanza seems out of control, and it never quite becomes a sentence, as if the woman has lost her way among her feelings; but it is held together by her intense focus on her clothing (*This print of mine...this dull null /Navy*), then on the body it covers (*this serviceable /Body*) and finally, with passion, on that body as a cage in which she is trapped (*Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!*)
- o She then seems to take breath (at *line 20*) and begins again in a calmer tone, voicing her sense of injustice through the whole of the ensuing stanza. Note, however that the birds she is accusing of ignoring her grow larger in size through the five lines of the stanza (*sparrows...Pigeons...buzzards*), leading into her outcry *Vulture* at the beginning of the next stanza. So there runs through the stanza a sense that her anguish is growing once more.
- o The next stanza (lines 25-31) carries the poem towards its climax: the woman pleads with the vulture to transform itself into a sexual force (*The wild brother*) that will in turn (final stanza) transform her (*change me, change me!*) into a powerful wild creature like the 'great lioness' she has envied in line 30.

Examine the poet's use of repetition. (Style)

As we noted in relation to the third question on Passage a), your answers will be strengthened by any overarching comment you feel able to make. Here, for instance, you could include the introductory point that some of the repetition in the poem is not exactly that: phrases are echoed (with slight changes) rather than repeated – as in the opening examples below.

- o *Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet*: There is some adjustment in the second phrase, as if the woman is searching for a more powerful way to describe the saris – their cloth is from a planet more distant, and perhaps more colourful, than our pale moon.
- o *Navy I wear to work, and wear from work*: The repetition here suggest the sameness and circularity of her daily life.
- o *so /To my bed, so to my grave*: The underlying suggestion is that since she has no good (sexual) reason to remove her clothes when she arrives home from work, she sleeps in them; and the repetition of the simple '*so to my...so to my*' indicates how small a step it will be from her empty bed to her empty grave.
- o *no /Complaints, no comment*: The third (weaker) example of repetition in what is a closely-spaced string of four emphasises the negativity of her situation.
- o *My chief...his chief*: Suggests the strictness of the hierarchy of which she is a disregarded part.
- o *no sunlight dyes, no hand suffuses*: Her body, always encased in navy, is never exposed to the sun; and no male hand ever touches and *suffuses* it (causes it to redden with passion). The repetition here continues the negatives of the earlier example *no /Complaints, no comment*, and picks up again the idea that her life (like her body) is totally colourless. (Navy, for the purposes of the poem, is seen as barely a colour.)
- o *open, open!*: The repetition here and in the final example is the repetition of outcry and abandonment – to an undeniable need to escape from a sterile present into an enriched future.

- o *change me, change me!*: This climactic repetition forcefully expresses the woman's final and paradoxical plea. She asks that the vulture become human and free her from her humanity so that she can become an animal, perhaps *the great lioness* she has envied earlier. She will then be able herself, like the women in the opening stanza, to *look back at the leopard like the leopard*.

(Second overarching comment): The poem's repetitions are not just superficial devices of language, but act integrally to give weight to its central themes.

So how *can* you assess how well you've done?

Only in broad terms:

- o If what we have included above is the sort of thing you've said in your commentary, you've probably done well.
- o If you have managed to include half, or more than half, of the actual ideas we have listed, you have probably done very well.

Extremely Short Passages for Extremely Quick Practice: Notes for Comparison

A

The lights burn low in the barber-shop
And the shades are drawn with care
To hide the haughty barbers
Cutting each other's hair.

(*The Tales the Barbers Tell*, Morris Bishop)

- S: A barber shop! Time of day? Details of setting (first two lines) contributing to *mood*.
C: What single word in the verse has the most impact (i.e. throws the most light on the situation)? Haughty? Explain why.
A: Something sneaky being done
S: Alliteration of '*lights...low*' and '*hide...haughty...hair*'; deliberate rhythm suggesting the barbers' careful planning
I: The power of professional pride, and the implication that even barbers are human: it's the fact that the poet feels the need to make that point, to give away the barbers' terrible secret, which is most significant.

B

Proximity was their support; like walls after an earthquake they could fall no further for they had fallen against each other. (*Friends and Relations*, Elizabeth Bowen)

- S: A marriage?
C: Man and wife?
A: The impact of a personal disaster?
S: Brief statement in abstract terms which is then 'translated' and given concrete form by a simile; alliteration of '*fall...further*' emphasising the finality of their collapse; assonance of '*further...other*' emphasising the finality of their coming together
I: The importance of closeness between people; the idea that there is a level below which we will not fall (but perhaps only if we have support)

C

Father declared he was going to buy a new plot in the cemetery, a plot all for himself. 'And I'll buy one on a corner,' he added triumphantly, 'where I can get out.'" Mother looked at him, startled but admiring, and whispered to me, 'I almost believe he could do it.' (*Life with Father*, Clarence Day)

You've probably asked yourself, and answered, these questions:

- What's the significance of '*declared*'?
- Why '*all for himself*'?
- What is Father triumphant about?
- Why is Mother startled?
- Why does she whisper?

D

Pale Ebenezer thought it wrong to fight
But Roaring Bill (who killed him) thought it right.

(*Epigrams, The Pacifist*, Hilaire Belloc)

- S: Philosophical: two opposing beliefs
C: Two different men holding to different ideas; the contrast between their names and between 'Pale' and 'Roaring' (is 'Roaring' part of Bill's name, in fact? What difference does that make? Does it relate him to the community and its perception of him?)
A: A simple death, or at least a death simply noted
S: The way the single most important fact is included in parenthesis, almost as an aside; conciseness, pithiness – the marks of an epigram.
I: Even when beliefs are held in balance, there can be outcomes, and they may be permanent; some beliefs are dangerous

E

I love to feel events overlapping each other, crawling over one another like wet crabs in a basket. (*Balthazar*, Laurence Durrell)

Similar in structure and effect to the *Friends and Relations* extract (B), except that the topic ('events') is given a physical presence in the word 'overlapping', which prepares us for the simile. What does the wetness of the crabs suggest? What other qualities of life's events are pointed up by the simile?

F

There was so much sculpture that I should certainly have missed the indecencies if Major Pomby had not been considerate enough to mention them. (*Hindoo Holiday*, J R Ackerley)

- S: Historical and exotic Eastern location in colonial times
C: Someone 'in the know' about the indecent statues (Major P) and a naïve visitor
A: Major P keen that the visitor shouldn't miss what for him are the significant bits of sculpture
S: Ambiguity of 'considerate' – is the visitor pleased to have had the rude bits pointed out to him (her?); weakness of 'mention', as if Major P has been cautiously off-hand
I: The subtleties in play when two people who don't know each other find themselves on morally questionable ground

G

I suppose I shall subscribe to hospitals. That's how people seem to give to the poor. I suppose the poor are always sick. They would be, if you think. (*A Family and a Fortune*, Ivy Compton-Burnett)

- S: Middle-class family
C: Man or woman who has just acquired money (it's alright to take clues from the name of the book...)
A: Discussion about what to do with the money
S: Vagueness, as if this is all a new experience ('I suppose...seem...suppose...would be') and lack of urgency suggested by the same phrases; differentiation between 'people' and 'the poor', as if they're two separate species; short sentences, indicating the slowness and jerkiness of this thinking process.
I: The ignorance in some parts of the community of the lives of people in other parts. The condescending stupidity of the speaker (Character again), who does not realise the significance of his or her phrase 'if you think'. If you think about what? The conditions the poor live in? Maybe the money should be used to do something about that.

H

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious (Mary Poppins, R M and R R Sherman)

Forget what you may remember of the song (if you can). Does the word in itself convey a feeling of happiness? If so, how? (Do the positive associations of 'super' carry us all the way through to the end? Does 'docious' remind us of 'delicious'? Why not 'ferocious'? Maybe the syllable 'al' helps. What about the jaunty rhythm?)

Perhaps you think the sound of it is really just atrocious.

Try making up some long nonsense words of your own, designing them for particular effect. You probably haven't been asked to do by a teacher that since you were much younger...

I

It's going to give me a little vista which will be rather exciting, I think! I shall see more sky – which is always desirable. I hope I shall see the horizon – which would be very jolly!...Then, I shall have sense of space – of distance...A little glimpse into the beyond, as it were. (*Showing the Garden*, Ruth Draper)

S: Near or on a plot of land next to a house

C: A woman (or man) with plans

A: Outline of future action

S: The inadequacy of the speaker's vocabulary to express this reaching out towards the world the passage describes – she borrows a foreign word ('vista', italicised to show that she is not wholly comfortable with it) and qualifies it with the paradoxical 'little' which effectively negates it. 'Jolly' is a rather poor word, is it not, to describe a view of the horizon? There are other qualifiers – words which limit the meaning of the words to which they are attached ('rather' and 'little' again) and which indicate her uncertainty, as do 'I think!', 'I hope' and 'as it were'. There are also emphatic, terms, however, which counteract this effect and convey a sense of naïve enthusiasm ('I shall...always...very...I shall'). So as in the extract from *A Family and a Fortune* above we have a character thinking her way into a new experience and using words tentatively; but the mood here is much more positive.

I: How the environment we create for ourselves (in so far as we can do so) can symbolise our outlook on life, and can change as our outlook changes. Overall we are given a glimpse of someone clearing a way through to life outside their immediate surroundings, without being wholly certain as to what they will find there.

J

The most formidable headmaster I ever knew was a headmistress...She had X-ray pince-nez and that undivided bust popularised by Queen Mary. I think she was God in drag. (Nancy Banks-Smith in *The Guardian* newspaper)

S: A school, sometime well in the writer's past

C: Grown-up woman and a head teacher from her childhood

A: Reminiscence about an early experience

S: Paradox and ambiguity (headmaster/headmistress; technologically advance X-ray/old-fashioned pince-nez, with the contrast emphasised in the rhyme; masculinity/femininity in the 'undivided' bust and the outrageous and irreverend final image); the force of 'that undivided bust', including the reader in an acknowledgement of what almost amounts to a national icon from the past

I: The perceptiveness of the young, who see the inappropriateness of some of the labels we give ourselves

K

When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray
What charm can soothe her melancholy?
What art can wash her tears away?

(Woman, Oliver Goldsmith, 1728-1774)

This extract begins with two generalisations/assumptions:

- o All women.....(are lovely – in a moral or spiritual sense, we guess)
- o All men.....(are disloyal)

Does the fact that the generalisations may not always hold true weaken the poem since we may feel that it is not founded in the reality we know?

'*Stoops*' describes a physical movement. What does the word imply in this context?

'*Folly*' suggests what about women, in addition to their 'loveliness'?

The third and fourth lines are rhetorical questions of the most extreme kind, since not only is no answer expected, there is no answer, according to the poet, that can be given. Does this extreme position weaken the poem further?

What's the link between '*charm*' and '*art*'? (Taken together, they suggest *supernatural* charm and *magic* art.) How does that help the poet make his point? (Since woman's loveliness and man's disloyalty are universals of nature, there is no power, even supernatural power, sufficient to interfere with the consequences of woman's folly – so the poet's argument goes.)

Is the verse, overall, sympathetic to women?

L

To be buried in lava and not turn a hair, it is then a man shows what stuff he is made of. To know he can do better next time, unrecognizably better, and that there is no next time, and that it is a blessing there is not, there is a thought to be going on with. (*Malone Dies*, Samuel Beckett)

S: Anywhere

C: A man who is pondering the paradoxes of life

A: None, appropriately

S: The way the sentences unfold in a straight line, with each new segment offering a contrasting consideration: blunt and frightening image of the opening phrase > easy colloquialism of '*not turn a hair...stuff he is made of*' > '*next time*' (magnified by '*unrecognizably*') > '*no next time*' > '*blessing there is not*' > the open-ended '*to be going on with*', as if there is more unfolding to do as the writer does more thinking. The two '*ands*' are the hinges of the second sentence. The grammatical awkwardness of the whole suggests the thinker's struggle.

I: The search for an understanding of life goes on...

M

Some have too much, yet still do crave;
I little have, and seek no more.
They are but poor, though much they have,
And I am rich with little store:
They poor, I rich; they beg, I give;
They lack, I leave; they pine, I live.

(*My Mind to Me a Kingdom Is* Sir Edward Dyer, 1550?-1607)

You've probably noted the simplicity of the language (mainly monosyllables), appropriate to the simplicity of the poet's life as he describes it. In spite of its simplicity, however, it creates a complex music. There are three groups of words linked by their sound. List them (here's the first one in each group, with the number of other words you should be able to add):

- o 'much' (a further three):
- o 'crave' (a further five):
- o 'more' (a further three):

The music intensifies towards the end of the verse, as a result of:

- o The accumulation of echoes
- o The compression of the language (*'They poor, I rich'*)

N

I've danced with a man, who's danced with a girl, who's danced with the Prince of Wales. (*Picnic*, Herbert Farjeon).

The repetitive structure of each of the phrases, each one representing a step backwards from the topic of the sentence, as if we're pulling open a telescope and looking at the Prince of Wales through the wrong end. Note the rhythm, which matches this suggestion of mechanical extension (compare the unfolding of the passage from *Malone Dies*). This is satirical writing. What is being satirised?

O

Who ever heard of a clockwork orange?...The attempt to impose upon man, a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against this I raise my sword-pen. (*The Clockwork Orange*, Anthony Burgess)

- S: A man alone at his desk penning a protest?
C: A man of strong feelings, certainly
A: Threat of violence, at least verbal
S: Oratorical devices (i.e. tricks of language appropriate to public speaking): opening rhetorical question; pause indicated by '...'; the simple and powerful orange symbol given an extra dimension by the onomatopoeia of 'ooze juicily'; the addition of weightiness to the prose by the slight archaism 'at the last' (as opposed to just 'at last' – is it an abbreviation of 'at the last trumpet', i.e. 'on the Day of Judgement?'); the personalising of the image of God; repetition as the speaker returns ('to attempt to impose, I say') to the central thrust of his sentence; the final symbol (with its proverbial reference) and symbolic gesture.
I: We must not treat men as if they were machines.

P

Between the curtains the autumnal sunlight
With lean and yellow fingers points me out;
The clock moans: Why? Why? Why?
(*Living*, Harold Munro)

- S: A bedroom?
C: Someone who wants to say in bed?
A: The struggle to start the day
S: Personification x 2: there are other characters in this drama
I: One of life's problems

Other questions you may have asked:

- Why are the curtains drawn?
- Why is there a gap between them?
- Why has the poet chosen '*autumnal*' sunlight?
- Why, then, '*lean and yellow*' fingers?
- Why '*points me out*' (remember 'drama' above)
- Clocks don't moan, they tick. So?

Q

The oily water on the river mirrored the red sky, sun sunk on top
of final Frisco peaks, no fish in that stream, no hermit in those
mounts, just ourselves rheumy-eyed and hung-over like old
bums on the river-bank, tired and wily.
(*Sunflower Sutra*, Allen Ginsberg)

- S: Setting as a reflection of mood: what you notice is what you feel (oily water, red sky, things missing)
C: Two (?) disillusioned men. What has tired them? Why are they still, however, '*wily*'?
A: The night after the night before
S: Diction - Why '*on top of*' rather than 'behind'? Meaning and effect of '*final*'? The negatives ('*no...no...just*'). Why call the river a '*stream*'? Why call mountains '*mounts*'?
I: Life's sordidness? It's the missing things that are significant – the fish from the river and the hermit (symbol of?) from the mountains

R

Under the window where I often found her
Sitting as huge as Asia, seismic with laughter,
Gin and chicken helpless in her Irish hand
(*Sonnet to My Mother*, George Barker)

- S: What does the fact that his mother is sitting under the window suggest about her?
C: Is this a tribute? To which of her qualities? The significance of '*helpless*'?
A: The relevance of '*often*'
S: One simile and one metaphor (find them and remind yourself of the difference); how one leads into the other
I: How the idiosyncracies of someone we love can make us love them more.