

Cambridge IGCSE™ Literature in English 0475

Paper 4 Unseen Poetry – Using candidate responses in the classroom

Writing a personal response

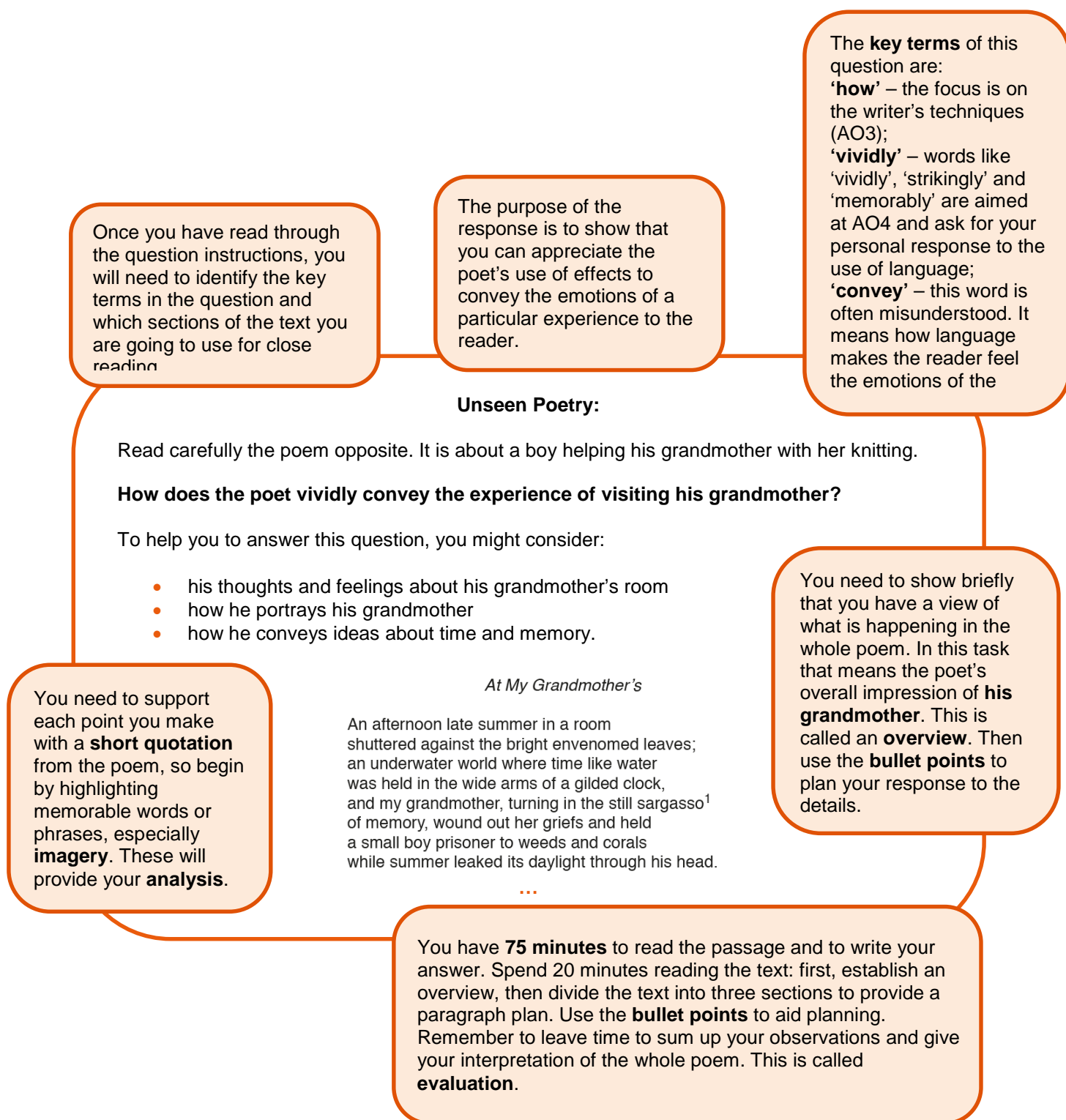
- The purpose of AO4 (Personal response) is to show that you can produce your own interpretation of a poem or prose passage based only on the text provided. You base your interpretation on the evidence of language (using quotation) and thinking about its effect on the reader.
- There are three stages to a personal response: overview, close reading and conclusion
- Thinking about personal response will help candidates to plan effective unseen responses and ensure that comments on language develop an interpretation of the text.
- There is no 'right' answer to a response to poetry, but interpretations are more convincing if based on careful close reading, so AO3 and AO4 are linked.
- The lesson will help candidates to plan their own personal response.

Tips for learners

- Read the **question and the rubric** carefully in order to ensure you don't make mistakes about the meaning of the text.
- Read the poem at least twice before beginning your **overview**, which gives your first impressions of what the poem is about.
- **First impressions** are important, so make sure you draft your first statement carefully and use it to tell your reader the impression the poem made on you. This will also make a good first impression on your reader, as it shows you have planned your response carefully.
- **Use the bullet points**, as these are there to help you to structure your response: you will want to divide the text into about three sections.
- As you plan your essay, highlight unusual or memorable words or phrases. Look out especially for unusual imagery. **Close reading** will help you to **develop** your personal response. Personal response is closely linked to response to language. Always think about the effect on the **reader**. This is your **analysis**.
- Leave time to come to a **conclusion**. You can change and deepen your interpretation on the basis of your close reading of its details. Your final thoughts should sum up the effect the poet might have wanted the poem to have on the reader: we call this the poem's **mood**. This is your **evaluation**.

Examination question

We have annotated the question below with some **guidance** for candidates to help them prepare their answer and encourage them to focus on what the question is asking for. This information is not given to candidates in the examination.



This question is from the Cambridge IGCSE Literature (English) 0486 March 2019 Paper 42 Question 1. For the poem go to School Support Hub www.cambridgeinternational.org/support

Suggested lesson activities

Assessment objectives

AO1: Show detailed knowledge of the content of literary drama texts in the supported by reference to the text

AO2: Understand the meanings of literary texts and their contexts, and explore texts beyond surface meanings to show deeper awareness of ideas and attitudes.

AO3: Recognise and appreciate ways in which writers use language, structure and form to create and shape meanings and effects.

AO4: Communicate a sensitive and informed personal response to literary texts.

Learning objectives

- To develop understanding of personal response (AO4) to unseen poetry
- To practise planning and drafting an overview
- To develop close reading skills and link them to interpretation
- To practise evaluation skills in coming to a conclusion.

Starter:

Introduce the idea of 'first impressions': what are the first things we notice about a person?

Learners in pairs brainstorm the idea of visiting an older person when they were a child. What did that person look like? What do they remember about their room? What activities did they do together? What kind of memories did they share? Was there anything sad or uncomfortable about the experience? What mood were you in after the experience?

Why might it be beneficial to plan your answer before you begin? Look at the plan in the candidate response. What else could the candidate have include to help them?

Ask learners to create their own essay plan for this exam question.

Development:

Ask your learners to look at the tips for learners and create a checklist of what they should include in their answers. What sort of things are the examiners looking for? What is included in the best answers? How can they use this in their planning?

Main task:

As a class, look at the example candidate response. Learners should use the examiner comments to improve the candidate's original answer.

Look at examiner comment seven together. Give learners the quote '*street of thoughts*' and ask them to consider the effect and the feelings conveyed. As a class, extend the section of the candidate response referred to by examiner comment seven to improve it.

Learners should read the candidate response and examiner comments and use the questions posed by the examiner to improve each of the paragraphs. They should focus on the sections referred to by the following examiner comments: 14, 16, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24 and 25.

Suggested lesson activities

Plenary:

Ask learners to share as a class their improved paragraphs.

Looking at the section on tips for learners, which of these has the candidate response met and which do they need to improve on?

Example candidate response and examiner comments

Example Candidate Response – high

1

English (Unseen)

Planning

A boy's experience with his grandmother while he longs to go out & play

Humorous poem
Hyperbole

2

3 stanza

23 line poem

No particular
rhyme
scheme

Underwater
trapped
Sargasso
weeds
corals

Examiner comments

1 The candidate has taken time to plan their response. There is a factual overview.

2 The candidate is beginning to think about the overall tone and effect of language, by mentioning humour and hyperbole.

3 These notes make observations about the structure of the poem and some unusual words or images.

4 There is an initial overview which addresses both language (hyperbole/extended metaphor - AO3) and its effect on the reader (AO4). The candidate at first finds the tone humorous, perhaps missing some darker elements.

3

The poem 'at my grandmothers' is a first person narrative poem written by a child who describes his experience with helping his grandmother in knitting. The poem is a humourous one as the poet uses an extended hyperbole to describe the experience. **4** Things that would look very normal to us are shown in a way using

Example Candidate Response – high

metaphors, that the reader feels that the child is dreading the experience. This sets the mood of the poem to humour and empathy. **5**

The poem is a 23-line poem and is divided into three stanzas. The poem is written in iambic pentameter but does not have any particular rhyme scheme. In the first stanza of the poem, the poet has created a lexical field of words that relate to the sea which include words like 'underwater', 'Sargasso', 'weeds', 'corals'. **6**

These words are also found in the second and third stanza. The enjambment that is present in the whole of line 14 to 22 represent the stream of thoughts and feeling that the boy feels while he helps his grandmother in knitting. **7**

The tone of the poem is that of fear, despair and impatience. **8**

In line 3, when the poet describes his grandmother's house as 'an underwater world' shows that he feels suffocated being there. The reference to being underwater means that just as there is darkness and suffocation underwater, **9** the poet is feeling the same. His first reference to water begins here. Series of words that compare his experience with sea term. **10** The simile that has been used in line 3 and 4 'like water was held in the wide arms of a gilded clock' show that the poet feels time is being determined by the clock in grandmother's room. **11** It is as though the clock is fate for him **12** as if it will decide when he can run away from this despair. In line 7 the poet describes himself as being a 'small boy prisoner to weeds and corals'. The line is amusing as the being a prisoner to weeds and corals could also mean that he is getting tangled up in the thread that is being used for knitting. **13**

The second interpretation could also be that the poet has continued his previous metaphor of his grandmother's house being an underwater world. **14**

In the second stanza, the poet describes his feeling about his grandmother's room. The Oxymoron used the line 9, 'screeching

Examiner comments

5 Now the overview is deepened, as there is dread as well as humour. There is appreciation that 'mood' (AO4) depends on empathy and identifying the feelings of the poetic voice ('the poet').

6 This paragraph addresses form and structure, and highlights some unusual vocabulary, spotting patterns of language. (lexical field - AO3)

7 This AO3 comment on enjambment - 'stream of thoughts' – is especially good but would be even better if linked to its effect and the feelings conveyed. (AO4)

8 The darker tones of the poem emerge here. (AO4)

9 Deeper understanding comes from engagement from how the poet's imagery (AO3) conveys his feelings.

10 By identifying effects of language, the candidate is able to see patterns of imagery and the feelings implied.

11 This is a very strong observation and moves beyond the literal description of the grandmother's room to what the poet feels about time standing still there.

12 This is a well-introduced personal response. 'It is though' is a phrase to show what the poem 'suggests' or 'could' mean. Be adventurous: there is no need to be too definite.

13 This thoughtfully links the poet's imagery of getting tangled up in the thread (AO3) to a less literal reading about time and fate (helped by the third bullet point).

14 This point could be developed further. Why might the poet feel

Example Candidate Response – high

soundless' effects the auditory sense of the reader as they can also feel the pain of screeching so loud **15** that it turns soundless as it keeps on continuing. In line 11, we understand that the poet is actually talking about collections of butterflies and a taxidermied parrot or just a replica of a parrot. **16** When he mentions that butterflies are pinned like jewels are pinned against a sable cloak show that his grandmother might be someone who collects such things. **17** In line 8, the poet has use personifications to show his longness to go out and play in the sun as he says that 'summer leaked its daylight through his head'. The reference to time in line 13 and line 4 show that the boy feels that he has been helping his grandmother for a lot of time. **18**

The last stanza of the poem is a powerful one. The poet describes his grandmother's fingers with words that even make the reader feel the same senses as the author. **19** In line 14, 'bejewelled fingers' refers to the jewellery that his grandmother wears and the poet has used visual imagery in order to describe this to the readers. **20** Line 22 and 23 describe the deep thoughts that the poet is having. He says that children will come to the place that once he sat at and felt the same pain that he felt. **21** 'Wide Ache of his arms' induce tactical imagery in the reader and even they begin to feel the pain that the poet is feeling. **22** The last line of the poem shows that the poet feels that his grandmother's old grey hands are slowly killing time by 'winding out his blood'. **23**

Line 5 and line 6 mention that the poets grandmother is 'turning in the still sargasso of memory, wound out her griefs...'. The lines are important as they support the theme of memory in the poem. **24** The poet feels that his grandmother uses knitting as a way of wounding the pain that she has felt **25** in the past and recalls this using her memory. The poet has thus vividly conveyed his experience with his grandmother. **26**

Examiner comments

that the house is an 'underwater world' or himself a 'prisoner' in a place where time is determined? Is the poem's tone really 'humorous'?

15 Effective link of AO3 to AO4. Thinks about the effect of unusual language on the reader.

16 Good AO2, with understanding that the grandmother is surrounded by stuffed and dead things. Could this be extended further? What will the boy feel? Poets often compare themselves to birds, as both sing...

17 Something more sinister about this?

18 These comments are rather bland. Is there more to say about the emotions of 'leaked' and 'through his head'? What are the emotions of the poet?

19 This is a very well-structured response, appreciating the need to develop a personal response.

20 This needs to be extended as the poet says the fingers are 'pinned at her throat'. Why does the poet use such violent language?

21 The candidate realises the need to go deeper, but is the time sequence understood? The poet is imagining children from the past (the ones in 'gilded frames'. What does this suggest about his own future?

22 The 'pain' of the poet is realised, but not all of its deeper causes. Why does he feel trapped by time, as well as her knitting, when he sees his grandmother?

23 This very disturbing image needs more comment. (AO3 linked to AO4)

Example Candidate Response – high	Examiner comments
	<p>24 The candidate returns to the poem's extended metaphor of the still, stagnant and sinister sea of memories, referring to 'griefs'. At this point, the interpretation needs to be deepened by understanding of why memories involving the grandmother might be disturbing or sad.</p> <p>25 This provides interpretation of the grandmother's pain and sees the knitting as a kind of displacement activity. But what about the poet's own feelings and how they make the 'experience a disturbing one?</p> <p>26 This is a detailed and critical response, which is well-planned, and explores language sensitively and in some detail. Well-selected reference is well integrated. To be a 'perceptive and convincing' personal response (AO4), the interpretation needs to be pushed further into deeper (and darker) non-literal areas. This could be achieved through a closer look at what is implied by the choice of words and images, especially the idea of being trapped in a world where time and emotions stand still.</p>

How the candidate could improve their answer

This is a strong answer with a good plan, but it does not quite capture the mood of the poem, partly because the candidate initially reads its tone as 'humorous'. This comes from initially focusing on the language of the first stanza (hyperbole/'underwater world'/ 'still sargasso') and not enough on the second two stanzas, both of which begin with the word 'feared'.

The answer improves when it begins to develop its first impressions through a closer reading of the final (and longest) stanza, with its references to painful experiences ('pinned'/ 'feared'/ 'ghosts'/ 'drowned'/ 'ache'/ 'blood'). More could be made of the experience of the room full of dead things, and the experience of feeling trapped while bound up in the grandmother's knitting, unable to escape from her and his own fate, shuttered away from the sunlight.

It is quite acceptable to re-evaluate a personal response, changing first impressions as a result of close reading. The candidate initially thinks the tone of the poem is humorous and then switches to 'fear, despair and impatience'. The perception that the clock is fate is especially perceptive. However, others make more of

the image of being tangled up in the grandmother's thread, interpreting it as a metaphor for the poet's fate, and not as humorous or exaggerated but disturbing. This fits better with the poem's last line 'watched the old grey hands wind out his blood'.

The image of the children in 'gilded frames' on the wall is not wholly understood, so the relationship of the poet in the present to children in the past, and implicitly therefore to his own future is not fully grasped, although by the end of the essay the candidate realises that this is a poem about the danger of being trapped in your memories.

The essay plan should cover the whole of the text.

Common mistakes

This is an unusual, dark and challenging poem: many candidates prefer to answer on prose, but it is good to practise with challenging texts.

Critical understanding of the text needs to be supported by comment on what the text means to candidates as reader, thus showing a personal response and evaluation.

Most elegies for relatives are more affectionate and respectful than this. Candidates need to ask what it was that the boy disliked about the experience of visiting his grandmother.

Some candidates find it hard to appreciate that the boy is uncomfortable: many appreciate that he would rather be outside, but fewer that he aches when holding up the wool, and is afraid of time standing still. Not all candidates are aware of the associations of 'still sargasso' as a stagnant place where you might get lost (the Bermuda Triangle) or the image of the stuffed bird and pinned butterflies. Linked to the ideas of time standing still, ghosts of children from the past trapped in their photograph frames and the poet himself trapped in the skein of wool while the grandmother is knitting, there is a strong image of being imprisoned by time, fate and memory.

Answers are most successful when patterns of words and images describing being underwater or drowned, time and memories are linked together, so that the direction of the whole poem is understood.

Many candidates misunderstand the form of the poem and call it 'free verse'. It is in fact in 'blank verse' like Shakespeare, and the rhythms and enjambment of the poem contribute to the boy's sense of being trapped and unable to escape.

A few candidates want to construct their own, usually violent, narrative about the grandmother, without basing them securely on the evidence of the text. This is not a valid personal response. The strongest answers realise that the boy is really trapped by his own thoughts, rather than the grandmother.

Useful resources

- You can find the **syllabus** and the most recent **past papers** at the Cambridge International public website www.cambridgeinternational.org/programmes-and-qualifications/english-literature-0475/
- A list of **endorsed textbooks** and digital resources can be found in the [Resource centre](#)
- The [School Support Hub](#) provides teachers with a wide range of practical resources, detailed guidance and innovative training and professional development so that you can give your learners the best possible preparation for Cambridge IGCSE.
- Look out for the [Introduction to Learner Guides](#) and [Learner Revision Guide](#) video

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