

Cambridge O Level Literature in English 2010

Paper 1 Poetry and Prose – Using candidate responses in the classroom

Songs of Ourselves Volume 2 – Writing a response to a poetry question

- The purpose of the response is to make an informed, sensitive (AO4) and supported response to the question that shows a detailed knowledge (AO1) and understanding (AO2) of the poem and a critical engagement with the poet's methods (AO3).
- The candidate will use relevant short quotations from the poem (AO1) as evidence for each point they make.
- The candidate will use the quotations to support an informed personal response to the poet's methods: the ways in which Hopkins uses language, structure and form (AO3) to vividly convey thoughts and feelings about the bird in this poem.

Tips for learners

- Read the question and highlight the **key terms** that you need to focus on.
- Read the poem carefully and **highlight relevant parts** that you might use in your answer. Do not highlight too much as you should use short quotations to address precisely the points you make.
- Remember you cannot write about everything in 45 minutes. **Be selective**, but make sure you have comments to make about the beginning and ending of the poem as well as key parts in between.
- Keep **focused on the question**. You are not expected to show everything you know about the poem.
- **Support** your points **with quotations** – the poem is given to you in the paper.
- **Comment precisely** on the ways in which the poet achieves his effects in vividly conveying thoughts and feelings about the bird.
- Aim to make at least **10 points** so that you can develop a convincing response to the question.
- Remember that the assessment objectives are not assessed separately, so try to **address all of them in each point** you make.

Examination question

We have annotated the question below with some **guidance** for learners 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.

Once you have read through the question instructions, you will need to identify the **key terms** in the question and which sections of the poem you are going to use.

The purpose of the response is to show that you can develop and sustain a **critical engagement** with both the poem and the question.

The **key terms** of this question are 'How?' and 'vividly convey'.

SONGS OF OURSELVES VOLUME 2, Part 2

Remember to support your ideas with details from the writing.

Read this poem carefully, and then answer the question that follows it:

The Caged Skylark

As a dare-gale skylark scantd in a dull cage,
Man's mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells -

...

How does Hopkins vividly convey thoughts and feelings about the bird in *The Caged Skylark*?

You need to support each point you make with a **short quotation** from the poem.

You have **45 minutes** to read the poem and to write your answer: it needs to be long enough and detailed enough to show that you have a clear understanding of the poem and to show a developed critical response to the question.

You need to show briefly that you understand the **context** of the poem: ideas of freedom and imprisonment.

This question is from the Cambridge IGCSE Literature (English) 0486 past paper March 2019 Paper 12 Question 3. For the poem, go to the [School Support Hub](#)

Suggested lesson activities

Assessment objectives

AO1: Show detailed knowledge of the content of literary poetry texts, 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 learn to focus on the key words of the question
- To take responsibility for own learning
- To develop informed personal responses to poetry

Starter:

As a class look at the tips for learners and the examination question guidance. Learners could use this information to create a flow chart of what they need to do when they encounter a poetry question in the exam. For example:

1. Highlight the key terms.
2. Go through the poem and highlight the parts that relate to the question, etc.

Development:

Remind your learners of the importance of linking their answer back to the question. Look at examiner comment three and the part of the candidate answer this refers to. Using their flow charts, ask your learners to suggest what could be improved – which parts of the tips for learners and examination question guidance have not been followed?

Extension task (optional):

Ask learners to rewrite this part of the candidate response to include a more detailed consideration of the effect that the structure of the poem has and stronger links back to the question.

Main task:

Look at examiner comment seven and the relevant part of the candidate response as a class. In pairs, learners look at the quote '*dwells in its own cage*' and the phrase '*bone house*' and consider the effects of these in greater detail, as the candidate response is quite generic.

Learners attempt to write their own paragraph focusing on the quote and phrase above, ensuring that they write in depth about the effect of these in relation to the question.

This could be developed further by looking at examiner comment eleven and the relevant part of the candidate answer. In this part of the response the candidate has spotted key features but has not considered their effect. Give your learners the alliteration '*perch or poor*' and '*droop deadly*' the metaphor '*aloft on turf or perch*' and the sibilance '*sing, sometimes*', '*sweetest sweetest spells*' and ask them to comment in detail on their effect, using alternative interpretations in their response to fully explore the effect. They can use the candidate response as a starting point if they need to, and then rewrite this to develop their own ideas on the meanings conveyed by the poetic techniques.

Suggested lesson activities

This could be developed further as learners could then answer the question posed in examiner comment twelve, this would consolidate the skill of writing in depth on a short piece of text.

Extension task:

As a class look at the how the candidate could improve this section. Mind map how the comparison make you feel about the bird stronger?

Explore the quotes 'sweet fowl' and 'song fowl' emphasise the good nature of the bird.

Using whole class discussion, learners should be able to generate a range of alternative interpretations which will allow them to consider the effects of the poem in greater depth.

Plenary:

Having created a flow chart at the start of the lesson, learners should now create a what not to do list – they can then use this to check their answers against when practising examination questions.

Example candidate response and examiner comments

Example Candidate Response – high	Examiner comments
<p>'The Caged Skylark' is a poem that centers around a bird that is caged in a prison. The bird however, is actually only a metaphor for man's soul, which Hopkins says lies in its own prison. The poem is about the bird and the soul's freedom that can only come when free from its prison. 1 It is an emotive powerful poem that conveys its strong message through a number of Hopkins' techniques.</p> <p>The structure of the poem is the first way that Hopkins vividly conveys thoughts and feelings about the bird. 2 The poem is actually a Petrarchan Sonnet with 14 lines, the first eight being an octave and the last six being a sestet. The first eight are written in pair rhythm: a-a-b-b. This serves to convey the monotonous life of the caged bird, 3 which is described in the first eight lines. The sestet is divided into two stanzas of three lines each. The first two lines of both stanzas are rhyming couplets, however the last line breaks away from the rhyme, which lays emphasis on the words 'prison' and 'risen'. Lines 11 and 14 rhyme, giving a stark comparison of the escape from a prison, to a kind of resurrection ('risen'). 4</p>	<p>1 Begins with an overview that shows understanding of the poem. (AO1, AO2)</p> <p>2 Focuses on the use of structure to convey thoughts and feelings. (AO3)</p> <p>3 Comments on form and rhyme (AO3). Makes some attempt to provide a general comment on effects ('convey[s] the monotonous life of the caged bird') related to the rhyme scheme (here ABAB).</p> <p>4 Here there is specific comment on the effects of particular words. (AO3)</p>

Example Candidate Response – high

In the first eight lines, Hopkins gives us a description of the life of a caged bird with subtle comparisons that allude to the soul. The title itself is a paradox, which brings out a shocking factor. A skylark is a bird which is free and roams the skies. The word 'sky' represents freedom and to have the word 'caged' before it is paradoxical and evokes pathos in the reader. **5** In line 1 'dare-gale' means daring and free and once again pushes the image of a free skylark towards the reader. However, this image clashes with the imagery of a 'dull cage' – something that is not worthy to house the skylark. **6** Immediately under this line, is a line that refers to man's spirit which 'dwells' in its own cage – the 'bone-house'. Here 'bone-house' could refer to either the body or perhaps the ribcage, which protects the heart or spirit. Line 2 hints that this poem is not only about the bird and thus this comparison only makes the feelings about the bird stronger. **7**

Lines 3 and 4 talk about how the bird has been trapped so long it has forgotten the time it was free. This evokes pathos and to ensure readers truly feel emotion, the author uses an alliteration to describe the bird's free days – 'free fells'. More alliterations are used in line 4 to again lay emphasis on the fact that the bird is now resigned to its fate – to spend its entire life in this cage. The alliterations, 'drudgery, day' and 'labouring-out life's', stretch out the sentence, making it extremely memorable and driving the point home. **8**

Lines 5–8 take on a change instead of mentioning the bird, the poem now talks about 'both'. **9** The 'both' are the soul and the bird, who will sometimes sing in joy, or be depressed or mad with rage. This is the thought Hopkins wants us to understand, **10** and he conveys it by using alliterations and metaphors. Line 5, 'aloft on turf or perch' refers to the bird being free. This is connected to the statement on how it is caged for ('or poor low stage') by the alliteration of 'perch or poor'. The alliteration links them making us understand that the writer wanted us to take them together

Examiner comments

5 A clear personal response to the effects created by the words in the title. (AO4, AO3)

6 A clear critical understanding of the contrast between the free skylark and the imagery of the dull cage. (AO2, AO3)

7 The final three sentences of this paragraph develop further an analysis of the meanings and effects of particular words. (AO2, AO3) The comment about the comparison 'mak[ing] the feelings about the bird stronger' could, however, have been developed further.

8 Useful comment here about the effect of alliteration 'stretch[ing] out the sentence', a point which links with the previous sentence about the bird's fate, 'its entire life in this cage'. (AO3, AO4)

9 Comment on structure – the candidate recognises a shift in content and tone. (AO3)

10 Direct reference to the question.

Example Candidate Response – high

for just a minute. Line 6 uses sibilance ('sing', 'sometimes', 'sweetest, sweetest spells') to stretch out the sentence and lay emphasis on the joy of the bird. **11** In line 7, 'droop deadly' is another alliteration to make the fact that the bird or soul can be so depressed that they may die, the focus of the line. The last line holds emotive weight, with heavy words such as 'wring', 'barrier' and 'bursts' which bring out the final thought which is 'fear' and 'rage'. Again 'barriers in bursts' is an alliteration, focusing our attention to the line. **12**

The first three lines of the sestet put emphasis on the fact that however tired the free skylark may be, he sleeps in his own nest. Firstly, in the line 9 the repetition of 'sweet fowl' as 'song fowl' by chiasmus – the inversion of syntax, emphasises the good nature of the bird. **13** By rhyming 'rest' and 'nest', Hopkins links the previous stanza to this one, as it is because of the emotions that the birds feels in lines 6–8, that it needs rest, which is why it needs a nest. Repetition of 'hear him' and because it is an alliteration the author can emphasise his thought. Repetition of 'nest' in line 11 explains that the nest is a bird and so the word 'prison', which is also not part of the rhyme, seems out of place, conveying the peculiarity that the bird was even in a prison in the first place. **14**

The last stanza refers to the resurrection of Christ and now alludes only to man's soul. It says that, though man's soul will be in a body, the body like 'meadow down' will not affect the soul or a 'rainbow'. Since the fluff on the meadow or the body will not affect anything, the soul like a rainbow **15** will be able to rise like a rainbow in the sky. 'Risen' could mean like Christ resurrects and rises, free at last, to heaven or could even mean like a phoenix rising from the ashes which keeps in with the bird theme. **16**

In this way, Hopkins vividly conveys thoughts and feelings about the bird in 'The Caged Skylark'. **17**

Examiner comments

11 Alliteration, sibilance and metaphors are mentioned, and supported by quotation, in this paragraph. (AO1, AO3) The candidate comments to some extent on effects (such as 'emphasis on the joy of the bird') – but points could be developed in greater detail.

12 This could be developed. In what way does alliteration focus attention on the line?

13 The comment about the 'good nature of the bird' responds to the question's key words 'thoughts and feelings'. (AO1, AO2)

14 In this paragraph, the candidate states features such as the structure of the sestet and the use of repetition. However, the final sentence lifts the response above the level of simple description. There is specific analytical comment on the effect of the word 'prison' which 'seems out of place'. (AO3, AO4)

15 A clear and supported interpretation of the poem's final stanza. (AO2, AO4)

16 A developed personal response to the possible implications of the word 'Risen' (AO4).

17 The final paragraph repeats the wording of the question.

How the candidate could improve the answer

The candidate shows a clear understanding of the poem and makes a generally convincing critical response to the ways in which Hopkins achieves his effects.

There are however two ways in which the candidate could improve their answer:

- The candidate could occasionally develop their comments about specific effects in greater detail in order to be fully convincing. For example, the candidate writes that 'Line 2 hints that this poem is not only about the bird and thus this comparison makes the feelings about the bird stronger'. This assertion could be further developed and supported: **how** does this comparison make feelings about the bird stronger?
- The candidate mainly uses literary terms confidently in the answer to support critical analysis. Occasionally, however, the terms get in the way of clearly communicating ideas, for example, '...in line 9 the repetition of "sweet fowl" as "song fowl" by chiasmus – the inversion of the syntax, emphasises the good nature of the bird'. Here the candidate simply states features rather than using them to develop analysis clearly. The candidate could improve the answer by explaining more clearly how these devices serve to 'emphasise the good nature of the bird'.

Common mistakes

The most common mistakes in answering this question are:

- writing general introductions instead of addressing the key words of the question 'How?' and 'vividly convey' from the start
- working through the whole poem from start to finish instead of selecting the best material to answer the question
- relying too much on study-guide notes instead of providing an informed personal response to the question
- not tailoring the answer to the specific topic of the question ('thoughts and feelings about the bird')
- writing mainly about the content of the poem rather than the ways in which the poet uses language, structure and form to 'vividly convey' thoughts and feelings about the bird
- making assertions about the poem's meanings or the poet's methods without providing quotations from the poem to support them
- spotting literary devices without commenting on their effect, for example, labelling the rhyme scheme of the poem ABAB without relating this to specific features of the poem
- using lengthy quotations that do not (cannot) lead to precise analysis
- including background material about Hopkins's life (e.g. biographical digressions about his life as a priest) without making the comments relevant to the detail of the poem.

Examination preparation (advice for learners)

Learners have found some or all of the following advice useful in preparing for poetry questions:

- Annotate copies of your set poems indicating aspects of language, structure and form used to convey ideas or experiences.
- Read the poems aloud regularly.
- Record the poems and listen to them regularly.
- Explore on the internet other readers' interpretations of the poems, e.g. reputable websites such as www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gerard-manley-hopkins
- Practise combining short quotations and analytical comment in your written responses to poems.
- Mark your own draft answers, finding and editing out:
 - unsupported assertions
 - lengthy quotations
 - irrelevant points that do not address the question
 - irrelevant background material.

Poems by famous writers such as Hopkins can cause problems. You can often find plenty of material on them in study guides. This material can help you to work out basic meanings and to consider other people's interpretations. **But** a key objective for this syllabus is to develop your **own** informed personal responses to texts. Use other interpretations only as a way of informing your own judgements, and never be tempted simply to repeat what other people have to say about the poem. Moreover do not expect there to be ready-made 'correct' readings of poems. Your task is to answer the question by using your personal judgement in:

- the points you make
- the evidence you use from the poem to support your points
- the close analysis of particular ways in which poets achieve their effects.

Useful resources

- You can find the **syllabus** and the most recent **past papers** at the Cambridge International public website
- A list of **endorsed textbooks** and digital resources can be found in the Published resources
- 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 O Level.
- Look out for the [Introduction to Learner Guides](#) and [Learner Revision Guide](#) videos.

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