

How do I read unseen poems?

1. Read and annotate. Read the poems slowly and carefully two or three times before you start writing your answer. Underline any words and/or images that you could write about. It might help you to read from punctuation mark to punctuation mark instead of from line to line.
2. Always read the line introducing the poems as this will tell you what the poems may be about.
3. Don't worry if you do not understand every word in a poem. You might be able to work it out; the general mood of the poem might be self explanatory, or it may suggest something about the theme or tone.
4. Think about the titles of the poems. They may have an obvious meaning, or they may suggest something about the theme or mood. Titles can be a good way into the poems.
5. Make sure you get to the end of the poems. Sometimes you might find a key image or unexpected twist, a contrast or surprise at the very end.
6. Ask yourself who is speaking the poem and to whom.
7. Work out the mood and atmosphere by looking at key words. E.g., there may be words which may create a gloomy and depressing mood.
8. What does the poet want the reader to 'take away' from reading the poem? Is there a particular lesson or message you can take away from it?

Assessment Objectives

- AO1** Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.
- AO2** Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers' presentation of ideas, themes and settings.
- AO3** Make comparisons and explain links between texts, evaluating writers' different ways of expressing meaning and achieving effects.

Vocabulary

Subject matter/ content	Theme	Title	First person narrator
Third person narrator	Mood	Atmosphere	Imagery
Simile	Metaphor	Personification	Symbol
Alliteration	Sibilance	Assonance	Enjambment
Rhyme	Rhythm	Sonnet	

How to show similarities and differences

Similarities	Differences
The poems both have...	Whereas in...in...
There are obvious similarities in the poets' use of...	However, in...we see a different...
In both poems...	On the other hand, ...has...
We can see some obvious links/ similarities in the...	Another important difference can be seen as...
Another link between the poems is...	It is very different in...however, as we notice that...
In neither poem is there any...	On the contrary, the second poem...
Both poets chose to...	Unlike the first poem...

Sentence Starters

- This word suggests that...
- The image...implies that...
- The phrase....creates the impression that...
- By choosing the word...the poet wants us to imagine that...
- The line...signifies that...
- The image...makes us think that...

Is there a right or wrong answer?

- In poetry there is no right or wrong answer.
- Be confident with your opinion and support it with reference to the poems.
- Show the examiner that you are aware that there may be more than one possible meaning for a word or image.
- Use some tentative language and phrases such as:
 - This image may imply that...
 - Perhaps this word could suggest that...
 - The poet may have wanted us to think that...

Personal Response

- Think of a well considered personal response to the poems at the end of your writing.
- What effect did the poem have on you?
- How did it make you feel?
 - Did you identify with the situation(s) being described?
 - Did you relate to the feelings of the character(s) in the poems?

Spend about 1 hour on this section.

Think carefully about the poems before you write your answer.

Both poets describe the experience of being inside an empty school.

Write about both poems and their effect on you. Show how they are similar and how they are different.

You may write about each poem separately and then compare them, or make comparisons where appropriate in your answer as a whole. [20]

The Closed School

Under the silvering light of the cold, tall sky,
Where the stars are like glimmering ice and the moon rides high,
Bolted and locked since the war by long-dead hands,
Next to the shadowy church, the closed school stands.

A village school, in the grip of frost and the past,
Its classrooms airless as tombs, its corridors waste;
Behind boarded windows barely an insect crawls
On the spreading atlas that is staining ceiling and walls.

Here is the stillness of death.
Listen hard as you can,
There's not one sound to be heard that is noisier than
The creeping of mould, or the crumbling of masonry
Into a fine floor-dust, soft and powdery.

Only deeper than the silence, at the far end of listening,
Come the feet in the corridors, silver voices that ring
In the raftered hall, and outside, where the frost freezes hard,
Brittle laughter of children, snowballing in the yard.

Raymond Wilson

After Lessons

The classrooms are as dead as winter trees.
You hold your breath along the corridor –
Your plimsolls* creak. There is no other noise.

A single light ices the polished floor.
You turn and, somehow, end up in The Boys,
A row of basins level with your knees.

You shouldn't be inside this place so late.
I wonder what you thought you might achieve
By squinting at the blackboard. What, and how?

In the dark, you wipe your nose across your sleeve.
It's much too late to put your hand up now.
There's someone outside, waiting at the gate.

Stephen Knight

**plimsolls* – a type of shoe

'The Closed School' is a poem that is about a person who is travelling around an empty school that has been long abandoned 'since the war' and is deteriorating to 'floor dust'. The person seems to be reminiscing about the children who used to attend the school. 'After Lessons' also seems to be about the narrator travelling through the school in the dead of night, yet they seem completely alone unlike in 'The Closed School' which has the sound of children, as there is 'no other noise' than the narrator's shoes.

Wilson perhaps wanted us to think that 'The Closed School' symbolises how time continues to tick on and people age and eventually die. We get this idea due to the description of the classrooms being like 'tombs'. This makes the reader get the impression that the children who once sat at the desks have abandoned them and grown up. In 'After Lessons', Knight may have wanted to think about how school is a safe haven for some and that in their time of need they find themselves returning to their school days for comfort. We get this sense as the narrator seems to be last to leave the school due to something 'waiting at the gate' for us. This makes the reader think that there is an abusive household or perhaps a situation that they are trying to avoid.

'The Closed School' has a sense of mourning as if those who used to go to the school were probably dead and that there is an air of 'death' inside the buildings. The 'long-dead hands' that shut the school also add to this atmosphere as it gives us the sense that the school is very old as are its former inhabitants. We feel a sense of sorrow for the school itself as it is slowly dying also, with its 'crumbling masonry' and 'boarded windows'. This illuminates how dilapidated the school has become. In contrast, we get a sense of fear and suspense from 'After Lessons' as there is 'someone outside' that seems to be waiting for the narrator to exit the school and we do not know his person's intentions. Unlike 'The Closed School' the school seems to be fully functional as it has 'polished floors'. This gives us the idea that the narrator is sneaking around after hours. We get the feeling of suspense when we are told that it is 'too late' to raise our hands. This gives us the sense that the narrator is trying to cry out for help but they can no longer do so.

I find the fact that 'barely an insect crawls inside the dead school' in 'The Closed School' is quite interesting as it makes the reader think that the school is so abandoned that even the bugs do not live there. It also makes the reader feel like the school is well and truly dead. I think that how the school is described to be in the 'grip' of the cold and the past creates the idea that the school has been captured by time and cannot escape its clutches. The 'silver voices' that are heard make the reader think of the ghosts of the children who used to go to the old school. It also gives us the image of a silver wisp that glides around the abandoned school. In 'After Lessons' I find the fact that the narrator 'wonder(s)' what we might achieve from looking at the blackboard.

It gives the reader the sense that they are desperately trying to find a solution to the problems they are hiding from. The way the author says 'what and how' gives the reader a sense of excitement, unlike in 'The Closed School' and perhaps frustration as they do not know the answers to these questions. It also makes the reader wonder what has led the narrator up to this moment. When we 'wipe [our] nose' it gives us the feeling of sympathy for the narrator as we get the idea that they are crying from the stressful situation.

Personally, I think that 'The Closed School' is a very interesting poem about how everything ages, crumbles and dies. I enjoy how the mould is shown to be 'creeping' as it paints the image of mould slowly travelling up the side of the wall. I think that 'After Lessons' is quite an exciting poem as I feel quite nervous when we find out that someone is 'waiting at the gate'.

'The Closed School' and 'After Lessons' both show the stillness of a school without its students. However, Wilson's poem shows it in an abandoned light.

Commentary

There is a consistent and focused analysis of both poems. The response begins to show how the poets' use of language builds a picture of the schools described. There is a clear appreciation of how both poets use language to achieve specific effects. Comments are sustained and moving into being perceptive and explorative.