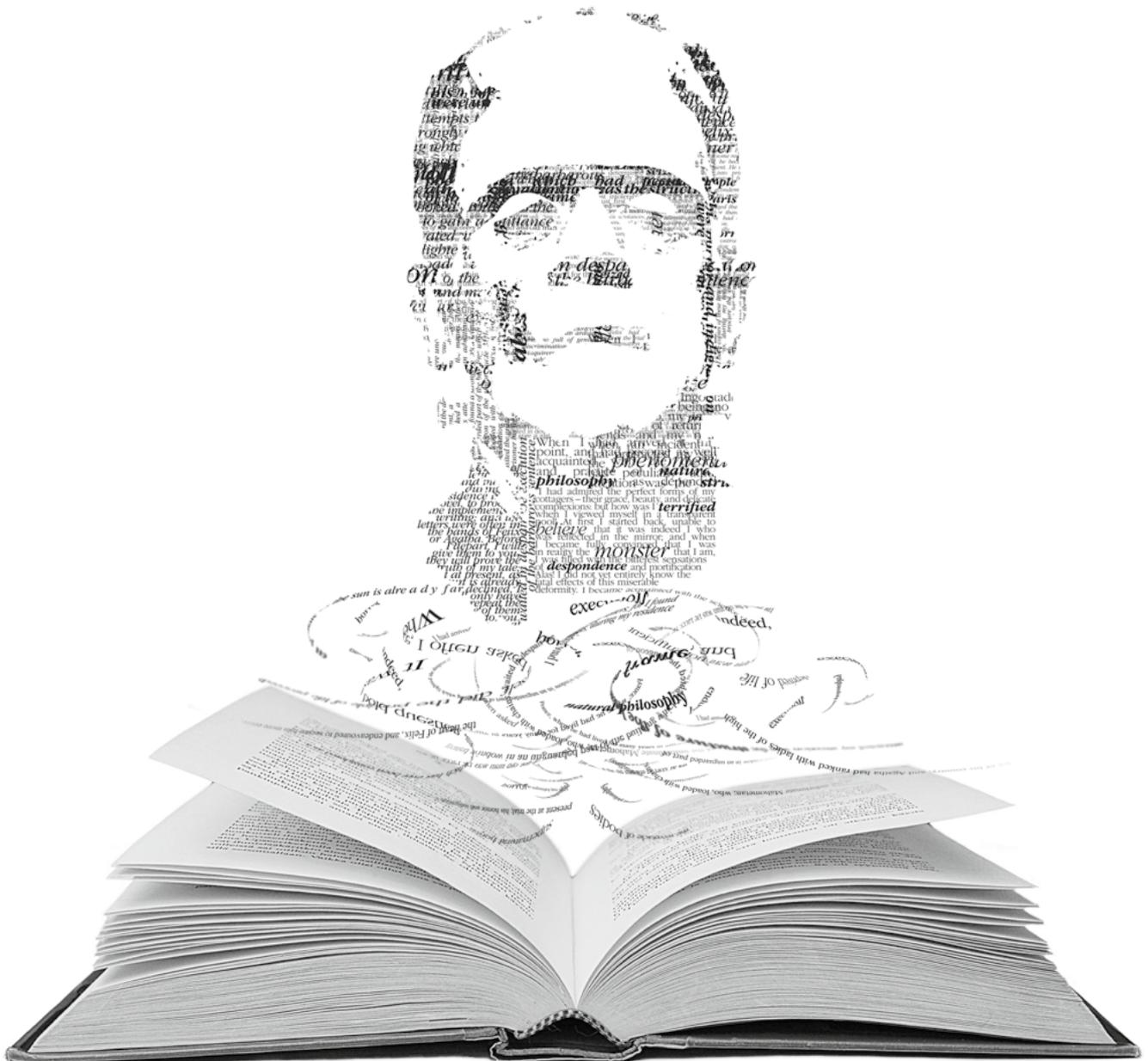


A LEVEL

ENGLISH LITERATURE H071 H471

HOW TO SET A QUESTION

Unit F661 - Poetry and Prose 1800-1945



SECTION A

Poetry questions are probably easier to set than those on the novels. Below is a sample question based on one of the new set poets, Edward Thomas.

'I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing ...'

Discuss ways in which Thomas presents memory in 'Old Man'.

In your answer, explore the effects of language, imagery and verse form, and consider how this poem relates to other poems by Thomas that you have studied.

Old Man

*Old Man, or Lad's-love, - in the name there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man,
The hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree,
Growing with rosemary and lavender.
Even to one that knows it well, the names
Half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is:
At least, what that is clings not to the names
In spite of time. And yet I like the names.*

*The herb itself I like not, but for certain
I love it, as someday the child will love it
Who plucks a feather from the door-side bush
Whenever she goes in or out of the house.
Often she waits there, snipping the tips and shrivelling
The shreds at last on to the path, perhaps
Thinking, perhaps of nothing, till she sniffs
Her fingers and runs off. The bush is still
But half as tall as she, though it is as old;
So well she clips it. Not a word she says;
And I can only wonder how much hereafter
She will remember, with that bitter scent,
Of garden rows, and ancient damson-trees
Topping a hedge, a bent path to a door
A low thick bush beside the door, and me
Forbidding her to pick.*

*As for myself,
Where first I met the bitter scent is lost.
I, too, often shrivel the grey shreds,
Sniff them and think and sniff again and try
Once more to think what it is I am remembering,
Always in vain. I cannot like the scent,
Yet I would rather give up others more sweet,
With no meaning, than this bitter one.*

*I have mislaid the key. I sniff the spray
And think of nothing; I see and I hear nothing;
Yet seem, too, to be listening, lying in wait
For what I should, yet never can, remember:
No garden appears, no path, no hoar-green bush
Of Lad's-love, or Old Man, no child beside,
Neither father nor mother, nor any playmate;
Only an avenue, dark, nameless, without end.*

Decide on the topic for the question: here, I have chosen 'memory'. The idea at the centre of the question is likely to be a central theme or idea in the poem, and should be a concept which is readily accessible to all candidates. Other choices for this poem might include **nature**, or **despair and hope**. Some questions might deal with the nature of the poet's insight or method; for example, **Discuss ways in which Thomas makes ordinary things seem extraordinary in 'Old Man'**. When you choose your central idea, you should consider whether there are other poems in the selection which allow candidates to make a thematic link to the set poem (candidates can make links for different reasons, not purely thematic ones, but most will feel more secure and confident if some thematic links are available). In the question above, I am happy that 'memory' is a central idea in the set poem, and that there are others in the selection (such as 'Tears' and 'The sun used to shine') which deal with the same theme. I have asked candidates to 'discuss ways in which memory is presented'; this is a standard wording, and reminds candidates that they have to privilege AO2 in their answers.

Next, you need to choose a quotation from the set poem which illustrates the topic, and place it at the beginning of the question. The idea of this quotation is that candidates can use it confidently to help illustrate their answer, along with other material which they select for themselves.

Finally, you need to add the standard last sentence for all Section A questions:

In your answer, explore the effects of language, imagery and verse form, and consider how this poem relates to other poems by Thomas that you have studied.

The first part of this sentence provides a reminder to candidates that they need to address AO2 in their answers ('explore the effects of language, imagery and verse form'). A good answer will come up with a wide range of ways in which memory has been presented (for example through imagery, use of blank verse and paragraphing, through word choice and repetition etc.). Weaker answers may discuss a limited range of poetic methods, or even just paraphrase the poem without considering ways in which the writer has treated the central theme.

The second part of the sentence requires the candidate to fulfil AO4 by linking the set poem to other poems they have studied ('how it relates to other poems ...'). The form of words is designed to communicate to candidates that they must refer to at least two additional poems in the answer, and that, for good marks, they must explore the relationship between the set poem and the other poems. A good answer will make clear what the link is (perhaps the additional poem treats the same theme) and offer an explanation of the relationship between the poems (perhaps the writer has used a contrasting technique, or taken a different attitude to the theme in the additional poem).

SECTION B

Section B questions are a little harder to set, since you will have to research or invent the statement at the top of the question. Below is a pair of questions set on Jane Eyre, one of the new set texts.

(a) 'Though restrained by social convention, the passions of the female characters emerge with great force.'

In the light of this comment, discuss Brontë's presentation of female characters in Jane Eyre.

(b) 'Jane gains happiness but sacrifices her independence.'

How far and in what ways do you agree with this view of the ending of Jane Eyre?

All Section B questions are set in pairs: the (a) option is generally more theme- or character-based, and the (b) option is focused more on style or method. All questions start with a statement about the set text given in quotation marks. This statement can be a quotation from the novel itself; a statement about the novel from a reviewer or a critic; a view of the novel from the novelist herself; or (usually) a statement which you have invented. The advantages of writing the statement yourself are that you can ensure a clear focus on your chosen theme or method; and that you can devise a statement which has the appropriate clarity and simplicity for an AS Level examination (statements from critics are often too complex and multi-faceted to work well at AS). The hardest part of question-setting is finding inspiration for this statement. Past papers are a good source, as are reviews and criticism; all sorts of material can be found online, and of course in critical works and introductory essays in editions of the novel. Contemporary reviews can be especially thought-provoking and helpful. If you use a statement from a critic, you may need to simplify the ideas or language to make them suitable for AS.

When you have your statement about the text, you need to add a tail-piece inviting the candidate to respond to the statement, giving his or her own view. If your initial statement offers a firm, even controversial view of the novel (**'Jane gains happiness but sacrifices her independence'**), you can add the sentence **How far and in what ways do you agree?** Candidates need to make clear the extent of their agreement or disagreement, and to offer explanation and illustration to support their views. If the initial statement is more of an observation (**'Though restrained by social convention, the passions of the female characters emerge with great force'**), you may prefer to add a sentence beginning 'In the light of this comment' which invites the candidate to explore relevant material and relate it to the statement in the question: in this case, **In the light of this comment, discuss Brontë's presentation of female characters in Jane Eyre.**