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Revision

Preparing for paper 2 in poetry

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Paper 2 in poetry assesses your appreciation of poetry's conventions based on your study of a range of poems by your set poets (four poets at HL, three poets at SL).

Poetic conventions

A **convention** is a traditional way of viewing or achieving something. In poetry, these are techniques or practices that make up the genre. When identifying poetic conventions, you should consider the elements of poetry that make it what it is, and compare the effects that their varied uses have on our experience, response, and appreciation of a given poem.

List of poetic conventions

- form and structure (stanzas, rhyme, rhythm/metre, etc.)
- repetition and pattern
- voice and tone
- sound devices
- atmosphere
- setting
- description
- beginnings
- tonal shifts
- endings
- figurative language
- conflict and tension
- contrast
- thematic concerns and aims (e.g. natural world, love, time, praise, criticism, revelation, etc.)

This does not mean that there is no disagreement about what constitutes a poem and what does not. Poets and critics have disagreed throughout the ages; conventions change and are not always agreed upon at any given time, and some poems do not feature all conventions or use them to different effect. We saw this, for example, in Keats' and Frost's differing styles and responses to the natural world (see pp. 2–6 of the magazine). Questions often challenge you to explore the extent to which you agree with a statement about poetry in general, or about the relationship between several of its features.

Throughout your exploration of the genre, you should develop an informed but also personal understanding of poetry that can tackle these debates.

How should I structure a paper 2 essay?

For paper 2, you should always write a compare-and-contrast essay. Depending on the question, you may also have to formulate an argument that argues ‘how far’ or ‘the extent to which’ you or your poems agree with a statement or idea about poetry.

You should always write a clear and engaging introduction:

- Respond to the question, showing that you understand the terms of its debate and/or its significance to poetry as a whole. You may wish to begin with a critical quotation by a poet or a critic, or a relevant line from a different poem.
- State your thesis, a sentence that provides a clear argument in response to the question.
- Give an overview of how each poem you are using gives evidence for your thesis, evaluating how the convention or definition in the question is being used in the poem.

There are two ways of structuring the body of a compare-and-contrast essay:

- A **paralleled** comparison looks at each poem one-by-one (i.e. considers poem A in response to the question, before exploring poem B, and then possibly poem C), building in comparative points once the second (and possibly third) poem is introduced.
- An **interlocking** comparison builds two to three comparative points to prove its thesis, and explores the two to three poems in each section. An ‘interlocking’ comparison may have paragraphs that feature the analysis of two poems, bringing out more subtle comparisons within each section.

In a ‘how far’ or ‘to what extent’ question, it may be useful to compare a conventional poem to an unconventional poem, evaluating their different effects. You can also compare the similarities in the poems in the first half of the essay, before considering how the poems depart from the conventions in the second half.

In the conclusion:

- compare and contrast what is similar or different about the poems, evaluating how they achieve their particular aims
- fit your exploration of the question into your understanding of the poets’ principal concerns in their work as a whole
- end compellingly — maybe a quotation

No matter how you structure your essay, be sure to:

- sustain your focus on the question and your thesis
- quote and analyse each poem in depth
- write in an appropriate formal register, paying attention to spelling, grammar, and punctuation

Using past exam questions

The bulk of your revision should be spent building comparisons between poems' use of poetic conventions and literary devices to achieve their ends. You should also respond to past paper questions to practise your skill in comparative argumentation. What you should *not* do is prepare ready-made responses to regurgitate under exam conditions. While there have been multiple questions on the same poetic conventions over the years, they have never been worded exactly the same, and often have specific and unique demands.)

Relevant paper 2 questions

The past paper 2 questions below have been selected as appropriate for the content that was explored in the article on pp. 2–6 of the magazine. The article modelled the comparative approach you should take to revising your poems. In comparing each poet's approach to a similar subject, it considered the varied effectiveness of a wide range of poetic conventions.

The questions have been categorised by poetic convention. Prepare responses to the questions, developing the points of comparison raised in the article. For some of them, you may want to consider bringing in a third poem.

- Atmosphere: May 2010
- Conflict and tension: November 2007
- Endings: May 2006
- Form and structure: May 2002 and November 2003
- Thematic concerns and aims: May 2001
- Setting: November 2006
- Voice: November 2003

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