

**IB Diploma Programme: Language A1 (English) Mock Examination: Unseen Commentary**

The passages are suitable for both Standard Level and Higher Level practice. Print out the whole document for use later, if you wish.

**How to use this mock examination paper****Taking the exam:**

- o Choose a block of time (Standard Level one-and-a-half hours, Higher Level two hours) during which you will not be disturbed.
- o Find a quiet place and set it up as nearly as you can to resemble an examination room, with
  - an upright chair and a table with a good writing surface
  - appropriate temperature and lighting
  - a watch or clock
  - sufficient paper (possibly as many as four letter or A4 sheets) and pens, including coloured felt tips to help you mark the passage.
- o When you are ready, note the time (write it down) and the time you will need to finish (write it down).
- o Begin.

**Choosing the passage:**

- o Don't decide ahead of time to write about the prose or the poetry passage.
- o Read both passages carefully before you choose one.
- o Don't automatically choose the one which is easier to understand – there may be less to say about it.
- o When you have made a preliminary choice, read that passage (and maybe the other one) again before you begin work – just to make sure. A mistake now can cost a lot later.
- o If, when you've begun to make notes on the passage you've chosen, you feel to be getting nowhere, consider changing to the other passage. You shouldn't do so, however, after anything more than say ten minutes: stick with your original choice, and you'll find that more ideas come once you start writing.

**Making notes:**

- o Use the margins of the question paper.
- o Underline or circle details in the passage you think are significant, and link them to your margin notes.
- o SL candidates: consider colour-coding (or number-coding) the parts of the passage you think will help you answer each of the guiding questions.
- o HL candidates: if you have a structure you intend to use in your commentary (like the one we will suggest later) consider colour-coding or number-coding details from the passage to match your structure.

**Writing the commentary:**

- o You will not have time to write your commentary in draft form and then copy it out again. So write carefully and legibly.
- o Leave time at the end to read through what you have written.

**Evaluating your answer (when it's all over):**

- o There are suggestions for doing that on Page 5 onwards.

If any of the above contradicts what your teacher has suggested, follow your teacher's advice. He or she knows you better than we do...

**Mock Examination: English A1, Paper 1 (Unseen Commentary) February 2006****Instructions to candidates**

**Standard Level** (1 hour 30 minutes): Write a commentary on one passage only. It is not compulsory for you to respond directly to the guiding questions provided. However, you are encouraged to use them as starting points for your commentary. (*Guiding questions for Standard Level candidates can be found on Page 5.*)

**Higher Level** (2 hours): Write a commentary on one passage only.

(*HL candidates: Do not look at the SL guiding questions Page 5. You may however use them after you have completed your commentary, to check that you have covered the areas the examiner has thought important.*)

**1. (a)**

All morning Buddy had been teaching me how to ski.

First, Buddy borrowed skis and ski poles from a friend of his in the village, and ski boots from a doctor's wife whose feet were only one size larger than my own, and a red ski jacket from a student nurse. His persistence in the face of mulishness was astounding.

5 Then I remembered that at medical school Buddy had won a prize for persuading the most relatives of dead people to have their dead ones cut up whether they needed it or not, in the interests of science. I forget what the prize was, but I could just see Buddy in his white coat with his stethoscope sticking out of a side pocket like part of his anatomy, smiling and bowing and talking those numb, dumb relatives into signing the post-mortem papers.

10 Next, Buddy borrowed a car from his own doctor, who'd had TB himself and was very understanding, and we drove off as the buzzer for walk-hour rasped along the sunless sanatorium corridors.

Buddy had never skied before either, but he said that the elementary principles were quite simple, and as he'd often watched the ski instructors and their pupils he could teach me all I'd need to know.

15 For the first half-hour I obediently herring-boned up a small slope, pushed off with my poles and coasted straight down. Buddy seemed pleased with my progress.

'That's fine, Esther,' he observed, as I negotiated my slope for the twentieth time. 'Now let's try you on the rope tow.'

20 I stopped in my tracks, flushed and panting.

'But Buddy, I don't know how to zigzag yet. All those people coming down from the top know how to zigzag.'

'Oh, you need only go half-way. Then you won't gain very much momentum.'

25 And Buddy accompanied me to the rope tow and showed me how to let the rope run through my hands, and then told me to close my fingers round it and go up.

It never occurred to me to say no.

I wrapped my fingers around the rough, bruising snake of a rope that slithered through them, and went up.

30 But the rope dragged me, wobbling and balancing, so rapidly I couldn't hope to dissociate myself from it half-way.

There was a skier in front of me and a skier behind me, and I'd have been knocked over and stuck full of skis and poles the minute I let go, and I didn't want to make trouble, so I hung quietly on.

At the top, though, I had second thoughts.

35 Buddy singled me out, hesitating there in the red jacket. His arms chopped the air like khaki

windmills. Then I saw he was signalling me to come down a path that had opened in the middle of the weaving skiers. But as I poised, uneasy, with a dry throat, the smooth white path from my feet to his feet grew blurred.

40 A skier crossed it from the left, another crossed it from the right, and Buddy's arms went on waving feebly as antennae from the other side of a field swarming with tiny moving animalcules like germs, or bent, bright exclamation marks.

I looked up from that churning amphitheatre to the view beyond it.

45 The great, grey eye of the sky looked back at me, its mist-shrouded sun focusing all the white and silent distances that poured from every point of the compass, hill after pale hill, to stall at my feet.

The interior voice nagging me not to be a fool – to save my skin and take off my skis and walk down, camouflaged by the scrub pines bordering the slope – fled like a disconsolate mosquito. The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.

I measured the distance to Buddy with my eye.

50 His arms were folded, now, and he seemed of a piece with the split-rail fence behind him – numb, brown and inconsequential.

Edging to the rim of the hilltop, I dug the spikes of my poles into the snow and pushed myself into a flight I knew I couldn't stop by skill or any belated access of will.

I aimed straight down.

55 A keen wind that had been hiding itself struck me full in the mouth and raked the hair back horizontal on my head. I was descending, but the white sun rose no higher. It hung over the suspended waves of the hills, an insentient pivot without which the world would not exist.

A small, answering point in my own body flew towards it. I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery – air, mountains, trees, people. I thought, 'This is what it is to be happy.'

60 I plummeted down past the zigzagers, the students, the experts, through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past.

People and trees receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the still, bright point at the end of it, the pebble at the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly.

65 My teeth crunched a gravelly mouthful. Ice water seeped down my throat.

Buddy's face hung over me, near and huge, like a distracted planet. Other faces showed themselves up in back of his. Behind them, black dots swarmed on a plane of whiteness. Piece by piece, as at the strokes of a dull godmother's wand, the old world sprang back into position.

70 'You were doing fine,' a familiar voice informed my ear, 'until that man stepped into your path.'

People were unfastening my bindings and collecting my ski poles from where they poked skyward, askew, in their separate snowbanks. The lodge fence propped itself at my back.

75 Buddy bent to pull off my boots and the several pairs of white wool socks that padded them. His plump hand shut on my left foot, then inched up my ankle, closing and probing, as if feeling for a concealed weapon.

A dispassionate white sun shone at the summit of the sky. I wanted to hone myself on it till I grew saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife.

'I'm going up,' I said. 'I'm going to do it again.'

'No, you're not.'

80 A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face. 'No, you're not,' he repeated with a final smile. 'Your leg's broken in two places. You'll be stuck in a cast for months.'

from *The Bell Jar*, Sylvia Plath



**Guiding Questions for Standard Level Candidates Only****1. (a) *The Bell Jar***

What do we learn from the passage about the two central characters, and about their relationship?

By what means does the writer control the narrative, and give it shape?

What contribution do the comparisons make to the passage?

The episode carries a significance for Esther which goes beyond the events themselves. Explore it.

**1. (b) *The Woman at the Washington Zoo***

What significance lies in the fact that the poem is set in Washington?

What do we learn from the poem about the life the woman leads, and her feelings towards it?

Give a detailed account of the poem's structure and development.

Examine the poet's use of repetition.

**End of Paper 1**

When you have completed your commentary, take a long break before you begin to think about how well you may have done. When you are ready (and not necessarily on the same day) you can come back and look at our suggestions for evaluating your answers.

(You may decide to exchange your work with another student who has written about the same passage, so that you can discuss the quality of each other's commentaries.)

**Assessing Your Commentary**

The examiner will assess your commentary in five areas:

- o Understanding of the text
- o Interpretation of the text
- o Appreciation of literary features
- o Presentation
- o Formal use of language

You'll find it difficult to assess the last two, but it's worth asking yourself:

- o Presentation: 'Have I organised my answer well and used plenty of examples to support what I have said?'
- o Formal use of language: 'Have I expressed myself clearly and avoided sloppy or casual language?'

(There are more precise suggestions about how to improve both the structure and style of your commentary in 'Writing Unseen Commentaries: A Student Help Book'.)

What about the first three?

### Standard Level Candidates

We've made notes below on things you could have said to show how well you have understood, interpreted and appreciated the passage. You may wish to tick off the ideas you did manage to include in your commentary. (Don't worry if you've missed quite a lot – our list is a full one.)

### Higher Level Candidates

You can use the same notes, even though you were not given the guiding questions. Taken together, the questions cover much of what you would want to say about the passages.

As far as organising your commentary is concerned, you may have taken a simple 'word-by-word, line-by-line' approach. If you did, check that some larger ideas have emerged from your comments on the passage's detail.

You may feel that that approach has worked quite well for you. You could consider the following method for future use, however...

Analyse the passage under five headings

- o Setting
- o Character
- o Action
- o Style
- o Ideas

You could call this the SCASI system (it's explained very fully in 'Writing Unseen Commentaries'). It will allow you to make your notes and develop your ideas in a very controlled way. To give you some idea of how it works we have designed the four SL guiding questions on each passage to match four of the five SCASI topics.

#### 1. (a) *The Bell Jar*

**'What do we learn from the passage about the two central characters, and about their relationship?'** (*Character*)

The best way of dealing with multi-part questions like this is to take each item separately (in this case, the characters first, one by one, and their relationship next). Always look for ways of breaking questions down into smaller parts.

You should base the majority of your points on details you can point to in the text. Sometimes, however, you will be able to make a general, or introductory, comment without supporting it, as in the first bullet below:

Esther:

- o Our overall impression of Esther: timid and unsure of herself.
- o '*All those people coming down from the top know how to zigzag*': Compares herself unfavourably (but perhaps, in this case, sensibly) with others.
- o *It never occurred to me to say no*: Unquestioning.

- o *I'd have been knocked over and stuck full of skis and poles the minute I let go*: Prone to exaggerate her own weakness and vulnerability.
- o *I didn't want to make trouble*: Self-effacing, unassertive, shy.
- o *The thought that I might kill myself formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower*: Faces the possibility of a serious accident in a detached way. Is more realistic than Buddy? Has a self-destructive tendency?
- o *I aimed straight down*: Supports the previous suggestion.
- o *'I'm going up,' I said. 'I'm going to do it again'*: Determined, easily carried away.

#### Buddy:

- o Overall impression of Buddy: very confident, rather overbearing.
- o *His persistence in the face of mulishness*: Determined, but in a different way from Esther: he is in competition with other people, she with herself.
- o *persuading the most relatives... smiling and bowing and talking*: Takes satisfaction from the control he exercises over others; does that in a manipulative way.
- o *Buddy had never skied before either, but*: Very sure of his own knowledge.
- o *Buddy seemed pleased with my progress*: Is he in fact more pleased with his abilities as a teacher than with Esther's performance in itself?
- o *'Oh, you need only go half-way'*: Very quick to supply an answer which will allow him to retain control (even if it's an inadequate answer).
- o *A queer, satisfied expression came over Buddy's face*: Having been proved wrong (about the safety of what Esther was attempting) he is pleased to be able to speak with certainty about her injuries.

#### Their relationship:

- o He seems to want to help her.
- o She seems to trust him, is perhaps slightly in awe of him.
- o *For the first half-hour I obediently herring-boned*: She is willing to take instructions from him, and is only driven to question them through fear ('*But Buddy...*')
- o *'You were doing fine...until that man stepped into your path'*: Is he trying to make her feel better or shift the blame from himself?
- o *'No, you're not,' he repeated with a final smile*: The fact that she will be partially immobilised will give him even more control over her. The repetition and the smile both emphasise his satisfaction.
- o By the end of the episode she is perhaps beginning to question her reliance on him: we would expect her to ask herself the reason for his *queer* expression and his *final smile*.

Note that there may well be some overlap between your answers. There's no reason why you shouldn't use the same quotation to make two different points.

It's also acceptable to leave a question open, as in 'Is he trying to make her feel better or...?', when there's some uncertainty in the passage itself. (The uncertainty may in fact be part of the writer's technique.)

#### **'By what means does the writer control the narrative, and give it shape?'** (*Action*)

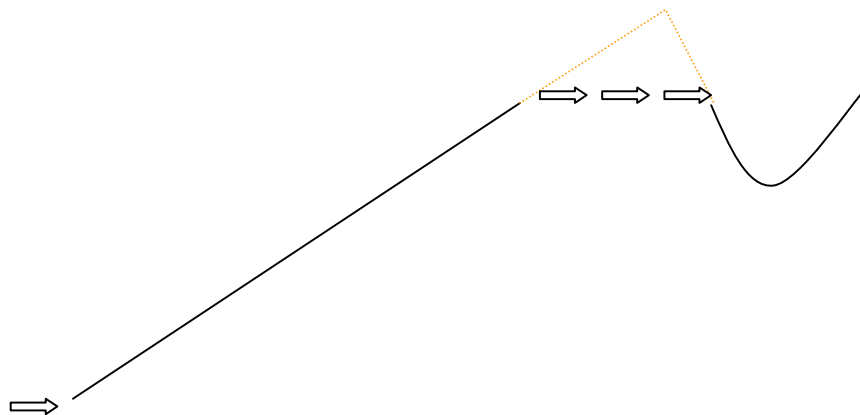
##### Control:

- o The first paragraph gives us a time-context (*All morning*).
- o We are then taken right back to the beginning of the episode, and four of the next five paragraphs open with order-markers (*First...Then...Next...For the first half-hour*).
- o The very short paragraphs which follow break up the narrative, each one taking us one more step towards what we increasingly feel will be a disaster.

- o Plath holds us at the top of the slope, along with her central character, for eight paragraphs, while Esther has her *second thoughts*.

Shape:

- o The start and finish points of the episode are clearly delineated (*All morning Buddy had been teaching me how to ski... 'You'll be stuck in a cast for months'*); and there's a degree of contrast between them (mobility/immobility, endeavour/failure, time periods).
- o Just as the action is about to reach its height (*I hurtled on to the still, bright point*) Plath jumps to the aftermath of Esther's fall (*My teeth crunched a gravelly mouthful.*) She thus withholds the climax we have been expecting, deliberately flattening the apex of the narrative.
- o She then replaces the missing climax with a secondary one, when we learn the extent of Esther's injuries. There is therefore a lift in intensity at the end of the passage after what has been, in its effect, an anti-climax. (You probably shouldn't include diagrams in your exam answer, but it may help you to draw one in your notes, representing the shape of the passage you're writing about. The one for this passage might look something like:



Try adding line numbers (or phrases) matching the points at which the line changes direction.

**‘What contribution do the comparisons make to the passage?’ (Style)**

You may have identified as many as fifteen, if you have included both similes and metaphors. Here are the first four, just to indicate what kind of comment would be appropriate in answer to the question.

- o *his stethoscope sticking out of a side pocket like part of his anatomy*: Macabre image which sets the pattern for Plath's representation of Buddy as a slightly absurd but also dangerous figure.
- o *the rough, bruising snake of a rope that slithered through them*: Mainly suggests the danger Esther faces, but with a secondary suggestion of the surprises in store for her: we would expect a snake to be smooth and slippery.
- o *His arms chopped the air like khaki windmills*: Buddy, like a windmill, is out of place on a ski slope; and once more he is seen as slightly ridiculous. The jerkiness of his movements also suggests his agitation.
- o *Buddy's arms went on waving feebly as antennae*: Buddy has been reduced to the proportions of a distant insect, trying and failing to communicate with Esther. He is now of no more help to her than the other skiers, *animalcules* (tiny creatures) no bigger than *germs*.

The other comparisons, in case you've missed some (add your own comments now if need be, but look at the context of each example first):

- o *tiny moving animalcules like germs, or bent, bright exclamation marks*
- o *that churning amphitheatre*
- o *The great, grey eye of the sky*
- o *fled like a disconsolate mosquito*
- o *formed in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.*
- o *he seemed of a piece with the split-rail fence behind him – numb, brown and inconsequential*
- o *receded on either hand like the dark sides of a tunnel*
- o *near and huge, like a distracted planet.*
- o *as at the strokes of a dull godmother's wand*
- o *as if feeling for a concealed weapon*
- o *saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife.*

(It's not clear, in the last example, where the comparison begins. Does Plath see the blade of the knife as saintly and thin as well as essential? Food for discussion...)

Don't forget that the guiding question is a general one. You will be expected to examine each comparison separately, but only within the context of some overall comment such as: 'The intensity of Esther's experience is reflected in the sharpness and originality – even oddity – of the similes and metaphors she uses to express it.'

In addition, if you notice links among some of the comparisons, or the images they evoke, note that. The insect similes, for instance, indicate how the other people on the ski slope (including Buddy) and Esther's own *interior voice*, shrink to insignificance as she sets off down the slope. (The other skiers later become *black dots swarming on a plane of whiteness* – not in itself a very strong comparison, but you could point out the connection with the insect images.)

**'The episode carries a significance for Esther which goes beyond the events themselves. Explore it.'**  
(Ideas)

- o *Buddy borrowed a car from his own doctor, who'd had TB himself and was very understanding, and we drove off as the buzzer for walk-hour rasped along the sunless sanatorium corridors:* First hint of significant context for what becomes in Esther's mind more than a simple skiing lesson. Are she and Buddy in the sanatorium to receive treatment for an illness? Is her reckless flight down the mountain a symbolic escape, or even the expression of a death-wish?
- o *The great, grey eye of the sky looked back at me, its mist-shrouded sun focusing all the white and silent distances that poured from every point of the compass, hill after pale hill, to stall at my feet.* She feels to be at the centre of things, in a vast *amphitheatre*, where her performance over the next several minutes is going to be closely observed, as if this is a momentous occasion.
- o The two paragraphs beginning *line 60* present the rush down the slope as a journey back into Esther's own life, to its earliest point – her birth, and life since then, in reverse. It is a process of purification, as she leaves behind the years of *doubleness and smiles and compromise*. In her imagination she is about to become unborn; but the crash happens first.
- o Her wish to go back up the mountain, then, comes perhaps from a desire to complete the process of escape and purification, to become *saintly and thin and essential as the blade of a knife*. (Depending on how full your analysis of this simile was, in your answer to the third guiding question, you may have been able to build on it here.)



1. (b) *The Woman at the Washington Zoo***What significance lies in the poem's Washington setting?** (*Setting*)

- o *The saris go by me from the embassies*: Washington is a very international city, and the central character compares herself unfavourably with the exotically-dressed women she meets at the zoo.
- o *neither from my chief, /The Deputy Chief Assistant, nor his chief*: She herself is only a cog in the capital's bureaucratic machinery.
- o *dome-shadowed, withering among columns, /Wavy beneath fountains*: The distinctive architectural landmarks of Washington loom over and oppress her, causing her to dry up and lose her substance, shape and certainty.

**What do we learn from the poem about the life the woman leads, and her feelings towards it?** (*Character*)

You can use again some of the material you included in the previous answer, but do so only briefly, and put a slightly different slant on it if possible. Additional points:

- o *this dull null /Navy I wear to work, and wear from work*: Her life is colourless and repetitive.
- o *So /To my bed, so to my grave*: She fears it will stay that way until she dies. Neither her lonely bed nor her equally lonely grave will offer her anything more.
- o *no /Complaints, no comment*: The men in her professional life do not even take enough interest in her to criticise her; and she seems to have no men in her private life.
- o *these beings trapped /As I am trapped but not, themselves, the trap*: She blames herself for creating her own cage by giving away her freedom to habit and low expectation.
- o *Aging, but without knowledge of their age, /Kept safe here, knowing not of death*: Her pain is all the greater because, unlike the animals, she knows what is happening to her.
- o *The world goes by my cage and never sees me*: She feels unacknowledged, even by the birds and the people going about their daily business around her.
- o The depth of her desperation is revealed when she calls out to the vulture, a symbol to her of natural power and sexuality, to free her from her imprisonment.

**Give a detailed account of the poem's structure and development.** (*Action*)

- o The opening stanza (one line only) establishes a dual base from which the woman will judge the quality of her own existence. (The women she sees passing by are colourful in appearance, and come from countries with romantic associations.)
- o This duality carries on into the next stanza (two lines only). The women's rich dress (*Cloth from the moon...from another planet*) gives them equal status in the woman's eyes with the most exotic animals in the zoo (*They look back at the leopard like the leopard*).
- o The short, broken line that follows introduces a long rambling stanza setting the woman's life in contrast to what has gone before. At first sight the stanza seems out of control, and it never quite becomes a sentence, as if the woman has lost her way among her feelings; but it is held together by her intense focus on her clothing (*This print of mine...this dull null /Navy*), then on the body it covers (*this serviceable /Body*) and finally, with passion, on that body as a cage in which she is trapped (*Oh, bars of my own body, open, open!*)
- o She then seems to take breath (at *line 20*) and begins again in a calmer tone, voicing her sense of injustice through the whole of the ensuing stanza. Note, however that the birds she is accusing of ignoring her grow larger in size through the five lines of the stanza (*sparrows...Pigeons...buzzards*), leading into her outcry *Vulture* at the beginning of the next stanza. So there runs through the stanza a sense that her anguish is growing once more.
- o The next stanza (lines 25-31) carries the poem towards its climax: the woman pleads with the vulture to transform itself into a sexual force (*The wild brother*) that will in turn (final stanza) transform her

(*change me, change me!*) into a powerful wild creature like the ‘*great lioness*’ she has envied in line 30.

**Examine the poet’s use of repetition.** (*Style*)

As we noted in relation to the third question on Passage a), your answers will be strengthened by any overarching comment you feel able to make. Here, for instance, you could include the introductory point that some of the repetition in the poem is not exactly that: phrases are echoed (with slight changes) rather than repeated – as in the opening examples below.

- o *Cloth from the moon. Cloth from another planet*: There is some adjustment in the second phrase, as if the woman is searching for a more powerful way to describe the saris – their cloth is from a planet more distant, and perhaps more colourful, than our pale moon.
- o *Navy I wear to work, and wear from work*: The repetition here suggest the sameness and circularity of her daily life.
- o *so /To my bed, so to my grave*: The underlying suggestion is that since she has no good (sexual) reason to remove her clothes when she arrives home from work, she sleeps in them; and the repetition of the simple ‘*so to my...so to my*’ indicates how small a step it will be from her empty bed to her empty grave.
- o *no /Complaints, no comment*: The third (weaker) example of repetition in what is a closely-spaced string of four emphasises the negativity of her situation.
- o *My chief...his chief*: Suggests the strictness of the hierarchy of which she is a disregarded part.
- o *no sunlight dyes, no hand suffuses*: Her body, always encased in navy, is never exposed to the sun; and no male hand ever touches and *suffuses* it (causes it to redden with passion). The repetition here continues the negatives of the earlier example *no /Complaints, no comment*, and picks up again the idea that her life (like her body) is totally colourless. (Navy, for the purposes of the poem, is seen as barely a colour.)
- o *open, open!*: The repetition here and in the final example is the repetition of outcry and abandonment – to an undeniable need to escape from a sterile present into an enriched future.
- o *change me, change me!*: This climactic repetition forcefully expresses the woman’s final and paradoxical plea. She asks that the vulture become human and free her from her humanity so that she can become an animal, perhaps *the great lioness* she has envied earlier. She will then be able herself, like the women in the opening stanza, to *look back at the leopard like the leopard*.

(Second overarching comment): The poem’s repetitions are not just superficial devices of language, but act integrally to give weight to its central themes.

So how *can* you assess how well you’ve done?

Only in broad terms:

- o If what we have included above is the sort of thing you’ve said in your commentary, you’ve probably done well.
- o If you have managed to include half, or more than half, of the actual ideas we have listed, you have probably done very well.

Three further exercises you could undertake if you wished:

- o There’s no question related directly to the Setting of the prose passage. Devise one, and make notes towards an answer.

- o The ‘missing’ item from the SCASI list in the questions on the poem is Ideas. Devise one, and make notes towards an answer.
- o Compare the two passages, prose and poem, under the headings Intention (what each writer is trying to do), Methods (how he/she is trying to do it) and Success (how thoroughly they have achieved their aims).

If you now feel you need more help and practice (and you have time) you may want to look at the free Sample Section from ‘Writing Unseen Commentaries: A Student Help Book’ (<http://www.litworks.com> in case you’ve forgotten). If you need even more help and practice (and have even more time) you will be able to buy the book itself online.

Good luck, in any case, with the exam itself!