

Suggestions for learning and teaching Scottish Literature and Language

Higher / Intermediate 2 Textual Analysis on a Scottish Text

You are reminded that this part of the paper tests your ability to understand, analyse, and evaluate the text. The number of marks attached to each question will give you some indication of the length of answers required.

Liz Niven

TOURISTS AT AUSCHWITZ

(first published in *Going Up Ben Nevis In A Bubble Car – New Writing Scotland 18*, ASLS, 2001)

We'd been telt
nae birds wid sing.

True it wis bit tall trees
shrooded brick wark camps.

Row upon row, they stretch,
far as the greetin een cuid see.

Hidden frae view,
gas chaumers lay buriet,
unner foondations crummlt,
as butcher builders fled.

A million an a hauf stanes pave
memorials in monie tungs.
A brick fir ilka deid sowel.
Vyces are low, few picters taen.

Nearhaun, a watter-fillt hollow,
algae covert, still hauds human ash.
A haun-wringin guide tells us mair.
Wirds hing heavy.

Intae sic silence,
a green puddock lowps a perfit bow,
oan the staignant loch.



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Glossary:

shrooded = shrouded, een = eyes, chaumers = chambers, ilka = every, sowel = soul,
puddock = frog/toad, lowps = leaps, perfit = perfect, staignant = stagnant

QUESTIONS

MARKS

1. Look at the opening two lines.
 - (a) Who are “we” and who might have told them? 1
 - (b) What impression of the place are we given by these lines? 1
 - (c) Why do you think “nae birds wid sing” there? 1
2. What effect do you think the poet is trying to create by combining the words “tourists” and “Auschwitz” in the title of the poem? Explain how she achieves this effect. 2
3. Why do you think the poet has chosen the word “shrooded” rather than simply “covered”? 2
4. Look again at stanzas 3–5.
 - (a) Show how word choice and imagery are used to develop the ideas expressed in stanza 2. 4
 - (b) Select one other feature of technique or style and show how it helps to emphasise how the poet is feeling in these lines. 2
5. (a) Supporting your answer with reference to the text, how would you describe the mood of the tourists in stanza 5? 2
- (b) Show how this mood is further developed in stanza 6. 2
6. In your opinion, what effect is created by the last stanza and how far does it alter the mood or tone as well as our reading of the poem? 4
7. How far do you think the poet has succeeded in conveying a real sense of the scale and enormity of the evil committed at Auschwitz and how has she achieved this? (you should refer to at least two techniques) 4
8. Comment at greater length on the effect Auschwitz had on the poet, with reference to at least two aspects of style or technique, such as word choice, imagery, sound effects, syntax, contrast or comparison, sentence or verse structure, punctuation etc. 5

TOTAL = 30

MARKING GUIDE

1. (a) Tourists / a guide or other people who had been there 1
 (b) A scary, eerie, grim, empty, silent place, etc. – any one 1
 (c) It has scared away all bird life or birds sense it is a place of death, where horrific things took place and so singing is inappropriate. 1
2. The title is surprising, odd or even ironic in the way it uses a very unexpected or contrasting word collocation, via the very different connotations of tourism and death camps. Not the sort of place we expect tourists to visit. Also reward relevant comments on use of half rhyme. 1 + 1
3. “Shrooded” creates a visual image which carries associations the more literal word lacks, to do with death and covering bodies or secrecy etc., as well as implying a respect or sympathy for the dead offered by the trees, something not given to the victims. 2
4. (a) Word choice: greetin, hidden, buriel, memorials, stanes, deid sowels, or references to the extent/ number of bricks and buildings etc.
 Imagery: row upon row etc., greetin een, gas chaumers buriel etc., butcher builders, memorials in monie tungs etc.
 Half mark for each reference, up to a maximum of 2 2
 All develop the associations of death suggested by “shrooded” or convey the factory scale of “wark camps” designed to kill on a vast scale, that cannot be/must not be obliterated or forgotten. Two for comment.... 2
 (b) Accept comments on such things as variation in sentence and stanza length, syntax in line 1 of stanza 3, enjambment in stanza 4, assonance or vowel stress in the next line or in line 3 of stanza 4, alliteration in stanzas 4 and 5, use of numbers, contrast, short sentences, simple words and ellipsis in stanza 5 or any other feature related to the poet’s feelings. 2
5. (a) Sombre, subdued, sorrowful etc., supported by reference to “vyces are low, few picters taen” or “million “deid sowels” 2
 (b) Stanza 6 refers to the hollow containing human ash, the “haun-wringin” guide and how “wirds hing heavy”, all developing the revulsion, horror, pain and sorrow etc. felt by those present. 2
6. A sense of the poet’s surprise, wonder, amazement, though it also highlights the silence of the place. 1
 Its sudden appearance is certainly a pleasant surprise for the author and seems to lighten the sombre mood at the end, possibly leaving the poet with a reason to feel uplifted. 1
 Better answers should attempt to comment on the symbolism of the green puddock lowping “a perfit bow” for a further two marks.
 While green is the colour of the “stagnant loch”, it also has many positive associations in the natural world, of new life, regrowth etc. Perhaps the green puddock could represent nature’s perfection or innocence in contrast to man’s imperfection and capacity for evil, or simply the miraculous regenerative power of nature, even from a stagnant loch in the ruins of a death camp. After all the “gas chaumers” have “crummlt” and the “butcher builders” have fled, so maybe there is room for cautious hope for the future after all. However it could be read as highlighting man’s evil even more by contrast with the natural world of birds, frogs and trees which provide a shroud almost as if in mourning.
 Reward two separate points or one more developed point, with supporting evidence. 2
7. The scale of the death camp is conveyed firstly though the imagery of the rows of work camps stretching as far as “greetin een” can see, almost like endless rows of tombstones, also highlighted by the syntax/ inversion of these lines, placing row upon row at the start of the sentence.
 The scale/enormity is further developed by spelling out the exact number of stanes and the explicit comparison of a brick for each “deid sowel”, further stressed via the alliteration in million/memorials/monie.



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Reward any reference to the silence of a place where no birds will sing or the “stagnant loch” still filled with human ash (symbolism) or to the hidden “gas chambers” which the fleeing “butcher builders” tried to conceal, now buried under rubble, whereas the number of its victims are represented by brick memorials.

Also the euphemism of “work camps” for death camps shows how language was used to lie and conceal the truth. In contrast the blunt compound expression “butcher builders” explicitly spells out the truth by using a very unexpected combination of words which effectively condenses two very different word associations or expectations, revealing the true function behind all these buildings, while the b/r alliterations also helps to suggest that something very harsh and brutal took place here. 2 + 2 or 1 + 1 + 1 + 1

Each point must be supported by reference and explanation.

8. She must have been greatly moved, overwhelmed by a strong sense of grief and pity for the dead, horror and anger at what happened, disbelief at the scale of it all or felt reverence for the dead, even the place and also at the end nature, though her feelings here may be contradictory or ambivalent (see answer to 6).

Reward and references to imagery or tone of “greetin een”, “haun-wringin” or “deid sowels”, with the Scots “sowel” suggesting much more sympathy or pity than the English “soul”, or imagery, plus assonance and stress employed in “wirds hing heavy”, any techniques mentioned for questions 4(b), 6 and 7, or any other relevant features.

More mature answers might comment on the very terse, economical style, using mainly simple language, few adjectives, short sentences, short lines, absence of rhyme, or regular verse form, almost as if it is difficult to find words or forms to describe evil on this scale (“wirds hing heavy”) or possibly using language and style to reflect the nature of the place itself: a bare, bleak, ugly place where people were literally stripped bare, stripped of all identity and reduced to ash, as millions were exterminated by a callous, ruthless regime founded on racism and hatred.

Reward one mark for the effect on the poet, plus two marks for each relevant technique, with supporting evidence, or single marks for several techniques briefly explained. 5

ESSAY QUESTIONS ON *TOURISTS AT AUSCHWITZ*

1. Write at length about the effect this poem had on you and examine the means by which the poet achieved this effect.
2. Liz Niven’s poem illustrates that the Scots language, or a mixture of Scots and English that most Scots use and understand, can be used effectively to write seriously about any subject and not just humorously. Discuss how far you agree with this statement, with reference to several aspects of the poem such as the subject, theme, style, technique, tone and language.

GENERAL ESSAY QUESTIONS ON SCOTTISH TEXTS

1. A history book may give us all the facts or evidence available about the past, but only the novelist can really make us feel what it was actually like to be alive then. By referring to a work of fiction or non-fiction, say how far you agree with this statement and then discuss how several aspects of the work contributed to making the reader/audience feel this way about the lives of people in a past age.
2. Select a play, novel or short story which deals with an evil or injustice of the present or past and show how successful you think the author was in making you share their concern about it.
3. Choose a poet who celebrates, laments or satirises some aspect of life in the past or present and by reference to one or more poems discuss the techniques used to achieve the poet’s aims.