English Poetry

DETAILED STUDY NOTES

PART I — WILLIAM BLAKE

Songs of Innocence and of Experience (1789 / 1794)

'The Lamb' · 'The Tyger' · 'The Chimney Sweeper' (Innocence) · 'The Chimney Sweeper' (Experience)

PART II — UNIT II

P. B. Shelley: 'Ode to the West Wind' · 'Ozymandias'

John Keats: 'Ode to a Nightingale' · 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' · 'To Autumn'

Every poem explained in continuous prose — context, movement of the poem, close reading, themes, form and devices, comparison, and how to write the answer.

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PART I — WILLIAM BLAKE

1. Blake, his moment, and the two contrary states

William Blake was born in London in 1757 and died in the same city in 1827, having left it almost never. This matters more than it might seem, because the London he never left was the London of soot, chimneys, street-cries and children for sale, and those things are not merely the background of his poems but their whole subject. At fourteen he was apprenticed to an engraver, James Basire, for whom he drew the tombs and monuments of Westminster Abbey, and it is worth saying plainly that medieval art rather than classical art became the shape of Blake's imagination. He later studied at the Royal Academy, quarrelled with its president Sir Joshua Reynolds, and wrote furious marginal notes against Reynolds's doctrine that art should generalise and idealise. Blake believed the opposite with his whole body: that the particular, the minute, the individual and the sharply seen were the only things worth drawing or writing about, and that any doctrine of the general was a doctrine of the dead. He married Catherine Boucher, taught her to read and to help him in the printing, and lived in poverty for most of his life. His contemporaries thought him mad. Wordsworth's remark is often quoted, that there was no doubt the poor man was mad, but that there was something in the madness of this man which interested him more than the sanity of Lord Byron, and a contemporary diarist recorded Blake as an unfortunate lunatic whose personal inoffensiveness secured him from confinement. He claimed to see visions, angels in a tree on Peckham Rye, the ghost of a flea, the spirit of his dead brother Robert, and the honest way to take this is not as fraud or as pathology but as evidence that Blake did not draw a line between imagination and reality. For him the imagination was the real. Whatever else a student writes about Blake, this is the assumption underneath every line he wrote.

The historical moment matters equally. The year 1789, in which Songs of Innocence appeared, is the year of the fall of the Bastille, and Blake was among those Londoners for whom the French Revolution was not foreign news but a release of energy in the universe. Legend has it that he wore a liberty cap in the street. The same decades brought the Industrial Revolution and the child labour that ran it, and in particular the trade of chimney-sweeping, in which small boys of four and five were sold or apprenticed to master sweeps and sent up narrow flues to scrape soot, sometimes naked, sometimes with a fire lit beneath them to make them hurry. They suffocated, burned or were crushed, and those who survived developed the cancers that the trade made famous. In 1788 Parliament passed an Act intended to regulate the trade, and it was very widely ignored. Blake's two chimney sweeper poems are therefore not sentimental sketches of childhood but pieces of reportage written the year after a useless law. Meanwhile Pitt's government was prosecuting men for sedition and suspending habeas corpus, so that to speak directly about liberty in Britain was dangerous. Blake's solution, and it is one of the great tactical inventions in English poetry, was to put the most dangerous political and religious observations of his age into the mouths of children and into poems about lambs and tigers, where the censor does not think to look.

The form in which he published these poems is part of their meaning. Blake invented a method he called relief etching, sometimes described as illuminated printing, in which he wrote his poems backwards in acid-resistant varnish directly onto a copper plate, etched the plate, printed from it and then coloured each copy by hand. Words and images were cut on the same plate, so that the picture is not an illustration of the poem but part of the poem. The practical consequences are three. First, every copy of the Songs differs from every other in colouring and sometimes in the order of the plates, so that there is no single authoritative text in the way there is for Wordsworth or Keats. Second, the poems are short, sharp and song-shaped because they were made to sit inside an image on a page. Third, and most

useful for criticism, Blake was a craftsman whose hands worked metal and acid, and this is exactly the Blake who imagines God in 'The Tyger' as a blacksmith with a hammer, a chain, a furnace and an anvil. The smith-god of that poem is not a decorative choice; it is the imagination of an engraver.

The doctrine that organises the two books is stated in their full title, Songs of Innocence and of Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul. The operative word is states. Innocence and Experience are not childhood and adulthood, and they are not good and evil. They are two modes of perception, two conditions through which every human soul passes, and the poems are dramatic utterances made from inside each condition rather than moral judgements delivered from outside. This is the point on which most student answers fail, because the temptation is to say that Blake prefers innocence and regrets experience. He does not. His own formulation, in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell, is that without contraries there is no progression, and that attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate are necessary to human existence. Because the contraries are necessary, innocence is beautiful but blind, and experience is painful but seeing. Innocence is a world in which nothing is hidden because nothing is withheld, and its characteristic mark is that questions have answers. Experience is a world in which the answer has been withdrawn, and its characteristic mark, as the chimney sweeper of 1794 shows, is that the sufferer can now describe exactly who is profiting from his suffering. A good answer therefore holds both states at once and refuses to sentimentalise either.

Two further convictions run through the volume and should be named in any answer. The first is that energy is holy. Blake's aphorisms in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell make the case repeatedly: energy is eternal delight, the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom, prisons are built with stones of law and brothels with bricks of religion. What Blake hates is never passion but repression, never desire but the machinery, in priests and laws and fathers, that polices desire. The lamb's joy and the tiger's fire are both divine; what is demonic is the system that shuts a child up a chimney in order to pay for a prayer. The second conviction is that the God of the churches is a false god. Blake called the remote law-giving deity Old Nobodaddy, and in his longer prophetic books he called him Urizen, from your reason, the cold maker of moral prisons. For Blake the divine is not above the human but is the human imagination at full stretch, and Jesus is the Divine Humanity. This is why the line in 'The Lamb' about God becoming a little child is not a piece of Christmas sweetness but the whole of Blake's theology compressed into five words.

Finally, a word about the pastoral, because it gives a student a vocabulary for describing what Blake does across the volume. Innocence is written in the pastoral mode, the convention that runs from Virgil through Spenser and Milton and that supplies shepherds, meadows, streams, green plains and sun, together with the Christian overlay of Eden and the Good Shepherd. Experience does not simply abandon the pastoral; it breaks it. In the first chimney sweeper poem the green plain survives only inside a dream, and in the second it has vanished altogether, replaced by snow and by a church. Naming this movement from pastoral to anti-pastoral, and showing that the green plain migrates from landscape to dream to nothing, is one of the strongest analytical moves available in an examination.

2. 'The Lamb'

The poem's situation could hardly be simpler. A very small child is out in a green meadow with a lamb on a summer morning, and the looking turns into a question. He asks the animal directly, twice, who made it, and because no lamb can answer, and because in his world questions do have answers, he answers himself. He tells the lamb that its maker is called a lamb too, that this maker is gentle, and that he became a little child; then he sets himself beside the animal, declaring that the child and the lamb are both called by that name; and he ends not with an argument but with a blessing, repeated twice, so that the poem comes to rest on a benediction rather than a conclusion. There is no conflict in

the poem, no time, no death and no other person. This is what Blake means by a state of innocence: not a world without evil, but a world that cannot yet see it.

The first stanza establishes the world the lamb inhabits, and it does so entirely through the verb gave. Life and feeding, clothing and voice are all presented as gifts, and the triple anaphora of gave thee, gave thee, gave thee defines the creator solely as a giver rather than as a lawgiver or a judge. The lamb is given life and bidden to feed by the stream and over the mead, which places it inside the pastoral landscape of Psalm 23, green pastures and still waters, and the preposition over quietly grants it freedom of movement across an open meadow. It is given clothing of delight, softest clothing wooly bright, and it is important that Blake's word is delight rather than warmth or protection, since the garment is described as pleasure rather than utility; Blake's insistence throughout his work is that joy is the purpose of creation and not a by-product of survival. It is given such a tender voice that all the vales rejoice, and this is the only line of the stanza that widens the frame from one animal to a whole landscape, so that the smallest sound in the poem makes an entire countryside happy. In innocence, joy is contagious and cosmic rather than private, and the word rejoice is a religious word placed in a natural scene because for Blake nature and worship are not two things.

The second stanza is where the theology sits, and it is startling in its simplicity. The child takes on the role of teacher and priest, saying I'll tell thee, and this reversal is the essence of the state: an adult reader expects the child to be taught, and instead the child instructs, with no doubt whatsoever and no sense that his answer requires defence. What he says is that the maker is called by the creature's name. Not that he is almighty, not that he dwells in heaven, but that he calls himself a lamb; and the allusion is to John the Baptist's cry, behold the Lamb of God. Blake now has four things sharing a single name, the creator, Christ, the lamb and the child, and the logic is childlike and completely serious: if he calls himself a lamb, and you are a lamb, then you and he are of one name. The following line, that he is meek and he is mild, quotes the popular hymn Gentle Jesus meek and mild and behind it the Gospel sentence, I am meek and lowly in heart, and in the context of Blake's whole work the quotation is highly charged, because the Innocence poems use the language of eighteenth-century piety sincerely while the Experience poems turn that same language into an indictment. Here it is sincere. Then comes the Incarnation in five words, he became a little child, and the line deliberately lowers God, since it repeats the diminishment of the poem's first word, little, and completes a chain of shrinking from God to child to lamb. If God became a child, then a child speaking theology is not an impertinence, and the divine turns out to be the human and specifically the human in childhood.

The most beautiful line in the poem is also the plainest, I a child and thou a lamb, which contains two nouns, two beings and no verb at all. Blake uses juxtaposition in place of argument, offering no therefore and no because, and letting identity do the work; the pronouns I and thou keep the child and the animal as companions rather than as owner and stock, and the poem never says whether the child is a boy or a girl, which is itself a mark of the ungendered wholeness of innocence. From this the final claim follows, that we are called by his name, and with it Blake's doctrine of divine immanence is complete: one name covers creature and creator, God is not beyond the world but in it, and to see a lamb truly is already to see God. It also quietly answers the poem's opening question, since the lamb does know who made him, because he is made in his maker's name. What follows is not a conclusion but a blessing, God bless thee, twice, which is exactly right for a poem about innocence, because innocence does not close an argument, it simply rests inside one. The repetition also rounds the poem off musically, the way a hymn ends on a repeated Amen.

Yet Blake does not allow the pastoral to be entirely unshadowed, and this is the observation that lifts an answer above the average. The lamb's clothing of delight is wool, and wool is what is taken from a sheep; the lamb of God is the sacrificed lamb, and Blake's central symbol of innocence is also the central symbol of innocent suffering. The shadow falls across the meadow even in the happiest of the Innocence poems. More than that, Blake plants in this poem a phrase he will later reverse. Here God

gives clothing of delight; in the chimney sweeper poem of 1794 the parents clothe the child in the clothes of death. Same verb, same noun, turned inside out. Catching that echo and quoting both lines together is the single most efficient way to show an examiner that you have understood the design of the two books and not merely read one poem.

On form, the poem is two stanzas of ten lines in loose rhyming couplets, largely iambic tetrameter and almost entirely monosyllabic, with a refrain that repeats the opening question as lines nine and ten, repeats the promise as eleven and twelve, and doubles the blessing at the end. The effect is that of a hymn or nursery rhyme, and this is deliberate: Blake is using the metre of the hymns of his own childhood, of Isaac Watts's Divine Songs for Children, so that major theology arrives in the simplest possible vehicle. The phonetics support the meaning, since the l, m and w of Little Lamb, softest, meek and mild and wooly make gentle shapes in the mouth, and sound enacts gentleness. The poem is also an apostrophe throughout, addressed to the lamb in the intimate pronoun thee, and it rests on a chain of allusions, John 1:29 for the Lamb of God, Matthew 11:29 for meek and lowly, Matthew 18:3 for becoming as little children, Psalm 23 for the pastoral setting and the Wesleyan hymn for meek and mild. The one device it conspicuously lacks is the question mark that is not followed by an answer.

For an examination answer, the formulation to remember is that Blake dramatises innocence as a mode of perception in which the question of creation is already answered, and that the reader, who lives in experience, is left to feel how fragile that answer is. The comparison with 'The Tyger' is not optional but structural: the lamb's poem asks and answers in twenty lines, while the tiger's poem asks thirteen questions in twenty-four lines and answers none, and the two poems together are the whole of Innocence and Experience in miniature.

3. 'The Tyger'

The scene of 'The Tyger' is a night forest, though it is less a real forest than darkness itself with something on fire inside it: a tiger that does not so much stand as burn, a flame in the black. Someone is watching it and the watching will not settle into recognition, so the watcher stops being a spectator and becomes an investigator, working backwards from the creature to the workshop that produced it. Where did the fire in those eyes come from, some deep below or some sky above? What kind of being had the wings to fly up and the hand to seize that fire? What shoulder and what skill twisted the sinews of that heart, and when the heart first beat whose dreadful hand and feet were they? The middle of the poem turns into a forge, with hammer, chain, furnace and anvil, and then the frame widens to the cosmos, where the stars throw down their spears and water heaven with their tears. Two questions follow, whether the maker smiled at his work and whether the one who made the lamb made the tiger. And then the poem begins again, word for word, and asks it once more with a single word changed, so that could has become dare. There is no answer. The absence of an answer is the content of the poem.

This is the problem of evil, posed not as philosophy but as aesthetic shock. A good God made a gentle lamb; who then made a creature whose beauty is its deadliness? And the point must be pressed, that 'The Lamb' asks and answers in twenty lines while 'The Tyger' asks thirteen questions in twenty-four lines and answers none, so that the two poems side by side produce the whole architecture of the volume in a single contrast, a world that makes sense and a world that does not. The maker, further, is never named. Blake writes immortal hand or eye, he, dread hand, dread grasp, and never God and never Lord, and this refusal is the poem's intellectual honesty: the argument is not about doctrine, it is about evidence and shock. It is also why the poem has survived two centuries, because it commits to nothing except the terror of its own question, and every reader completes it differently.

The maker, when he does take shape, is a blacksmith. Hammer, chain, furnace and anvil make creation into industrial labour, and three consequences follow. Blake the engraver identifies the divine

with the artist-craftsman, so that the poem's God has a shoulder and an art, muscle and technique together. The tiger becomes a manufactured thing, which allows Blake's readers to hear the furnaces of industrial England inside a poem about a wild animal. And a smith-god is far more frightening than a father-god, since a smith is proud of what he forges and a furnace is not a nursery. The stanza that lists the tools abandons sentences altogether and becomes a staccato series of bare nouns, hammer, chain, furnace, anvil, with no verbs, so that the rhythm is that of work, one blow after another. The brain is cast in a furnace, which is a terrible answer to the question of where mind comes from and a magnificent image, and in Blake's hands it is also a blow at the rationalists, since even the calculator's brain is molten metal. The maker, finally, must dare to clasp the deadly terrors of what he has made, and clasp is an intimate word, an embrace, which also names the clasp of a chain.

Several details in the poem repay minute attention. The phrase fearful symmetry is an oxymoron, since symmetry was the eighteenth century's word for beauty, proportion, order and reason, and Blake makes proportion terrifying; it is also a blow at Reynolds and at neoclassical aesthetics, because the poem insists that form does not save you. The verb frame is a triple pun, meaning to build, to frame a picture and to frame someone, to entrap. The words aspire and seize the fire carry the allusions of Icarus and of Prometheus, so that the maker is already cast as a transgressor before we are told anything else about him. The line that asks what shoulder and what art could twist the sinews of the heart is violent in its verb, and it applies that violence to the organ of feeling, so that the tiger's cruelty appears to be built into its anatomy, torqued into it. Then the poem stops, in the only moment of stillness it allows, at the words and when thy heart began to beat, which is the instant at which life enters and the closest the poem comes to witnessing creation. The question that follows, what dread hand and what dread feet, is deliberately ambiguous between the smith's braced hands and feet at the anvil and the tiger's own paws, and the ambiguity is the point, because maker and made have become indistinguishable in their dread.

The fifth stanza widens the poem into cosmic history. The strongest reading of the stars that threw down their spears is Miltonic, the war in heaven of Paradise Lost, where the rebel angels' weapons fall and the stars submit, so that the tiger is made in a fallen universe and its making is implicated in a fall; a secondary reading makes the stars the older gods disarmed before this new maker. Either way the heavens respond to the tiger's creation with grief rather than applause, and the homely agricultural verb water'd quietly undercuts the grandeur of the scene. The question that follows is the most disturbing in the poem, did he smile his work to see, because a smile admits of two opposite readings, the pride of a craftsman satisfied with a perfect job or the cold pleasure of a maker of killers, and Blake gives the reader no help at all. It is worth observing that this is the only moment in the poem at which the maker is allowed an emotion. And then comes the hinge of the whole volume, did he who made the Lamb make thee, which names the earlier poem inside this one and leaves the question genuinely open. One reading is that a single maker contains both gentleness and terror, in which case the God of 'The Lamb' is only half a God and the child's answer was incomplete. A second is that there are two makers, since the Experience poems repeatedly suspect a false and cruel god, Urizen, behind the world's misery. A third is Blake's own resolution, that contraries are both necessary, that reason and energy, love and hate are necessary to human existence, so that the tiger is energy and energy is holy. Any of the three will serve in an examination provided the student shows that the question is unanswerable.

The most examinable detail in the whole poem is the one-word alteration between the first stanza and the last. The opening asks what immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry, and the closing asks what immortal hand or eye dare frame thy fearful symmetry, and in that change from could to dare the poem travels from wonder to accusation. Could asks about power, whether anyone was able; dare asks about right, who had the audacity, the recklessness and the moral nerve. Blake still does not answer, but he has changed the temperature of the question. Two further observations are worth carrying into an answer. The first and last stanzas form a frame, and the repetition is the point, since the poem has gone all the way round and come back to the same image with nothing resolved; even the

punctuation changes, the semicolon of line two becoming a colon in the last stanza, so that the poem now leans forward into its question instead of resting on its image. And the tiger itself never acts anywhere in the poem, since it only burns: the poem is not about what the tiger does but about the fact that it exists.

The metre is the argument in miniature. 'The Tyger' is written in trochaic tetrameter with the final unstressed syllable dropped, so that the stress falls on the first beat, tyger tyger burning bright, producing a hammering rhythm that is the exact opposite of the skipping iambic lilt of 'The Lamb'. Blake matches the metre to the maker: the lamb's poem sings and the tiger's poem strikes. Add to this the alliteration that drives the poem forward, burning bright, distant deeps, dare and dread and deadly, frame and fearful, and the industrial diction of twist, seize, clasp and grasp, and the sound of the poem is the sound of a forge. The tiger is also addressed directly in apostrophe, so that the reader stands in front of it rather than hearing about it, and the symbolism is stable and powerful: tiger as energy, terror, the sublime, desire and revolutionary power; night forest as the fallen world; fire as energy and life; anvil and furnace as creation understood as labour.

A political reading may be mentioned briefly but should not be made to carry an answer. In the 1790s a tiger loose in the night was an available figure for revolutionary energy, and Blake in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell had already praised the tygers of wrath as wiser than the horses of instruction. The temptation for students is to write that the tiger represents evil, and it should be resisted, because in Blake's scheme ruthless energy stands closer to God than cold and chained restraint. What the poem interrogates is not the tiger's morality but the nature of whatever could have made it.

4. 'The Chimney Sweeper' in Songs of Innocence

Before the poem, the reality. Boys as young as four or five were sold or apprenticed to master sweeps and sent up flues too narrow for a grown man, scraping the soot as they climbed, often naked, sometimes with a fire lit beneath them to make them hurry, and they suffocated, burned, were crushed or contracted the cancers of the trade and slept at night on bags of soot in cellars. The street-cry of the trade was sweep, and the Act of 1788 designed to stop the practice was ignored. Blake had seen these children in the streets he never left. A question on this poem should never be answered without a sentence of that context, because the poem's tenderness and its irony both depend on the reader knowing what is actually being described.

The poem itself is spoken by a very small boy who tells us how he came to be where he is. His mother died when he was almost a baby and his father sold him, and he dates the sale with terrible precision, saying that it happened while his tongue could scarcely cry weep, weep, weep, weep. That pun is the engine of the poem. He is trying to cry sweep, the trade's street-call, but he is too young to pronounce it, and what comes out of his mouth is weeping, so that language itself is wounded by child labour and the cry of the trade and the cry of grief become one sound. His life is then stated in a single line, that he sweeps chimneys and sleeps in soot. A new boy then arrives, little Tom Dacre, whose hair curled like a lamb's back, which is Blake's way of saying that a lamb has arrived at the shearer, and when Tom's head is shaved and he cries, the narrator comforts him with the flawless illogic of a child: never mind, because with a bare head the soot cannot spoil your white hair. That detail should be lingered over, since innocence here makes beautiful nonsense out of horror, and Blake finds it both touching and terrible at once.

That night Tom dreams, and the dream is the poem's centre. He sees thousands of sweepers, named Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack, locked up in coffins of black; an angel with a bright key opens the coffins and sets them free; they run down a green plain, laughing, wash in a river and shine in the sun, and naked

and white, their bags left behind, they rise on clouds and sport in the wind. The angel then tells Tom that if he is a good boy he will have God for a father and never want joy. Every element of this deserves comment. The coffins of black are a double image, naming both the soot-black chimney and the plain fact that boys died inside them, and black carries mourning as well. The bright key is revealing, because the angel does not build houses or repeal laws, it unlocks coffins, so that all the consolation on offer is otherworldly. The four ordinary names are not symbols but a census, Blake converting a statistic into boys. The green plain, river and sun are his stock pastoral of Eden and heaven, the same images he uses in 'The Echoing Green' and 'The Lamb', and their beauty matters, because Blake is not sneering at the child's faith but showing that this beauty is all that is on offer. And the condition attached to the angel's promise, if he'd be a good boy, is precisely what makes heaven a tool of social control.

Then Tom wakes, and it is still dark, and they get up in the cold with their bags and brushes and go to work, except that Tom is happy and warm. The narrator closes with the moral he has been taught, that if all do their duty they need not fear harm, and this couplet is one of the most savage lines in English poetry, because it is a lie and the poem has proved it a lie in the six stanzas preceding. Tom is warm in the cold because he has been taught a false promise, the promise of heaven in exchange for obedience now, and Blake's target is religion as compensation, heaven as an anaesthetic. The whole poem in fact runs two views at once, and naming this technique is the surest way to a good answer. The child's view is coherent and complete: a sad beginning, a kind friend, a beautiful dream, a happy ending and a good lesson, with consolation working and God as a father and duty paying. The reader's view is that a child has been sold by his father, that children are dying in chimneys, that the coffins are literal, that the only comfort available is a dream and that the final couplet is a lie. The gap between the two views is dramatic irony in its purest form, since the speaker does not understand what he is saying and the reader does, and it is worth saying explicitly that the child's consolation is genuine as an experience and false as a fact.

On form, the poem is six quatrains of AABB couplets in a simple ballad measure with a child's diction, so that the form of a song for children carries an atrocity. It is narrated in the first person by a child, which produces the dramatic irony, and its escape is a dream vision, because the only release available is in sleep. Its symbols are consistent and easy to handle: soot and black for death, corruption and the industrial city; white hair for innocence; the green plain, river and sun for Eden and heaven; coffins for chimneys; the bag for labour; the key for release.

The fatal mistake with this poem is to write that the angel shows that God looks after poor children. Blake is not preaching that. A poem does not tell the truth in its final couplet if the ending has been arranged to be a lie, and the correct formulation is that the child's consolation is real as an experience and false as a fact, which is exactly the difference between innocence and experience.

5. 'The Chimney Sweeper' in Songs of Experience

The second poem takes place in the same city on a colder day. A small figure stands in the snow, black with soot, so that the opening image is a black shape on a white field, a little black thing among the snow, crying weep, weep, which is both his trade-cry and the sound of his grief. An adult, a passer-by or perhaps the poet himself, stops and asks him where his father and mother are, and the child answers with a sentence that contains no self-pity at all: they are both gone up to the church to pray. He then explains his own life with perfect clarity, saying that because he was happy upon the heath and smiled in the winter snow, they clothed him in the clothes of death and taught him to sing the notes of woe, and that because he is happy and dances and sings they think they have done him no injury, and are gone to praise God and his Priest and King, who make up a heaven of our misery. Four quatrains, and no angel, no dream, no green plain, no blessing. The poem ends in indictment.

Four things happen here that could not happen in the earlier poem. First, the parents are alive. In 1789 the mother was dead and the father sold the child, which made the evil a private tragedy; in 1794 both parents are respectable churchgoers, and the child freezes while they pray, so that evil has shifted from accident to hypocrisy. Second, the child is articulate about his own exploitation. He is no longer consoled, he is knowing, and that is exactly what experience means in Blake, not being worse but seeing clearly; and the pathos is that he is still a child who has had to become an analyst of his own life. Third, Blake indicts institutions rather than individuals, since God and his Priest and King are Religion, Church and State chained together in one line, and the sin is not that the parents are wicked but that they are ordinary people inside a system that rewards them for their piety. Fourth, the poem ends with a diagnosis rather than a lie.

The details of the poem deserve the same minute attention as those of its companion. The child is called a little black thing, and thing is the operative word, because he has been reduced to an object, a piece of equipment, and he even describes himself in the third person in the opening line before the pronoun I appears. Black against white makes both the exploitation and the isolation visible, since there are no Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack here, no crowded congregation of the dreaming dead, only one child alone in the snow, and the snow is the indifference of respectable society. The question comes from an adult and the poem is therefore dialogue rather than monologue, an interrogation answered by a testimony, so that Blake has moved from the dream to something like a courtroom. The answer about the parents is the most damning line in the poem precisely because it is calm: they are not far away and cruel, they are nearby and pious. The words because I was happy upon the heath are Blake's theology in a single clause, since the heath is the open common and the pastoral and freedom, and the child's original joy turns out to be the reason for his punishment; joy is what this world cannot tolerate. The phrase clothed me in the clothes of death makes the soot-black rags into mourning clothes, dressing the child for his own funeral, and it inverts the clothing of delight given by the creator in 'The Lamb'. The statement that they taught me to sing the notes of woe is equally precise, because his lament has been taught to him, he was not born crying but trained to cry on cue, whereas in the 1789 poem the weep was an accident of a small mouth that could not say sweep. And the observation that because he is happy and dances and sings they think they have done him no injury is the deepest cruelty in all four poems, since the child's natural energy is used as evidence against him: he dances, therefore nothing is wrong. He knows that he is performing and knows that they cannot tell the difference, and Blake does not say that the joy is false, because the joy is real and that is precisely what makes it usable, energy being the one thing that cannot be extinguished and therefore the one thing that can be spent excusing suffering.

The last two lines are the thesis of the poem and one of the great political statements in English poetry of the 1790s. God and his Priest and King are capitalised as institutions and as powers, throne and altar in a single machine, and the phrase that follows has two meanings at once. They make up a heaven means both that they fabricate a heaven, an invented afterlife, an opiate for the poor, and that their heaven is literally composed out of the misery of the poor, so that the comfort of the powerful is made of the soot of the child. It is the perfect closing line because it explains both why the parents pray and why the child sweeps.

The form compresses everything. The poem has four quatrains instead of six, and it is hard and clipped, with no room for dreaming, and although the rhymes are simple couplets the tone is bitter rather than tender. It works through dramatic dialogue, through irony and sarcasm in the repeated because I am happy, through antithesis in the black figure against the snow, and through symbolism of snow, soot, clothes of death, priest and king. And the absence of the angel, the key, the green plain, the sun and the blessing is itself a technique, since Blake removes every consoling image and lets the poem stand in the cold; a student who says that the absence is a technique has said something worth marks.

The fatal mistake here is to write that in this poem the child is unhappy whereas in the other he was happy. Both children suffer identically. The difference is knowledge, not circumstance, and the sentence to memorise is that innocence shows the child consoled by a lie while experience shows the child who has learned the lie for what it is.

6. The four poems as a single argument

Read together, the four poems make one argument rather than four separate ones, and it is worth stating that argument as a paragraph in any answer that ranges across the volume. Innocence asks a question and answers it, and experience asks a question and cannot answer it, which is the whole architecture of the two books expressed in two poems about a lamb and a tiger. The same hand then appears to give both kinds of clothing, the clothing of delight in the first poem and the clothes of death in the last, so that the reader is forced to ask whether one maker does both or whether there are two powers in the world, and Blake's answer is that both are real and both are necessary contraries. The child is Blake's instrument throughout, appearing as a theologian in 'The Lamb', as a comforter in the first chimney sweeper poem and as a witness in the second, and in each case the child's plain speech is the sharpest instrument of critique available to the poet. Blake's enemy is never a person but always a system, whether father, master, priest or king, and the system's function is always the same, to convert the suffering of the weak into the comfort of the strong. And the style is the argument, since simple metres, refrains, couplets and children's words are used because Blake believed that the deepest truths are not argued but seen. The sentence from The Marriage of Heaven and Hell that best summarises his method is the one about the doors of perception, that if they were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.

7. How to write the answer

The shape of a good answer is the same for all four poems. Begin with a single sentence naming the poem, the book and the year, and containing a thesis rather than an observation; a sentence such as the one about 'The Tyger' not answering the question it asks, and its thirteen unanswered questions being themselves the argument about a creator capable of both terror and tenderness, does more work in an examination than a paragraph of background. Then write three or four body paragraphs, each built in the same order, a claim, a quotation, an account of what the device does and a statement of what it reveals; and bring in the counter-poem at least once in every answer, because comparison is where the marks are. Close with a judgement rather than a summary, and a judgement is a sentence that commits to a position, for instance that the poem's refusal to console is itself the honesty Blake offers.

The vocabulary should be used sparingly and accurately, one term to a paragraph being ample: dramatic irony, oxymoron, paradox, apostrophe, anaphora, refrain, ballad metre, trochaic tetrameter, iambic tetrameter, couplet, pastoral and anti-pastoral, allusion, symbolism, juxtaposition, child persona, divine immanence, and the contrary states themselves. What must be avoided is the language of appreciation without analysis, Blake describes nature beautifully, the poem is very simple, Blake was a Romantic poet so he loved nature; the correct replacements are that the description does something, that the form is simple while the argument is not, and that Blake was in fact hostile to the nature-worship of Wordsworth, saying that natural objects always did and now do weaken, deaden and obliterate imagination in him. Above all, do not spend two paragraphs retelling the poem; one line of paraphrase is the maximum, and the rest of the answer should be analysis.

Five quotations will fit almost any question on Blake. Little Lamb who made thee is the question that is answered. Did he who made the Lamb make thee is the question that is not. So if all do their duty,

they need not fear harm is the irony of innocence. They clothed me in the clothes of death is the echo that links the two books. And who make up a heaven of our misery is the indictment of experience.

PART II — SHELLEY AND KEATS

8. The two poets, and the difference between them

Shelley and Keats belong to the same generation, both born in the last decade of the eighteenth century, both dead young, both central to what is called the second generation of English Romanticism, and both writing the odes for which they are now remembered within a handful of months of one another in 1819. Their difference, however, is more useful in an examination than their similarity. Shelley is a poet of the world as it might be changed. His imagination runs outward into politics, prophecy and the cosmos, his characteristic gesture is the apostrophe to a force larger than himself, and his faith is that destruction is the condition of renewal. Keats is a poet of the world as it must be borne. His imagination runs inward into the senses, into sickness and time, and his characteristic gesture is the attempt to escape the fever of existence and his discovery that the attempt fails. Shelley wants to become the wind; Keats wants to fade into the forest and finds he cannot. Where Shelley ends with a prophecy, Keats ends with a question.

Two terms from Keats's letters should be carried into any answer about him. The first is negative capability, his phrase for the quality that makes a man of achievement, especially in literature, capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason; the unresolved endings of his odes, which students often read as weakness, are rather the deliberate exercise of that capability. The second is his remark that he is certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination, which is the best gloss available on the closing line of the 'Grecian Urn'. Both are worth a sentence in an answer, because they show that the uncertainty is a theory and not an accident.

9. Shelley: 'Ode to the West Wind'

The poem was written in 1819 near Florence and published in 1820 with Prometheus Unbound, and it was written in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre, when cavalry charged a crowd of some sixty thousand people meeting peacefully at St Peter's Fields in Manchester to demand parliamentary reform and killed and wounded hundreds. That event is not mentioned anywhere in the poem, and yet it is the poem's occasion, because in Shelley's hands the west wind becomes the figure of a revolution that strips away a dead social order and scatters the seed of a new one. The dead leaves of the first canto are not only leaves. The poem is an ode, in five sections, written in terza rima, the interlocking rhyme of Dante, aba bcb cdc and so on, and the choice of rhyme scheme is itself a piece of mimesis, since a form whose rhymes cannot rest, each tercet hooking forward into the next, imitates the wind that never stops moving and cannot be concluded.

The first three cantos locate the wind in three elements, in ascending order of scale. On the earth the wind sweeps the dead leaves like ghosts fleeing an enchanter and carries winged seeds to their wintry bed, and Shelley gives the wind the phrase that becomes the poem's thesis, calling it destroyer and preserver, hear, oh hear. The two words are a paradox and the paradox is the poem's whole argument, because one action, the stripping of the trees, is simultaneously an act of death and an act of planting. In the sky the wind drives the clouds, the angels of rain and lightning, and Shelley describes the loose clouds as being like earth's decaying leaves, so that the storm above repeats the autumn below, and the canto ends with the image of the sky as a vast dome on which the wind writes the dirge of the dying year. On the sea the wind wakes the Mediterranean, which had been dreaming of old

palaces and towers, and stirs the Atlantic, which cleaves itself into chasms, and even the sea-blooms and the oozy woods that had never felt the wind before grow grey with fear and tremble and despoil themselves. The progression matters, because the wind grows more terrifying as it grows larger, and the reader is being prepared to ask what such a power could do for a human being.

The last two cantos turn the poem inward, and this turn is what makes it a lyric rather than a nature poem. In the fourth canto Shelley asks the wind to lift him as a wave, a leaf or a cloud, and the cry that follows, that he falls upon the thorns of life and bleeds, is the poem's admission of weakness; the human speaker is caught in the same thorns the wind passes over. He explains his condition as a heavy weight of hours that has chained and bowed one too like the wind, tameless and swift and proud, so that the wind is not an alien power but a truer version of himself. And in the fifth canto he makes the poem's central request, that the wind make him its lyre, even as the forest is, and drive his dead thoughts over the universe like withered leaves to quicken a new birth. Both images are significant: the forest is the instrument and the wind is the player, so that the poet consents to become something played upon; and the dead thoughts that must be scattered are his own, which means the poem is asking for personal destruction as the price of collective renewal. The closing question, if Winter comes, can Spring be far behind, is deliberately a question rather than an assertion, because a prophecy should not be a statement of fact. It is also the reason the poem ends in hope: Shelley first admits his despair and then converts it into prophecy, so that the speaker does not merely complain of the winter but becomes the wind that precedes the spring.

The themes are therefore four, and each can be given a paragraph. The power and sublimity of nature are presented as something vast, terrible and beyond human control. Death and rebirth are shown to be one process rather than two, since destruction is the condition of renewal and the winter is the guarantee of the spring. The poet is presented as a prophet, whose role is not to describe the world but to scatter his words into it to awaken a sleeping humanity. And the whole is political, since the wind's work on the forest is a model of what revolution does to an exhausted order. On form, the poem is an ode in five sections using terza rima; its characteristic devices are apostrophe, since the wind is addressed directly and repeatedly with the anaphora of hear, oh hear; personification, since the wind is a spirit and an enchanter and the Mediterranean is dreaming; simile, in the leaves like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing; the central paradox of destroyer and preserver; and a closing rhetorical question that leaves the prophecy open. The last line is the one quotation no answer on this poem can do without, but the phrase destroyer and preserver should be placed beside it, because the argument of the poem is the identity between the two.

10. Shelley: 'Ozymandias'

The poem is a sonnet of fourteen lines, but an irregular one, mixing Petrarchan and Shakespearean patterns in a rhyme scheme that never settles into the expected octave and sestet, and the irregularity is worth commenting on, because a broken form is being used for broken power. It was written in 1817 and 1818, in the course of a sonnet-writing competition with Keats, who wrote his own sonnet on the grasshopper and the cricket at the same time. Its narrative is conducted at three removes, since the poet reports what a traveller from an antique land reported, and the traveller in turn reports what a sculptor's ruined work shows and what an inscription says, so that the story has already become legend by the time it reaches us.

What the story gives is simple and deliberate. A traveller describes two vast and trunkless legs of stone standing in a desert, with a shattered visage half sunk in the sand beside them, and the face still shows a frown, a wrinkled lip and a sneer of cold command, so that the sculptor who made it evidently read the king's passions accurately and stamped them on the stone. The three lines in the middle carry the poem's most audacious observation, that the hand that mocked them and the heart that fed are still

visible, since the sculptor's hand mocked or imitated the passions and the king's heart fed them, which means the artist understood the tyrant better than the tyrant understood himself. On the pedestal is the inscription, my name is Ozymandias, king of kings, look on my works, ye mighty, and despair, with its deliberate echo of the biblical phrase and of Shelley's own earlier ironic use of it in Queen Mab. And around all of it there is nothing. The poem's flattest and most devastating sentence is the two words nothing beside remains, after which the image closes on decay, on a colossal wreck, boundless and bare, with the lone and level sands stretching far away.

The irony is the poem, and it must be stated precisely, because a vague appeal to irony earns nothing. The king commands the mighty to look on his works and despair of rivalling them, and a reader does despair, but not for the reason intended, since there are no works to look at. Time has performed exactly what the inscription forbade, and the only monument left standing is the boast itself, which has become its own refutation. Behind the irony sits a set of themes that can be ordered as follows. Hubris and the vanity of human power are the poem's explicit subject. Time destroys all empires, and what survives of Ozymandias is a wreck. Art outlives the tyrant, since the statue and the skill of the sculptor who made it survive in part, and the poem that describes them survives entirely, so that art is shown mocking power rather than serving it. And human ambition is set against the indifference of nature, which is the final work of the lone and level sands.

The devices are economical and repay naming. Irony is the governing trope. The frame narrative places the reader at two removes, producing distance and rumour rather than immediacy. Alliteration does an unusual amount of work in a poem this short, in lone and level, in boundless and bare and in cold command. Synecdoche reduces the king to legs, visage, hand and heart, so that a person becomes a set of fragments and then a set of fragments in sand. The oxymoron of a colossal wreck holds greatness and ruin in one phrase. And the deliberately irregular sonnet form, as suggested, mirrors the fractured power it describes. A good answer will also note what the poem does not do: it contains no moralising narrator and no exclamation of outrage, and the reader is left to draw the conclusion from the arrangement of the facts alone, which is a far more sophisticated technique than a sermon.

11. Keats: 'Ode to a Nightingale'

The poem was written in May 1819 at Hampstead, and its circumstances must be known if it is to be understood, since Keats was then nursing his brother Tom, who died of tuberculosis in December of that year, and Keats himself would die of the same disease in 1821 at the age of twenty-five. The line about youth growing pale and spectre-thin and dying is therefore not literary decoration but a description of the room next door, and no answer on this poem should omit that fact. The form is the ode as Keats developed it, eight stanzas of ten lines in iambic pentameter rhyming ababcdecde, and the poem's structure is a series of attempts to escape, each of which fails a little more instructively than the last.

The first stanza establishes the paradox on which the poem turns, since the speaker is not envious of the bird's happiness but too happy in it, and the drowsy numbness that pains his sense is the numbness of excess rather than of deprivation, as though of hemlock he had drunk. The second stanza makes the first escape attempt, which is wine, a beaker full of the warm South, and it is important to notice that the wish is not for pleasure but for oblivion, for fading away into the forest dim. The third stanza explains why he wants to leave, and it is the most directly autobiographical passage Keats ever wrote, since the world in which he would fade is the world of the weariness, the fever and the fret, where men sit and hear each other groan, where palsy shakes a few sad last gray hairs, where youth grows pale and spectre-thin and dies, and where but to think is to be full of sorrow. The fourth stanza then rejects wine and chooses poetry instead, and the choice is stated in one of the poem's most beautiful formulations, that he will fly to the bird not charioted by Bacchus and his pards but on the viewless

wings of poesy. Wine belongs to the body and poetry to the imagination, and the poem is at this point still confident that the imagination will carry him.

The fifth stanza delivers him into the forest, where the senses dissolve rather than sharpen, since the darkness is embalmed and there is a murmurous haunt of flies, and the synaesthesia of that stanza, smell and sound and touch crossing into one another, is the technical signature of Keats's sensuousness. The sixth stanza gives the poem its most famous lines, in which the speaker, darkling, listens and confesses that for many a time he has been half in love with easeful death, and that it seems rich now more than ever to die and cease upon the midnight with no pain. The crucial word is half. The seventh stanza then performs the turn, because the bird turns out not to be mortal: thou wast not born for death, immortal bird, and the speaker realises that the song has been heard by emperor and clown, by the biblical Ruth amid the alien corn, and through the charm'd magic casements that open on the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn. The bird is not an individual but a species, a song rather than a singer, and what Keats has discovered is the permanence of the species and the mortality of the hearer.

The last stanza is built on a single word. Forlorn, which has just been used of the faery lands, comes back as the pivot, and the speaker hears it as a bell tolling him back from the bird to his sole self, so that the poetry that had carried him away is revealed as fancy, and fancy cannot cheat so well as she is famed to do. The poem ends on three questions, adieu, the fancy cannot cheat so well, was it a vision or a waking dream, do I wake or sleep, and the refusal to answer them is not a failure of nerve but the deliberate exercise of what Keats called negative capability. It is also worth stating clearly that the poem does not choose death. Death would be easeful, but it would also be the end of the song, and the poem turns away from it, which is why the ending is not consolation but a kind of honesty.

Four themes can be drawn from the poem for the purposes of an answer. The first is escape from mortality, attempted in three successive forms, wine, poetry and death, each of which is found wanting. The second is the contrast between transience and permanence, since human beings decline while the bird's song continues, and the poem is careful to note that it is the song and not the bird that is immortal. The third is death as a lover, since death is described as easeful and the speaker as half in love with it, yet the seduction is resisted. The fourth is the failure of imagination, which is the poem's most mature insight, that fancy cannot cheat so well, and the ode therefore ends in uncertainty rather than in consolation. The devices that should be named are synaesthesia, as in embalmed darkness and the murmurous haunt of flies; apostrophe to the bird; the alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia that make the verse physically sensuous; the personification of death as a lover and of the moon as a queen; the pivot word forlorn; and the closing rhetorical questions that leave the poem open.

12. Keats: 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

The poem is an ekphrasis, a poem written about a work of art, and although Keats probably never saw this particular urn, working instead from the Elgin Marbles and from urns he had seen in the British Museum and in Holland, what matters is the mode, because the poem is less a description of an object than a meditation on what an object can and cannot do. It has five stanzas often lines, rhyming ababcdecde. Three scenes are painted on the urn: a piper and two lovers beneath trees, a lover about to kiss, and a procession leading a heifer to sacrifice. Around these three scenes the poem conducts an argument about permanence and transience which is more unresolved in each stanza than in the one before.

The first stanza addresses the urn as a still unravished bride of quietness, a foster-child of silence and slow time and a sylvan historian, and the questions with which it begins, what men or gods are these, what maidens loth, are the questions of a man who wants the urn to tell him a story. The urn is a

historian because it preserves a tale, and yet it is silent, and that contradiction, a thing that speaks more sweetly than rhyme and yet says nothing, is the poem's first version of its central paradox. The second stanza makes the paradox explicit: heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter. The painted piper's song has no sound and therefore cannot disappoint, and the lover who can never kiss, though winning near the goal, is told not to grieve, because she cannot fade and he will love her for ever and she will be fair. The stanza celebrates and regrets in the same breath, since for ever is at once the greatest gift the urn can give and the exact measure of what it takes away.

The third stanza, with its famous cry of more happy love, more happy, happy love, pushes the logic to the point where it becomes slightly hysterical, because the boughs are happy in that they cannot shed their leaves, the lovers are for ever panting and for ever young, and yet all breathing human passion is far above, leaving a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed, a burning forehead and a parching tongue. The repetition of happy betrays the strain, and the stanza's last image is one of fever rather than joy. The fourth stanza then breaks the poem open, because the speaker turns from the lovers to the procession and asks who these are coming to the sacrifice, and in answering he realises that the little town by river or sea shore or mountain built with peaceful citadel is emptied of this folk this pious morn and that its streets will be silent for evermore, with not a soul to tell why it is desolate. This is the poem's deepest insight, that the urn's permanence is built out of absence, that the village has been abandoned so that the marble can be beautiful, and that art's eternity is purchased with other people's lives.

The fifth stanza draws the conclusion, and it is a cold one. The urn is an Attic shape, a fair attitude, a cold pastoral, and the word cold is the poem's honesty, because marble cannot feel. The consolation offered is that when old age wastes this generation the urn will remain in the midst of other woe and will be a friend to man, saying that beauty is truth, truth beauty. That final statement is the most debated line in English poetry, and the safe way to write about it is to give the two principal readings without pretending the matter is settled. On one reading the line asserts a metaphysical identity, that the beautiful and the true are finally one thing. On another it asserts an epistemological limit, that since we cannot reach abstract truth, the beauty of art is the only truth available to us, which is why the line ends by saying that this is all we know on earth and all we need to know. Either reading can be supported, and a third possibility is worth mentioning in passing, that the words belong to the urn and not to the poet, so that Keats is reporting a doctrine rather than endorsing one. A student who canvasses the readings and then commits cautiously will do better than one who declares the line to be simple wisdom.

The themes of the poem follow from this structure. Permanence is set against transience, and the urn escapes time only by escaping life. The paradox of art is that it preserves by freezing, so that the lovers are for ever about to kiss and never kissing, and the piper's music is for ever unheard. Truth and beauty are held together in a formula which is either a revelation or a tautology, and the uncertainty is itself part of Keats's negative capability. Empathy and longing enter in the fourth stanza, where the recognition that the frozen town means vanished lives breaks the celebration. And the coldness of the ideal is named in the phrase cold pastoral, so that the poem refuses to end in simple praise. The devices are apostrophe, since the urn is addressed as thou throughout; personification, since the urn is a bride, a historian and a foster-child, and the boughs are happy; paradox and oxymoron, in cold pastoral, in unheard melodies and in still unravished; the repetition of for ever, which creates both eternity and monotony; rhetorical questions; and the sensuous detail of wild ecstasy, burning forehead and flowery tale. The comparison with the nightingale ode should be stated in an answer, since both poems use something immortal, a bird in one case and an urn in the other, to measure human transience, and both leave the poet uncomforted, the nightingale flying away and the urn remaining cold.

13. Keats: 'To Autumn'

The poem was written in September 1819 after a walk near Winchester, and it was published in 1820. It has three stanzas of eleven lines each, rhyming ababcdecdde, and it is the only one of the great odes in which nothing is argued, nothing is escaped and nothing is regretted, which is why it is usually described as the most serene of them. Three stanzas carry the season through three phases, ripeness, harvest and the dying close, and the structure is itself the meaning, since the poem moves from touch and taste to sight to sound, and from fullness to drowsiness to departure.

The first stanza presents autumn as the intimate of the sun, a close bosom-friend of the maturing sun, conspiring with him to load and bless the vines, to bend the apple trees, to swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells and to set budding more and still more later flowers for the bees, who are deceived into believing that warm days will never cease. The imagery is physical in a way that resists paraphrase, all weight and plumpness and sweetness, and the detail of the bees is characteristic of Keats, since it holds abundance and loss in one gesture: the hive is overfilled because the season is about to end. The second stanza personifies autumn as a woman, sitting careless on a granary floor with her hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind, or asleep in a furrow drowsed with the fume of poppies, or watching the last oozings of the cider press hours by hours. The tempo of the stanza is the point. Nothing in it is hurried, and the phrase hours by hours is the most leisurely phrase in all of Keats, so that the season is presented not as an ending that arrives but as a process that continues, and the poem's admiration is for that suspension.

The third stanza asks the question that the other odes would have asked earlier, where are the songs of spring, and then answers it in the plainest possible way, telling autumn not to think of them because she has her music too. What follows is that music: the wailful choir of small gnats mourning in the river sallows, the full-grown lambs loud bleating from hilly bourn, the hedge-crickets, the red-breast whistling from a garden croft and the gathering swallows twittering in the skies. The image of the swallows is the finest thing in the poem, because gathering is an unmistakable announcement of departure, and yet the poem never says winter, never says death and never names the loss it has been preparing. Keats trusts the reader to hear it. The last stanza also has no closing couplet to seal it, since the rhyme scheme leaves the stanza drifting rather than shut, and the effect is that the poem ends while still in motion.

The themes can be stated as a set of acceptances. Mortality is accepted rather than resisted, and this is the great difference between this poem and the nightingale ode, where mortality was the thing to be fled. Ripeness is treated as fulfilment rather than as loss, which is why the full-grown lambs and the overfull hive are images of completion. Process rather than stasis is celebrated, since nothing in this poem is frozen as the figures on the urn are frozen, and everything is at the point of transition. Abundance and loss are held together in a single perception, because the harvest's fullness already contains the coming winter. And the whole poem is an exercise in sensuousness and in what Keats called negative capability, since the poet does not moralise, does not console and does not philosophise, but simply feels the season and lets the feeling be the meaning. The devices are personification of autumn as a woman, a gleaner, a cider-presser and the sun's close friend; alliteration in mists and mellow, winnowing wind and full-grown lambs loud bleat; assonance in swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells; a synaesthetic mixing of touch, taste and sound in mellow, plump and soft-dying; the rhetorical question about the songs of spring; enjambment, so that the lines run on and the stanza never quite settles; and the deliberate refusal of a closing couplet. In an answer it is worth comparing the treatment of time here with the treatment of time in the 'Grecian Urn', since the urn stops time and pays for it in coldness, whereas 'To Autumn' lets time run and finds the running beautiful.

14. Shelley and Keats compared, and how to write the answer

A comparative paragraph should be built on a single difference and then illustrated from both poets. Shelley believes the world can be changed, and his characteristic figure is the prophet who asks a power greater than himself to scatter his words and quicken a new birth. Keats believes the world must be escaped or accepted, and his characteristic figure is the dreamer who flies to a nightingale, examines an urn, and finally sits down in a field in September and stops arguing. For Shelley nature is a violent and regenerative power, and his imagery is of storms, seas, lightning and seed. For Keats nature is a sensuous presence whose beauty is inseparable from its passing, and his imagery is of ripeness, drowsiness, flowers and birdsong. Shelley's time is cyclical, winter and then spring, and his poems end facing forward. Keats's time is loss for human beings, frozen eternity for art and fulfilment for autumn, and his poems end facing inward, in doubt or in quiet. Both poets are Romantics in their trust in the imagination and in the primacy of feeling over reason, but Keats is a Romantic of the senses and Shelley a Romantic of the idea.

The answer-writing advice is the same as for Blake and can be stated briefly. Open with a single sentence naming poem, volume or date, and a thesis. Build each paragraph as claim, quotation, effect, significance, and never allow a quotation to sit alone in a sentence without being worked. Bring in a second poem wherever the question permits, because comparison earns marks more reliably than any other single move. Use the technical vocabulary accurately and sparingly, drawing on the language of the ode, apostrophe, personification, paradox, oxymoron, synaesthesia, rhetorical question, negative capability, sensuousness, the sublime, terza rima and the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet. Close with a judgement that commits to a position rather than a summary that repeats the introduction. And in every answer about the Romantics, remember that the examination is not a test of whether the student likes the poem but of whether the student can show what the poem is doing and how it does it.