



## English

### Introduction

This task is about reading and responding.

Below is a range of texts which constitute entire poems, and extracts from plays, novels, short stories and non-fiction. Read them carefully and extendedly, making notes as you read (we highly recommend you print them out if you have access to a printer). You may feel drawn towards certain texts in particular; you may notice points of connection between them in terms of subject matter or form. You may find that some of the texts rub up against one another in ways that you find interesting, appealing, off-putting. You may feel you develop a good understanding of some of the texts quite quickly; others may take substantially longer. In all cases there may be moments of uncertainty or difficulty which you do not feel you can understand. Be patient with these and do not shy away from them in your thinking. Much of learning to read closely is learning to notice and accept our own uncertainties, and to acknowledge that they may not be a fault in us as readers but a feature or strength of the text. Be aware that, if you are reading carefully, it may just as well be that the text is trying to be uncertain or difficult in such a moment, and you will benefit from thinking about why that is.

### How to approach the task

As you read, you will want a good dictionary to hand. The best resource is probably the Oxford English Dictionary, which is available online [here](#). To make the most of it you will need a [subscription](#), which you can usually access through your local public library (if you can't, don't worry – there are other free online dictionaries available which will suffice). Beyond the use of a dictionary, try to resist the temptation to look anything else up in relation to these texts. You will notice they are provided to you without details about their author or any other contextual information beyond their date and, in some cases, a very short summary of their context within the longer text from which they are drawn. This task is asking you to engage in an exercise which is in the spirit of something called 'practical criticism', a way of reading invented in Cambridge in the 1920s by I. A. Richards. Richards was writing and teaching at a time when much literary criticism was preoccupied with the historical and biographical context of a piece of writing. In his view the level of attention paid to these aspects of literary texts came at the expense of a closer understanding of the form and style of the text itself. It also limited access to the formal study of literature to those with a certain kind of knowledge about a certain kind of author; one of his aims in developing practical criticism was to widen access to literary study by coming up with a way of reading literature which was precise and could be taught and understood no matter the educational background of the student. There is a brief introduction to practical criticism on the Cambridge English Faculty website [here](#), and two virtual classes [here](#) and [here](#) in which you may be interested. You might also want to get hold of a copy of Richards's book *Practical Criticism*, which you might be able to find in a library, online, or can be purchased second-hand online for between £5 and £10. Bear in mind that there are many different styles of and approaches to literary criticism, many of which pay more attention to context than practical criticism does. But for the purposes of this task, you are being asked to read in a practical critical spirit, and that means taking this exercise in good faith and working only with what is here on the page and the thoughts in your head (and a dictionary). This also means being patient and working closely with the words on the page in front of you, resisting any urges to leap to broad thematic interpretations.

## **Format**

The more you read these texts, the more you will find that you have things to say about them – likely some more than others. We want to hear what you have to say. There is no set format in which you must set out the response you send to us. Many of you will feel drawn towards the essay form, as that may be most familiar to you and the form you are used to from school or college. We would be very pleased to read essays, but also to engage with other formats such as extended annotations, presentations, podcasts... In all cases, try to keep in mind that we are not going to be ‘marking’ your work, as such; there are no assessment objectives or paragraph requirements. Don’t feel you need to bother with introductions and conclusions. We will be most impressed by responses in any form that show a reader genuinely engaging with the texts in front of them in form, style and content, and reflecting some elements of the complex process of getting to know a text in the response they produce.

The only rule is that your response must contain reference to **at least two** of the supplied texts, and we wouldn’t recommend you try to engage extendedly with more than three. We hope that you enjoy the process of reading what you find below, and we look forward to hearing what you have to say!



**Text [C] is an extract from the author's introduction to her novel.**

[Y]ou have not the best of it in all things, O youngsters! the elderly man has his enviable memories, and not the least of them is the memory of a long journey in mid-spring or autumn on the outside of a stage coach. Posterity may be shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure, from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our hopes; but the slow, old fashioned way of getting from one end of our country to the other is the better thing to have in the memory. The tube-journey can never lend much to picture and narrative; it is as barren as an exclamatory O! Whereas, the happy outside passenger, seated on the box from the dawn to the gloaming, gathered enough stories of English life, enough of English labors in town and country, enough aspects of earth and sky, to make episodes for a modern Odyssey. Suppose only that his journey took him through that central plain, watered at one extremity by the Avon, at the other by the Trent. As the morning silvered the meadows with their long lines of bushy willows marking the water-courses, or burnished the golden corn-ricks clustered near the long roofs of some midland homestead, he saw the full-uddered cows driven from their pasture to the early milking. Perhaps it was the shepherd, head-servant of the farm, who drove them, his sheep-dog following with a heedless, unofficial air, as of a beadle in undress. The shepherd, with a slow and slouching walk, timed by the walk of grazing beasts, moved aside, as if unwillingly, throwing out a monosyllabic hint to his cattle; his glance, accustomed to rest on things very near the earth, seemed to lift itself with difficulty to the coachman. Mail or stage coach for him belonged to the mysterious distant system of things called "Gover'ment," which, whatever it might be, was no business of his, any more than the most outlying nebula or the coal-sacks of the southern hemisphere: his solar system was the parish; the master's temper and the casualties of lambing-time were his region of storms. He cut his bread and bacon with his pocket-knife, and felt no bitterness except in the matter of pauper laborers and the bad-luck that sent contrarious seasons and the sheep-rot. He and his cows were soon left behind, and the homestead, too, with its pond overhung by elder-trees, its untidy kitchen-garden and cone-shaped yew-tree arbor. But everywhere the bushy hedgerows wasted the land with their straggling beauty, shrouded the grassy borders of the pastures with catkined hazels, and tossed their long blackberry branches on the corn-fields. Perhaps they were white with May, or starred with pale pink dog-roses; perhaps the urchins were already nutting among them, or gathering the plenteous crabs. It was worth the journey only to see those hedgerows, the liberal homes of unmarketable beauty—of the purple blossomed, ruby-berried nightshade, of the wild convolvulus climbing and spreading in tendriled strength till it made a great curtain of pale-green hearts and white trumpets, of the many-tubed honey-suckle which, in its most delicate fragrance, hid a charm more subtle and penetrating than beauty. Even if it were winter, the hedgerows showed their coral, the scarlet haws, the deep-crimson hips, with lingering brown leaves to make a resting-place for the jewels of the hoar-frost. Such hedgerows were often as tall as the laborers' cottages dotted along the lanes, or clustered into a small hamlet, their little dingy windows telling, like thick-filmed eyes, of nothing but the darkness within. The passenger on the coach-box, bowled along above such a hamlet, saw chiefly the roofs of it: probably it turned its back on the road, and seemed to lie away from everything but its own patch of earth and sky, away from the parish church by long fields and green lanes, away from all intercourse except that of tramps. If its face could be seen, it was most likely dirty; but the dirt was Protestant dirt, and the big, bold, gin-breathing tramps were Protestant tramps. There was no sign of superstition near, no crucifix or image to indicate a misguided reverence: the inhabitants were probably so free from superstition that they were in much less awe of the parson than of the overseer. Yet they were saved from the excess of Protestantism by not knowing how to read, and by the absence of handlooms and mines to be the pioneers of Dissent: they were kept safely in the *via media* of indifference, and could have registered themselves in the census by a big black mark as members of the Church of England.

[1866]

**Text [D] is an extract from a play. We join it as one of the characters, Fergus, has just left the stage, having failed to persuade Naisi to leave with him.**

[FERGUS goes. NAISI turns towards tent and sees DEIRDRE crouching down with her cloak round her face. DEIRDRE comes out.]

NAISI. You've heard my words to Fergus? [*She does not answer. A pause. He puts his arm round her.*] Leave troubling, and we'll go this night to Glen da Ruadh, where the salmon will be running with the tide.

[DEIRDRE crosses and sits down.]

DEIRDRE [*in a very low voice*]. With the tide in a little while we will be journeying again, or it is our own blood maybe will be running away. [*She turns and clings to him.*] The dawn and evening are a little while, the winter and the summer pass quickly, and what way would you and I, Naisi, have joy for ever?

NAISI. We'll have the joy is highest till our age is come, for it isn't Fergus's talk of great deeds could take us back to Emain.

DEIRDRE. It isn't to great deeds you're going but to near troubles, and the shortening of your days the time that they are bright and sunny; and isn't it a poor thing that I, Deirdre, could not hold you away?

NAISI. I've said we'd stay in Alban always.

DEIRDRE. There's no place to stay always. . . . It's a long time we've had, pressing the lips together, going up and down, resting in our arms, Naisi, waking with the smell of June in the tops of the grasses, and listening to the birds in the branches that are highest. . . . It's a long time we've had, but the end has come, surely.

NAISI. Would you have us go to Emain, though if any ask the reason we do not know it, and we journeying as the thrushes come from the north, or young birds fly out on a dark sea?

DEIRDRE. There's reason all times for an end that's come. . . . And I'm well pleased, Naisi, we're going forward in the winter the time the sun has a low place, and the moon has her mastery in a dark sky, for it's you and I are well lodged our last day, where there is a light behind the clear trees, and the berries on the thorns are a red wall.

NAISI [*with a new rush of love, eagerly*]. If our time in this place is ended, come away without Ainnle and Ardan to the woods of the east, for it's right to be away from all people when two lovers have their love only. Come away and we'll be safe always.

DEIRDRE [*broken-hearted*]. There's no safe place, Naisi, on the ridge of the world. . . . And it's in the quiet woods I've seen them digging our grave, throwing out the clay on leaves are bright and withered.

NAISI [*still more eagerly*]. Come away, Deirdre, and it's little we'll think of safety or the grave beyond it, and we resting in a little corner between the daytime and the long night.

DEIRDRE [*clearly and gravely*]. It's this hour we're between [the daytime and a night where there is sleep for ever, and isn't it a better thing to be following on to a near death, than to be bending the head down, and dragging with the feet, and seeing one day a blight showing upon love where it is sweet and tender.

NAISI [*his voice broken with distraction*]. If a near death is coming what will be my trouble losing the earth and the stars over it, and you, Deirdre, are their flame and bright crown? Come away into the safety of the woods.

DEIRDRE [*shaking her head slowly*]. There are as many ways to wither love as there are stars in a night of Samhain; but there is no way to keep life, or love with it, a short space only. . . . It's for that there's

nothing lonesome like a love is watching out the time most lovers do be sleeping. . . . It's for that we're setting out for Emain Macha when the tide turns on the sand.

NAISI [*giving in*]. You're right, maybe. It should be a poor thing to see great lovers and they sleepy and old.

DEIRDRE [*with a more tender intensity*]. We're seven years without roughness or growing weary; seven years so sweet and shining, the gods would be hard set to give us seven days the like of them. It's for that we're going to Emain, where there'll be a rest for ever, or a place for forgetting, in great crowds and they making a stir.

NAISI [*very softly*]. We'll go, surely, in place of keeping a watch on a love had no match and it wasting away.

[1909]

[E]

### Questions of Travel

There are too many waterfalls here; the crowded streams  
hurry too rapidly down to the sea,  
and the pressure of so many clouds on the mountaintops  
makes them spill over the sides in soft slow-motion,  
turning to waterfalls under our very eyes.

—For if those streaks, those mile-long, shiny, tearstains,  
aren't waterfalls yet,  
in a quick age or so, as ages go here,  
they probably will be.

But if the streams and clouds keep travelling, travelling,  
the mountains look like the hulls of capsized ships,  
slime-hung and barnacled.

Think of the long trip home.  
Should we have stayed at home and thought of here?  
Where should we be today?  
Is it right to be watching strangers in a play  
in this strangest of theatres?  
What childishness is it that while there's a breath of life  
in our bodies, we are determined to rush  
to see the sun the other way around?  
The tiniest green hummingbird in the world?  
To stare at some inexplicable old stonework,  
inexplicable and impenetrable,  
at any view,  
instantly seen and always, always delightful?  
Oh, must we dream our dreams  
and have them, too?  
And have we room  
for one more folded sunset, still quite warm?

But surely it would have been a pity  
not to have seen the trees along this road,  
really exaggerated in their beauty,  
not to have seen them gesturing

like noble pantomimists, robed in pink.  
—Not to have had to stop for gas and heard  
the sad, two-noted, wooden tune  
of disparate wooden clogs  
carelessly clacking over  
a grease-stained filling-station floor.  
(In another country the clogs would all be tested.  
Each pair there would have identical pitch.)  
—A pity not to have heard  
the other, less primitive music of the fat brown bird  
who sings above the broken gasoline pump  
in a bamboo church of Jesuit baroque:  
three towers, five silver crosses.  
—Yes, a pity not to have pondered,  
blurr'dly and inconclusively,  
on what connection can exist for centuries  
between the crudest wooden footwear  
and, careful and finicky,  
the whittled fantasies of wooden footwear  
and, careful and finicky,  
the whittled fantasies of wooden cages.  
—Never to have studied history in  
the weak calligraphy of songbirds' cages.  
—And never to have had to listen to rain  
so much like politicians' speeches:  
two hours of unrelenting oratory  
and then a sudden golden silence  
in which the traveller takes a notebook, writes:

*"Is it lack of imagination that makes us come  
to imagined places, not just stay at home?  
Or could Pascal have been not entirely right  
about just sitting quietly in one's room?"*

*Continent, city, country, society:  
the choice is never wide and never free.  
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?"*

[1965]

**Text [F] contains three diary extracts, as they are set out in a longer text which is a meditation upon keeping diaries.**

That morning at the port of Epidaurus, waiting on board the anchored liner for the small boats to come and take us ashore... after looking out at the flatness of the oyster-coloured sea and bright stillness of the morning mist, how I found myself staring down the smooth hull of the ship, watching a jelly-fish, its rhythmic pulsing in the water far below.

Crossing the narrow plank from the caique that had brought us to the shore, onto the slippery rocks of the Gallipoli beaches, watching a Greek sailor, dark curly-haired film star face, picking spiny black sea urchins out of the shallows – to eat, they said. And all those young men, from the 1914–18 war, buried up there on the hill.

Suddenly coming upon a flock of wading birds, on Delos, how they were standing all together in a gleaming pool left by the rain, in the very centre of the sanctuary of Apollo, and all looking the same way... How they took flight and wheeled up in a great curve over the island as I came near. So unexpected, so alive, amongst the deadness of the ruins, as if I had surprised a god.

[1987]

[G]

### **Wild Clematis in Winter**

*i.m. William Cookson*

Old traveller's joy appears like naked thorn blossom  
as we speed citywards through blurry detail:  
wild clematis' springing false bloom of seed pods,  
the earth lying shotten, the sun shrouded off-white,  
wet ferns ripped bare, flat as fishes' backbones,  
with the embankment grass frost-hacked and hackled,  
wastage, seepage, showing up everywhere  
in this blanched apparition.

[2006]