1.9 Literature: Unseen Prose Analysis

AQA 7712 · about 160 minutes · Write-in edition

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

The Tide Line

Source written for Revision Library (original, copyright-free). An extract from an original prose narrative, composed for the purposes of A-level unseen prose analysis. This text is not extracted from, and does not paraphrase, any published or in-copyright novel. Lines are numbered for ease of reference in the questions that follow.

I have not been back to Aunt Vera's guesthouse in eleven years, and yet I could still draw the front step from memory: the black iron boot-scraper shaped like a swan, the peeling sign that read VERA'S REST, the smell of vinegar and drying sea-lettuce that clung to the porch no matter how many times she scrubbed it. I was nine the summer my parents sent me to her, and I arrived at Fenwick-on-Sea with a suitcase that would not shut and a private conviction that I had been abandoned.

Vera did not fuss over me, which I resented at first and was grateful for later. She put me to work folding towels for the six guest rooms, then said, without looking up from the till, that idle hands made for long summers. She was my mother's older sister, though nobody could have guessed it from the two of them side by side; my mother was soft where Vera was all corners, her voice worn thin by decades of announcing breakfast times to strangers. She wore the same cardigan, grey with a darned elbow, on every day I knew her, and she had a way of standing in doorways with her arms folded that made the whole house seem smaller and more governable than it had any right to be.

The guesthouse itself sagged towards the sea like something reaching for water it could never quite touch. Salt had got into the window frames and swollen the paint into blisters; the residents' lounge held a piano nobody played and a stopped clock nobody had mended, its hands fixed forever at twenty to four. I used to think the whole building was simply old and tired, the way old people are tired, until the afternoon I found Vera standing at that piano with the lid

raised, one finger resting on a yellowed key she did not press.

It happened in the third week. I had come in from the beach, wet to the knees, meaning to fetch a towel, and I stopped in the lounge doorway because something in the set of her shoulders did not belong to the Vera who barked at guests about muddy shoes. She was not playing. She was simply looking at the keys the way you might look at a door you had decided, a long time ago, never to open again. When she noticed me she closed the lid with a soft, final sound, like a book being shut on an unfinished sentence, and said only, 'Go and change out of those wet things before you catch your death.' But her voice had lost its usual flint, and for the rest of that day she moved through the house more slowly, as though carrying something she had not agreed to carry.

I did not understand it then. It was only years later, sorting through her papers after the funeral, that I found the certificate from the Fenwick School of Music, dated the year she turned seventeen, and the letter beneath it from a college in London that had never been answered. I understood, too late for it to matter to her, that the guesthouse had not been a choice so much as a substitution, one life quietly folded away to make room for the running of somebody else's breakfasts.

What I remember most, though, is not the discovery but the tide line itself, that ragged brown seam of weed and broken shell the sea left along the sand each morning, always in a slightly different place, as though the water itself could not decide where it had meant to stop. Vera used to make me sweep it clear from the guesthouse steps before the first guests came down, grumbling that visitors did not pay good money to look at other people's rubbish. I swept it without asking why the sea kept leaving the same debris in different places, or why a woman who claimed not to care for order spent every morning restoring it. I know now that some people build their whole lives along a line like that: drawn fresh each day, never quite in the place it was the day before, and swept clear before anyone else can see what the tide has left behind.

1 Re-read lines 1 to 6. Explore how the writer uses narrative viewpoint and retrospective structure to shape the reader's early understanding of the narrator and of Vera.

(a) Explore how the writer uses narrative viewpoint and retrospective structure to shape the reader's early understanding of the narrator and of Vera in lines 1 to 6. **(10)**

(Total for Question 1 is 10 marks)

2 Re-read lines 8 to 15. Explore how the writer presents Vera's character, considering both direct and indirect methods of characterisation.

(a) Explore how the writer presents Vera's character in lines 8 to 15, considering both direct and indirect methods of characterisation. **(10)**

(Total for Question 2 is 10 marks)

3 Re-read lines 24 to 32. Analyse how the writer creates a shift in mood and pace in this section, considering structure, dialogue and narrative viewpoint.

(a) Analyse how the writer creates a shift in mood and pace in lines 24 to 32, considering structure, dialogue and narrative viewpoint. **(12)**

(Total for Question 3 is 12 marks)

4 Explore the significance of the piano and its closed lid as a symbol across the extract as a whole.

(Total for Question 4 is 10 marks)

5 Explore the structural significance of placing the revelation about Vera's past in lines 34 to 39, rather than earlier in the extract, immediately after the piano scene.

(Total for Question 5 is 10 marks)

6 Using your knowledge of the social and historical opportunities available to women in twentieth-century Britain, explain how the extract reflects this context, referring closely to lines 34 to 39.

(Total for Question 6 is 8 marks)

7 Explore the significance of the title 'The Tide Line' in relation to the extract as a whole.

(Total for Question 7 is 10 marks)

8 Explore how the writer creates a shift in tone between the description of Vera in lines 8 to 15 and the closing reflection on her life in lines 41 to 49.

(Total for Question 8 is 10 marks)

9 Two readers have offered contrasting responses to Vera: one describes her as 'a woman defined by quiet self-sacrifice', the other as 'a woman who chose control over connection'. Evaluate these two interpretations, using close reference to the writer's methods.

(a) Evaluate the two interpretations of Vera, 'a woman defined by quiet self-sacrifice' versus 'a woman who chose control over connection', using close reference to the writer's methods. **(15)**

(Total for Question 9 is 15 marks)

10 'In this extract, the writer suggests that the choices people make for others often come at the cost of the life they might have chosen for themselves.' Using your knowledge of the whole extract, evaluate this view.

(Total for Question 10 is 25 marks)

11 Analyse the writer's use of the extended tide-line metaphor in lines 41 to 49, and its relationship to ideas about identity developed elsewhere in the extract.

(Total for Question 11 is 12 marks)

Mark scheme · 1.9 Literature: Unseen Prose Analysis

Question 1

(a) **L4** Assured, perceptive analysis of viewpoint and retrospective structure, with well-selected, precise textual detail; consistently coherent, well-expressed argument using appropriate terminology. **9-10**

(a) **L3** Clear, sustained analysis of viewpoint and/or retrospective structure, supported by apt textual detail; generally coherent expression with appropriate terminology. **7-8**

(a) **L2** Some relevant comment on viewpoint or structure, with reasonable but sometimes generalised textual support; expression mostly clear. **4-6**

(a) **L1** Limited or descriptive comment, with little clear link to viewpoint or structure; basic or narrative-retelling approach. **1-3**

(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

(a) Indicative content:

- First-person, retrospective narration (an adult recalling a childhood summer) creates a gap between the child's contemporary feelings and the adult's later, more measured understanding.
- The phrase 'a private conviction that I had been abandoned' (lines 5 to 6) is presented with gentle retrospective irony, as the calm, controlled surrounding narration suggests the adult now recognises this as a childish exaggeration.
- The claim to be able to 'draw the front step from memory' (lines 1 to 2) signals unusually vivid recall, priming the reader to expect precise sensory detail, immediately fulfilled by the boot-scraper, sign and smell in the same sentence.
- Establishing Vera before she even speaks, through inherited, remembered detail rather than direct present-tense action, positions her from the outset as a figure defined by the narrator's memory of her, not by her own voice.
- Candidates might note that the extract withholds any explanation for the retrospective narrator's tone of quiet regret, a structural choice that only pays off once the reader reaches the revelation later in the extract.

Question 2

(a) **L4** Assured, perceptive exploration of both direct and indirect characterisation, with precise, well-integrated textual detail; fluent, accurate expression. **9-10**

(a) **L3** Clear exploration of characterisation methods, supported by well-chosen textual detail; generally accurate expression. **7-8**

(a) **L2** Some valid comment on characterisation, with reasonable but occasionally general textual support. **4-6**

(a) **L1** Limited, descriptive or narrative comment with minimal analytical engagement. **1-3**

(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

(a) Indicative content:

- Direct characterisation through repeated physical detail ('the same cardigan, grey with a darned elbow, on every day I knew her', lines 12 to 13) presents Vera as thrifty, unchanging and without vanity.
- Indirect/behavioural characterisation through her brisk instruction, delivered 'without looking up from the till' (line 9), shows a woman who prioritises the practical running of the guesthouse over comforting a homesick child.
- The direct antithesis 'my mother was soft where Vera was all corners' (line 11) characterises Vera through contrast, defining her against a gentler relative.
- The image of Vera 'standing in doorways with her arms folded' (lines 13 to 14), followed immediately by 'made the whole house seem smaller and more governable' (line 14), links posture directly to a sense of quiet, physical authority over the household.
- Candidates might note that the narrator's own admission of resenting, then later appreciating, Vera's briskness (line 8) invites a more sympathetic reading of this apparently unfeeling character.

Question 3

(a) **L4** Discriminating analysis of the shift in mood and pace, integrating structure, dialogue and viewpoint with precise, well-selected textual detail throughout; assured, controlled expression. **10-12**

(a) **L3** Clear, sustained analysis of the shift, supported by apt detail from more than one of structure, dialogue or viewpoint; generally accurate expression. **7-9**

(a) **L2** Some relevant analysis of the shift, though coverage may be partial or one-sided; reasonable expression. **4-6**

(a) **L1** Limited or largely descriptive comment on the scene, with little sense of shift or development. **1-3**

(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

(a) Indicative content:

- The short, flat opening sentence 'It happened in the third week' (line 24) breaks abruptly from the longer descriptive sentences of the preceding paragraph, slowing the pace and signalling a specific, significant memory.
- The withheld explanation, 'She was not playing' (line 26), delays understanding and builds quiet tension before the fuller image of Vera looking at the keys 'the way you might look at a door you had decided, a long time ago, never to open again' (lines 27 to 28).
- Vera's deliberately mundane dialogue, 'Go and change out of those wet things before you catch your death' (lines 29 to 30), functions as a deflection, allowing her to close down the emotional moment and resume her familiar, brisk role.
- 'Her voice had lost its usual flint' (line 30) marks a rare break in Vera's established characterisation; the writer extends the moment by slowing the narrative afterwards, noting she moved 'more slowly' (line 31) for the rest of the day.
- Candidates might discuss how the child narrator's limited understanding at the time, simply reporting what she observes, creates suspense and unanswered questions, since the reader too does not yet know what the moment means.

Question 4

Level 4 Perceptive, wide-ranging exploration of the piano's symbolic development across the extract, with precise textual support throughout; assured expression. **9-10**

Level 3 Clear exploration of the piano as symbol, supported by relevant detail from more than one part of the extract. **7-8**

Level 2 Some valid comment on the symbol, though support may be limited to a single moment in the text. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited, largely literal comment on the piano with little exploration of significance. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- The piano is introduced as an object 'nobody played' (line 19), establishing its symbolic function as a closed-off possibility before the reader knows why.
- The simile 'like a book being shut on an unfinished sentence' (lines 28 to 29) presents the closing of the lid as a story deliberately interrupted before its natural end.
- Once the certificate and unanswered letter are revealed (lines 34 to 36), the piano comes to symbolise Vera's abandoned musical ambition specifically, a life she chose, or was obliged, not to pursue.
- The finality of the lid's closure literalises the idea of a choice, or a resignation, being permanent, reinforced by the fact that the piano is never played anywhere else in the extract.
- Candidates might connect the piano to the extract's wider pattern of unfulfilled reaching, for example the personified guesthouse 'reaching for water it could never quite touch' (lines 17 to 18), suggesting object, setting and character share a single symbolic pattern.

Question 5

Level 4 Perceptive, well-developed exploration of the structural delay, precisely linking it to the extract's wider treatment of memory and understanding; fluent, controlled expression. **9-10**

Level 3 Clear exploration of the effect of the delay, supported by relevant textual detail; generally coherent expression. **7-8**

Level 2 Some valid comment on the delay, with reasonable but occasionally general support. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited or narrative-based comment with little structural awareness. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- Delaying the explanation creates a brief gap in which the reader shares the child narrator's own puzzlement at the piano scene, before understanding is granted.
- The explicit marker 'years later' (line 34), and the detail that understanding came only 'after the funeral' (lines 34 to 35), show the gap between event and understanding was, for the narrator, far longer than the structural gap the reader experiences.
- 'Too late for it to matter to her' (line 37) marks the revelation as arriving after any chance to act on it, reinforcing that understanding in this extract is always retrospective rather than immediate.
- Structurally, the writer withholds context (the certificate, the college letter) until after the reader has already formed an impression of Vera as brisk and undemonstrative, inviting a reassessment of the earlier characterisation.
- Candidates might argue that this delayed structure mirrors the extract's closing idea (the tide line) that meaning and understanding are never available all at once, but are pieced together gradually, and often incompletely.

Question 6

Level 4 Detailed, well-integrated explanation of context, clearly and precisely linked to textual evidence; assured expression. **7-8**

Level 3 Clear explanation of relevant context, linked to the text with reasonable precision. **5-6**

Level 2 Some relevant contextual comment, though the link to the text may be general or under-developed. **3-4**

Level 1 Limited or largely unsupported contextual comment, with minimal reference to the extract. **1-2**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- The unanswered letter from 'a college in London' (line 36) implies the opportunity was never actively taken up rather than formally refused, consistent with a context in which young women's individual ambitions could be expected to give way to family or domestic obligation.
- Vera's absorption into 'the running of somebody else's breakfasts' (lines 38 to 39) reflects how unmarried or available female relatives were often drawn into family businesses such as guesthouse-keeping, common in twentieth-century British seaside towns.
- The phrase 'one life quietly folded away to make room for' (line 38) implies a substitution presented as ordinary and unremarked upon rather than as a dramatic sacrifice, reflecting how such choices were rarely discussed openly at the time.
- The certificate 'dated the year she turned seventeen' (lines 35 to 36) implies a young woman's early musical promise interrupted at, or soon after, the point most young women of the period would have been expected to begin contributing to family or domestic life.
- Candidates might note the narrator's own generational distance, only understanding the significance of this context 'years later' (line 34), reflecting how such choices were often not discussed or fully understood within families at the time.

Question 7

Level 4 Perceptive, wide-ranging exploration of the title's symbolic significance across the extract, with precise textual support; assured expression. **9-10**

Level 3 Clear exploration of the title's significance, supported by relevant detail from more than one part of the extract. **7-8**

Level 2 Some valid comment on the title, though support may be limited to a single moment in the text. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited, largely literal comment on the title with little exploration of significance. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- The title foregrounds the extract's closing image rather than Vera's name or the guesthouse, signalling that the writer wants the reader's attention to settle on the idea of something recurring, shifting and daily concealed.
- Literally, the tide line is grounded in the seaside setting established from the opening description of the guesthouse (lines 17 to 18), anchoring the title in the extract's physical world.
- Figuratively, the tide line comes to represent Vera's unresolved history, and by the final sentence, a wider human pattern of managing disappointment that is 'drawn fresh each day' (line 48).
- Choosing this title over an alternative, naming Vera or the guesthouse, foregrounds theme over plot or character, inviting the reader to read the whole extract retrospectively in light of its closing metaphor.
- Candidates might discuss how the title only becomes fully meaningful on a second reading, once the reader has reached the final paragraph, mirroring the extract's own theme of delayed understanding.

Question 8

Level 4 Assured, precise exploration of the tonal shift, drawing pointed contrasts between the two sections, with sophisticated, well-controlled expression. **9-10**

Level 3 Clear exploration of the tonal shift, with relevant contrasting detail from both sections; coherent expression. **7-8**

Level 2 Some relevant comment on tone, though contrast between the two sections may be under-developed or one-sided. **4-6**

Level 1 Limited, largely descriptive comment on tone with little sense of shift or contrast. **1-3**

Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit. **0**

Indicative content:

- The opening description of Vera (lines 8 to 15) is brisk and slightly comic in tone ('idle hands made for long summers', line 10), presenting her unsentimentally as a stern, practical figure.
- By the close (lines 41 to 49), the tone has become reflective and quietly compassionate, reframing Vera's briskness as a means of managing private disappointment rather than simple hardness.
- The generalising final sentence, extending from Vera to 'some people' (line 47), lifts the tone from personal anecdote to a calmer, almost philosophical register.
- The shift in verbs, from active, almost comic description ('barked at guests about muddy shoes', line 26) to the gentler, cyclical 'drawn fresh each day... swept clear' (lines 48 to 49), reflects a movement from judgement towards understanding.
- Candidates might argue that this tonal shift mirrors the narrator's own developing understanding of Vera across the extract, from resentment and mild comedy in childhood to retrospective sympathy in adulthood.

Question 9

(a) **L5** Discriminating, independent evaluation of both interpretations, weighing them against precise textual evidence to form a convincing, well-substantiated personal judgement; assured expression.	**13-15**
(a) **L4** Clear, well-supported evaluation of both interpretations, reaching a reasoned personal judgement; controlled expression.	**10-12**
(a) **L3** Sound engagement with both interpretations, with relevant textual support, though evaluation may be more developed for one reading than the other.	**7-9**
(a) **L2** Some relevant comment on the interpretations, with reasonable but occasionally generalised textual support; limited independent judgement.	**4-6**
(a) **L1** Limited or largely descriptive response, restating the interpretations with minimal evaluation or textual support.	**1-3**
(a) **L0** Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

(a) Indicative content:

- The 'quiet self-sacrifice' reading might point to Vera's absorption into 'the running of somebody else's breakfasts' (lines 38 to 39) and the abandoned certificate and letter as evidence of a life given up for family duty.
- The 'control over connection' reading might point to Vera's brisk, undemonstrative manner (lines 8 to 10), her deflective dialogue after the piano scene (lines 29 to 30), and her habitual concealment of the tide line (lines 44 to 45) as evidence that she actively chooses distance and order over emotional openness.
- Strong evaluations will note that both readings can be supported by the same evidence, for example the closed piano lid (lines 28 to 29) as either a poignant symbol of sacrifice or a deliberate act of self-protective control.
- Candidates might argue the two readings are not mutually exclusive: Vera's control may itself be the way she manages, and lives with, an earlier sacrifice, so the interpretations describe the same behaviour from different angles.
- The most successful answers will reach and justify a personal judgement, rather than simply presenting both readings, using precise reference to the writer's choices of detail, dialogue and structure throughout the extract.

Question 10

Level 6 Sophisticated, discriminating evaluation of the statement, sustaining a conceptualised, critically aware argument that integrates language, structure and context with precise, wide-ranging textual support; sophisticated, assured expression throughout.	**22-25**
Level 5 Assured, well-developed evaluation of the statement, integrating language/structure and context, with well-selected textual detail; fluent, controlled expression.	**18-21**
Level 4 Clear, sustained evaluation with relevant use of language, structure and/or context, supported by apt textual detail; generally coherent expression.	**14-17**
Level 3 Reasonable engagement with the statement, with some relevant textual and contextual support, though development may be uneven.	**10-13**
Level 2 Some relevant comment on the statement, with generalised or partial support; limited independent evaluation.	**6-9**
Level 1 Limited, largely descriptive or narrative response with minimal evaluative engagement with the statement.	**1-5**
Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

Indicative content:

- The statement is most directly evidenced by Vera, whose abandoned musical ambition, shown through the certificate and unanswered letter (lines 34 to 36), was given up so she could take on 'the running of somebody else's breakfasts' (lines 38 to 39).
- The extended tide-line metaphor (lines 41 to 49) generalises this idea beyond Vera, suggesting that 'some people' habitually build lives around a choice made for others, continually renewed and continually concealed.
- The personification of the guesthouse 'reaching for water it could never quite touch' (lines 17 to 18) prefigures the theme of thwarted personal ambition before it is confirmed through Vera's own history.
- A contextual reading might note that such choices were often expected of women in Vera's generation, so the extract's central idea reflects a wider social pattern rather than one individual's unusual situation.
- Candidates might qualify the statement by noting that the narrator herself only partially understands Vera's sacrifice, so the extract arguably suggests that such choices are not only costly but also, for those who make them, largely unspoken and unacknowledged by others.
- The retrospective narrative structure, in which understanding of Vera's sacrifice comes only 'years later' (line 34) and 'too late for it to matter to her' (line 37), can be used to argue that the extract is as much about the cost of delayed recognition as about the original choice itself.
- Very strong responses might question the statement's assumption of a clear 'choice', noting the letter was simply 'never answered' (line 36) rather than actively declined, and consider whether limited opportunity, rather than deliberate self-sacrifice, better explains Vera's situation.
- Candidates should be rewarded for any well-substantiated personal response that engages seriously with the statement, whether they broadly agree, disagree, or qualify it, provided the argument is sustained and evidenced throughout.

Question 11

Level 4 Discriminating analysis of the extended metaphor, integrating close, wide-ranging textual detail with a clear line of argument connecting it to identity elsewhere in the extract; assured, controlled expression.	**10-12**
Level 3 Clear, sustained analysis of the metaphor, supported by apt detail, with some connection to identity elsewhere in the extract; generally accurate expression.	**7-9**
Level 2 Some relevant analysis of the metaphor, though connection to the wider extract may be underdeveloped; reasonable expression.	**4-6**
Level 1 Limited or largely descriptive comment on the tide line, with little analytical development.	**1-3**
Level 0 Nothing worthy of credit.	**0**

Indicative content:

- The tide line, 'always in a slightly different place' (lines 42 to 43), suggests something recurring but never quite fixed or resolved, an apt image for an identity shaped by an unresolved past.
- The daily sweeping, done 'before the first guests came down' (line 44), parallels Vera's habitual concealment of her own history, presenting identity-management as a repeated, almost ritual act rather than a single decision.
- Describing the debris as 'other people's rubbish' (line 45) echoes how Vera has disguised or dismissed evidence of her own disappointment, connecting to her earlier brisk dismissal of the piano scene ('Go and change out of those wet things', lines 29 to 30).
- The shift to 'some people' (line 47) generalises the image beyond Vera specifically, connecting her individual situation to a wider claim about how identity can be continually renewed and just as continually hidden from view.
- The closing verbs 'drawn' (line 48) and 'swept clear' (line 49) directly echo the earlier, literal description of the tide line, confirming the extension is a deliberate development of the same image rather than a new, unrelated one.