‘Home thoughts from Abroad’

Subject

Structure
A short lyrical verse set out in two stanzas. As the speaker’s thoughts about his homeland develop and move from the general (stanza 1) to the particular (stanza 2), so the images become more finely described with more attention paid to detail.

Time / viewpoint
In an interesting contrast with others from the selection, this poem takes place very much ‘in the moment’ as the first-person speaker, separated from England by distance, visualises a ‘frame-by-frame’ set of descriptions, spring unfolding across the countryside.

Language
The language of the poem is wholly descriptive – it’s a hymn (or song) to English nature, one which is wholly informed by the speaker’s love for his native country and imbued with his sense of longing. This is exemplified by the opening onomatopoeic sigh of ‘Oh’. He follows the progress of spring and (at first) its imperceptible arrival. The line ‘whoever wakes in England’ is a play on words, those who are alert to the first signs of spring.

Browning’s poetic eye for detail is simply but beautifully apparent in the minute descriptions of spring’s emergence in the first stanza – tiny leaf. His immediacy of language in the employment of the emphatic present tense and exclamation mark – In England – now! brings the scene before our eyes with vigour and freshness. We hear it too: Browning draws the sounds of spring to our attention with the ‘chaffinch’ singing ‘on the orchard bough’. Browning’s handling of the lyrical poem is most ‘song-like’ in this poem, illustrated by the bird-song that runs throughout the lines.

The second stanza follows spring’s progress and builds on the opening description with more spring birds. The speaker moves, in his imagination and memory, to where his own familiar ‘blossomed pear-tree’ is. He personifies it, ‘Leans to the field and scatters on the clover/ its blossoms and dewdrops’, suggesting an act of generosity. The speaker demands we ‘Hark’ to the song of the ‘wise thrush’, who, like the poet, ‘sings his song twice over’.

The speaker’s rapture can be compared with that of the thrush: both are enamoured of the English spring and are inspired to sing their songs in its praise. Minute attention to detail enables us to visualise and hear the scene.

The poem ends quite suddenly and brings us (and the speaker) to a halt and back to the present with the final, unflattering adjective of ‘gaudy’, paid to the native, but to him, foreign plant before him, a ‘melon-flower’. The contrast with the ‘brighter’ buttercups of the previous line shows its intrusive ugliness and reinforces the speaker’s longing for the familiarity of home at its most beautiful time of the year – an English spring.

Note the repetition of ‘blossomed’ and ‘blossoms’ – repeating the image in verb and noun form reinforces a sense of abundance and growth.
'Home Thoughts from the Sea'

Subject
A poem celebrating love of England, this is a companion piece to 'Home Thoughts from Abroad'. An intensely patriotic poem, it was inspired by the sight of Gibraltar as Browning first sailed to Venice in 1838. It indicates another aspect of the poet's love for his country; his mind here turns to the greatness of England and her victories at sea. In turn, these thoughts prompt the idea of what Browning's duty is toward her.

Structure
A single stanza written in trochaic metre, the gentle regular rhythm of the lines seem to mimic the rocking of a ship at sea. The poet's spoken words 'Here and here did England help me' break into the rhythm toward the end of the poem, as the passionate love for England inspires a similar response to that given by her defenders in the great sea battles of history.

Time / viewpoint
The first-person speaker apparently presents us with what he sees and feels as the ship sails by reminders of past naval victories.

Language
The poem is marked by various geographical references, so would be an appropriate choice for any question on setting or place.

- Cape Saint Vincent is the first mentioned; personified by the repeated adverbs that open the poem, 'Nobly, nobly'. The cape is on the South West extremity of Portugal and was made famous by the victory of the English fleet, under the command of Admiral Jervis, over a much larger Spanish fleet on February 14th 1797.
- Cadiz is situated on the South coast of Spain. The second Spanish armada was prepared at Cadiz, but the English fleet, under Essex and Raleigh, entered the harbour and destroyed the ships and stores gathered there.
- Trafalgar is east of Cadiz. Admiral Lord Nelson's great victory over the French and Spanish fleets was won here on October 21st 1805.

The poem refers to pride in England's victories, but there are also implicit references to the great and awful cost in lives: 'died away' in the first line refers to the disappearance of the Cape over the horizon, its 'dying' away in history and the deaths that came as a result of battle. This idea is enhanced by the following juxtaposition of 'glorious' and 'blood-red', on one level a vivid image of a sunset at sea, on another a memorial to the thousands of men who gave their lives as their blood died the seas red. This is followed by 'reeking', in which Browning mixes sight and smell (an example of synaesthesia) and so reminds us of the smell of battle. The poem graphically illustrates how costly victory is.

Key techniques include vivid use of colour adjectives (characteristic of Browning) to present the unfolding picture as the ship rounds the coast. References to red, 'Sunset', 'blood-red' and 'burning', denote both the passion of patriotic fervour and its pain. This example of Browning's lyric poetry is perhaps, unusual in its economy of language. As the ship approaches Trafalgar, the colours of the sky and seascape change to 'bluish'. As night falls, Gibraltar is perceived in the distance in the alliterative paired adjectives 'grand and grey' – Gibraltar was and is a British protectorate. The colours are reflective of the more subdued mood of the journey's (and poem's) end. There is a reminder of 'Home Thoughts from Abroad' in the penultimate line, 'Whose turns as I, this evening,' where we are immediately reminded of Browning sharing the moment with those in England thanking God for the greatness of his country. Jove, or Jupiter, Roman father of the gods, seems to further indicate the greatness and power of England, but also paternalism and justice, which may be why it hangs over Africa.

NB – these poems are lyrical poems, not dramatic monologues – so do not choose to write about them if the exam question demands consideration of the dramatic monologue.