

Night mail

These questions will help you practise:

- ★ summarising main ideas
- ★ identifying and explaining how language choices enhance meaning
- ★ identifying and explaining how narrative content is related and contributes to meaning as a whole
- ★ making comparisons.

This is the night mail crossing the border,
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,
The shop at the corner and the girl next door.
Pulling up **Beattock**, a steady climb –
The gradient's against her, but she's on time.

Past cotton grass and moorland boulder
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder,
Snorting noisily as she passes
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.
Birds turn their heads as she approaches,
Stare from the bushes at her blank-faced
coaches.

Sheep dogs cannot turn her course,
They slumber on with paws across.
In the farm she passes no one wakes,
But the jug in the bedroom gently shakes.
Dawn freshens, the climb is done.
Down towards Glasgow she descends
Towards the steam tugs yelping down the
glade of cranes,

Towards the fields of apparatus, the furnaces
Set on the dark plain like gigantic chessmen.
All Scotland waits for her:

In the dark glens, beside the pale-green lochs
Men long for news.

Letters of thanks, letters from banks,
Letters of joy from the girl and the boy,

Receipted bills and invitations
To inspect new stock or visit relations,
And applications for situations
And timid lovers' declarations
And gossip, gossip from all the nations,
News circumstantial, news financial,
Letters with holiday snaps to enlarge in,
Letters with faces scrawled in the margin,
Letters from uncles, cousins and aunts,
Letters to Scotland from the South of France,
Letters of condolence to Highlands and
Lowlands
Notes from overseas to Hebrides
Written on paper of every hue,
The pink, the violet, the white and the blue,
The chatty, the catty, the boring, adoring,
The cold and official and the heart's
outpouring,
Clever, stupid, short and long,
The typed and the printed and the spelt all
wrong.

W.H. Auden



Glossary

- **Beattock** a village in Scotland that is the highest point on this railway line

- 1 What is the main idea in the poem?
Explain in **one** sentence.

1

(1 mark)

- 2 Find and copy an example of alliteration in the poem.

2

(1 mark)

- 3 The word *letters* is repeated eight times in the section beginning:
Letters of thanks....

3

(1 mark)

What is the effect of repeating this word?

- 4 a) The rhythm and the pace of the poem change in each section.

4a

What do you notice about the pace in the section beginning:
Letters of thanks, letters from banks?

(1 mark)

- b) Explain the effect of this change in pace.

4b

(3 marks)

- 5 How is the setting in the section beginning *Past cotton grass ...* different to the setting in the section beginning *Dawn freshens, the climb is done ...?*

5

(3 marks)

Refer to the text in your answer.

/ 10

Total for
this text