There are a number of ways you can organise your information to answer this question, but essentially you should:

- Explain what you understand by “the significance of remembrance” and how Slessor shows this through his “portrayal of human experience”
- Support your explanation by evidence from the poems
- Explain what else you find significant in the poems, justifying your views with evidence
- Explain how other interpretations of the poems are possible and how these can be justified by the poetry itself.

You do not need to address these elements in this order. It may better suit your argument to introduce others’ readings at particular stages throughout your discussion, to demonstrate how other ideas have influenced the points you are making.

**Sample response: Poetry**

**Prescribed text:** *Selected Poems*, Kenneth Slessor

‘Five Bells’ and ‘Beach Burial’ are both elegies, poems commemorating someone who has died. In that sense, they can be said to be about remembering and about the significance of remembrance. They are, however, much more than this. Both poems depict human experiences that dwell on memory and past events, but they also explore other issues through human experience, most notably death, but also time, the present, the future, place and war.

In ‘Five Bells’, Slessor mourns the death by drowning of Joe Lynch. The poem begins in the present, the five bells of the title causing Slessor to think of Time, in its eternal, boundless sense that is not “moved by little fidget wheels”. This takes him to the past of twelve years ago when Joe drowned in the harbour. Time and place mingle as one entity, “Night and water / Pour to one rip of dark[ness],” and he does not know why he has thought of Joe. He feels that to think of him is “profitless”, but memories of Joe nevertheless intrude aggressively into the present. Ironically, although memories of Joe are now frail and fading, his “voice … dowsed by Life” and nothing of him remains but “the memory of some bones / Long shoved away”, crowded memories of Joe still force themselves into Slessor’s present state of mind. The bulk of the poem is a memory of Joe alive, and also of Joe’s father, significantly a “graveyard mason” whose headstones exerted an eternal weight, “cargoes they had never thought to bear”, on his non-living customers.

Death is therefore the motif that runs through the poem, linking the past, the present and the future. Slessor is mourning his own death when he hears the “bells, / Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out”. The ship’s bells are also funeral bells, specifically mourning Joe in his watery grave and reminding Slessor of his own mortality. The language of the poem is funereal and morbid, reinforcing the sense of all-pervasive death, the one thing in life that cannot be avoided. “Dead”, “die”, “death” and “bones” are repeated throughout and the atmosphere is dark, gloomy and cold. Emotions are intense – “hits”, “cries”, “shouting”, “agonies” – and the world is dangerous – “talons”, “knifing”, “maniac” and “guns”.

In May 2008, ABC Radio National’s ‘The Book Show’ held a discussion of ‘Five Bells’, which was voted Australia’s favourite poem by ABC listeners in 2008, a testament to the poem’s significance in the Australian psyche. Emily
McGuire, a journalist who had recently experienced serious illness and the death of a close relative, saw the poem as expressing anger and frustration at the inevitability of death. For her, Slessor’s anger provided some consolation for her own grief and despair about mortality. She explained that the anger of the poem, in words such as “thieve”, “beat” and “bawl”, helped her to realise and come to terms with the agony of grief.

For another panellist, Ivor Indyk, an academic, the poem is much more about place and how place can connect us to the past and our memories. He commented that the long stanzas about Joe in different places – Moorebank, Melbourne and then back in Sydney – are powerful in their depiction of Joe’s vivid and unsettled life and tell us clearly what type of man he was – in his words, a “thwarted hero”. He sees the poem as a reflection on failure, not just Joe’s, but Slessor’s. For Indyk, the unifying element of place in the poem is the harbour, which connected Joe and Slessor in the past and is connecting them again in the present.

The two personal commentaries show just how deep an impact Slessor has made on individual memory, but he also touches his audience at a more historical level. Slessor was a war correspondent in World War II and wrote ‘Beach Burial’ to commemorate the nameless dead who washed ashore after the battles at El Alamein in 1942. This poem is clearly about death, but it is also a reflection about the futility of war and about the importance of remembrance. Like ‘Five Bells’, ‘Beach Burial’ comments on how hard it is to remember the dead in the face of the demands of the present and the relentless march of time. Slessor is surprised that “Between the sob and clubbing of the gunfire / Someone has time” to retrieve the bodies, bury them and erect crosses to mark the graves. For him, this careful respect for the dead only underscores the futility of war – the dead are nameless and unidentifiable, so war enemies are probably now lying side by side, “together … on the other front” for eternity. In the poem, death is the great leveller, stripping men of their nationhood, destroying the boundaries and uniting the sailors in an eternal brotherhood.

This poem also mourns the future deaths of the living. There is a reminder in stanza four of Omar Kayyam’s lines that, “The moving finger writes and having writ, moves on”. This refers to human mortality and the fact that our lives are nothing more than little lines, easily erased, in the great story of Time. The “ghostly pencil” that “wavers and fades” is not just recording that here lies an “Unknown seaman”. It is reminding us of the brevity and insignificance of life, which is washed away as quickly as waves wash away writing in the sand. Here, remembrance is fleeting and will not withstand the force of time. The implied reference to Omar Kayyam is doubly fitting; he was a Persian philosopher who lived in the 11th century and he is connected to the “Gulf of Arabs” by place and by the fact that his lines about human mortality are as pertinent in 1942 and today as they were when written 900 years ago.

The poem is also about the significance of remembrance as a distinctly human experience. At one level, the bodies brought to shore each morning are a constant reminder of the terrible consequences of war. On another level, the unknown grave-digger who retrieves them, buries them and marks their graves knows the importance of memorials and the power of memory. Not content with simply placing them in graves, he has erected a memorial for each of them, bearing a “signature” that signifies another lost life, the “driven
stake of tidewood” a permanent reminder when the pencil marks have faded. The human experience of war has to be remembered too. The burials evoke “perplexity” and “bewildered pity” in the unknown grave-digger, a cause of such sorrow at the senseless loss that the words “choke” the observer.

The importance of remembrance is significant in both these poems. But Slessor moves beyond the concept of memory alone, linking it to other significant aspects of human experience, such as death, place and time.


**Working with the sample response**

1. Cloze exercise using Notes from the Marking Centre.

Read the Notes from the Marking Centre below. Place the correct word from the shaded box in the right space in the Notes, so that the Notes make sense. Check your answers on the Board of Studies website.

---

**Notes from the Marking Centre: General Comments on Module B**

Stronger responses ……………… argued the extent to which their own understanding of the prescribed text reflected the view presented in the statement, using carefully selected ……………… references to support their arguments. These responses perceptively ……………… a discussion of language and structure and presented a ……………… analysis which demonstrated strong personal understanding of the text.

Discerning responses used insights gleaned from how their text had been received and the context of its ……………… to strengthen the demonstration of their own understanding of the text. Better responses were ………………, fluent and tightly structured, revealing a strong ……………… voice as well as ……………… of expression. The notion of personal engagement was vital in addressing the question. Unfortunately, some responses relied too heavily on ……………… readings rather than developing an……………… personal response.

Weaker responses were ……………… driven, incorporating only limited reference to the text and its ……………… forms and features. They showed little appreciation of the ……………… of the text and lacked development, reflecting a limited understanding of the demands of the question.