The following notes are designed to help you to study Tennyson's poetry, and to write coherently about it. There is no substitute for close study of the poems, and for readiness to examine every possibility, without fantasy or exaggeration. Poetry is simple, in the sense that it is an organic whole. In most other respects it is highly complex. The combination of simplicity and complexity is one of the reasons why its study can be so rewarding. The study of poetry has to be taken seriously.

Answers, or material for answers, are provided for some of the questions that follow. For others, a few suggestions only are given.

A note on quotation

There are few more boring essays for an examiner to read, than the essay which consists basically of a thin trickle of critical comment leading from one long quotation to the next. Remember that real knowledge and perception are of the greatest importance; that this should be articulated in a logical and coherent argument, and that quotation should be to the point. It should make the reader think: 'yes, exactly -that is how it is'. It should never resemble a vague gesture in the general direction of the argument. A more extended quotation is sometimes convenient, and sometimes necessary, but you should try to cultivate the habit of brief reference.

Is the speaker in 'Ulysses' presented as a heroic or unheroic figure?

In any discussion of a poem the poet's intentions must be kept in mind. But with 'Ulysses', we tend to be stopped at once, since we are not sure of Tennyson's intentions. The mode may not help us very much: it is that of dramatic monologue, and we are accustomed to thinking of dramatic monologue as a form in which it often happens that the speaker tells us more about himself than he is aware. This question often occurs in examination papers, because there has been so much discussion among critics about it. Some help, but not, perhaps, very much, can be found in Tennyson's comments on it. He remarked that the poem, written after Hallam's death, under a sense of great loss, gives the feeling of going forward and braving the struggle of life, and also that it was written under the sense that (in spite of everything) life must be fought out to the end. The need to fight it out to the end probably expresses his sense more completely than the need to go forward. Ulysses is weakened by age; as Tennyson is by grief, but there will be no yielding. To that extent, the poem celebrates will, as does 'In Memoriam'.

Against this, it has been argued that the language of the poem is elegiac rather than heroic, and also that Ulysses, after all, abandons his aged wife, and his Ithacan subjects. It has also been argued that in the third verse, where he hands over his duties to his son Telemachus, he seems to speak of him with something like contempt, as of a lesser man fit to undertake an unheroic task, that of civilising the savage Ithacans. (We now know, from the manuscript drafts of the poem, that he does not show contempt.) One critic has gone so far as to argue that Tennyson presents Ulysses as an example of arrogance, and selfishness. Whether or not Tennyson presents Ulysses as noble seems therefore to be a puzzling question. We should remember, perhaps, that he took the idea of the last voyage for the Greek hero from the great Italian poet Dante, who tells how Ulysses insisted on voyaging farther than man should, in pursuit of knowledge, and how he was punished for it by God, and suffered in Hell. At the same time, there is no clear evidence that Tennyson is using Ulysses as a type of searcher after forbidden knowledge. The question of what might and might not be permitted to man had changed somewhat since Dante's day, and a man of Tennyson's age would view a Romantic quest rather differently.
As for the language, it is obviously slow-moving, and sometimes elegiac in tone:

The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep
Moans round with many voices.

Notice the use of elongated vowel sounds that Tennyson favoured, here furthering the languid movement and stasis described. Does this mean that it is unheroic? What is heroic language for one age may not be recognisably heroic for another. The apparent dismissal of his aged wife Penelope, who had remained faithful to Ulysses during his long absence, is difficult to reconcile with nobility, or heroism. Perhaps Tennyson is taking advantage of the idea of another age, with other ideas of conduct. On the other hand, although Ulysses intends to leave, is he brutally dismissing Penelope, as some critics have thought? 'Matched with an aged wife': it is uncompromising enough, but it is probably meditation, not speech to Penelope. For all we know to the contrary, this Penelope might have approved of an appropriately heroic death for her husband. As for the characterisation of Telemachus, we must remember that words like 'prudent', 'useful', 'blameless', and 'decent', though hardly Romantic, are not condescending. They indicate high attributes, not limitations.

Perhaps the best thing to bear in mind is the idea of not yielding to a life of desolate commonplace which threatens to destroy you. It is likely that this must override most other considerations. One thing which is clear is that the poem is of an unusual complexity, and that no easy decisions about it are possible.

Discuss Lancelot's role in 'The Lady of Shalott'.

Lancelot appears twice in 'The Lady of Shalott'. His first dramatic appearance, and its effect on the Lady, is described at length in Part III, and at the end of the poem it is he who prays for her when she is dead. The Lady seems to represent the withdrawn spirit of the artist, who is destroyed if he meets the world directly on its own terms. This is why she weaves alone in her island tower, symbol of her isolation. She must not stop, or look down the river to Camelot, which symbolises the life of the world. Her only sight of life is in her mirror, in which 'Shadows of the world appear'.

Lancelot, on the other hand, is a male principle, representing action. He is the greatest knight of Camelot, and he is also the guilty lover of Queen Guinevere. When he appears, it is at the time of harvest and fruition, from which the Lady is apart. (Since he is unmarried, and his love for the Queen is adulterous, it could be said that he too stands apart from these processes, however splendid his appearance and prowess.) 'A bow-shot from herbower-eaves, / He rode between the barley-sheaves': bow-shot, the physical action, works against the sheltered and sheltering feminine bower. The strong b-sounds at the beginning mark Lancelot's sudden entry into the Lady's world. The stanzas which describe him are full of light and sound: the sun flames on his greaves; his shield sparkles, his bridle and thick-jewelled saddle-leather glitter and shine; his helmet, helmet-feather, and brow burn and glow; he sings as he goes, and his bridle-bells and armour ring. Light, sound, and the mastery of the warrior and horseman break in upon the still world of the Lady, and she leaves her web, and looks down to Camelot. At the end of the poem, Lancelot seems like another man. The Lady's death has seemingly changed the world, and is now part of the approaching winter season. Camelot is hushed, and so is Lancelot, musing quietly on her death. It seems to be the first time he has seen her; nothing in the poem suggests that he saw her look down from her tower. He is different from the others who come out to look at the strange boat, with the dead Lady on it, not only because he is the greatest knight of them all, but because of what he knows of guilt, and human weakness. It seems that Lancelot is no longer the magnificent figure of Part III, who irresistibly drew the lady to look from her tower, and leave her tapestry. He is human now in another sense: that is, in his understanding, and charity. There is a moving inconsequence in what he says: 'She has a lovely face; / God in his mercy lend her grace'. The apparent illogicality of this is very human, as is the resolution of it all in prayer.
Discuss the methods by which Tennyson presents a state of desolation in ‘Mariana’.

Your answer should contain a good deal about the language and versification of the poem. The one repeated cry in the refrain, with its few but powerful variations; the relative lack of strong enjambment or run-on in the lines, so that they seem to fall with a soft even pace; the constant circling and return in the ababcdc rhyme of the body of the stanza: these could usefully be discussed. Note the force of the enjambment in ll.76-7, and the very different effect of that of ll.28-9, which is neutralised by the passivity implicit in ‘Came to her’. The nature of the few other living things in the poem should also be considered. Observe also the dream-like sequence of night and day in the stanzas; work out what time each stanza deals with, and the symmetry or form of this in the poem as a whole. Consider also in what ways the last two stanzas represent a climax to this desolation.

Discuss the variety of Tennyson's poetry.

The difficulty with this question is that, without appearing to do so, it may ask more than you can give, since by implication it is comparative. If you answer it by pointing to instances of variety in Tennyson's poetry, you are still left with the unspoken question, how much variety is there in him compared with other poets? You may not find it easy to answer this, however briefly. Variety of mode is not difficult to illustrate: satire, elegy, lyric, idyll. Technical variety is an obvious matter for discussion: ‘Maud’ is clearly one text to be discussed here. You might find it useful to speak also of monotony, and ‘In Memoriam’ could be discussed from this angle. You might also have a good deal to say about a lack of variety in theme: the constant theme of loss, and frustration, for example. How important is this, compared with variety in the verse forms?

Consider the importance of the will in Tennyson's poetry.

For most readers, will is important in Tennyson's poetry. Not surprisingly, spiritual stagnation of one sort or another matters too, as in ‘Mariana’ and ‘The Lotos-Eaters’. This could be a useful question for you, since it illustrates the need to understand the context of any statement, and to remember possible corollaries or inferences. You must stick to the question: agreed, but you must also get that question (if only briefly) in its proper context. One poem that should be considered is ‘In Memoriam’, and the stubborn human struggle against despair, as well as the consonance of human and divine will towards the end. Another is ‘Ulysses’ and you might find it useful to consider how far the elegiac note of the verse implies spiritual stagnation. There is the will to death at the beginning and end of ‘Maud’, and between them the surrender to happiness, with the decision also to live a life of truth. Consider, too, the speaking voice in ‘Tithonus’, whose will to die is strong yet he remains suspended, a part of the natural cycle, yet also cruelly detached from it. Here, his active questing for release is countered by his passivity of eternal immortality and entrapment. How far the circumstances of Tennyson’s age contribute to this insistence on individual will is a question worth following up, too.