

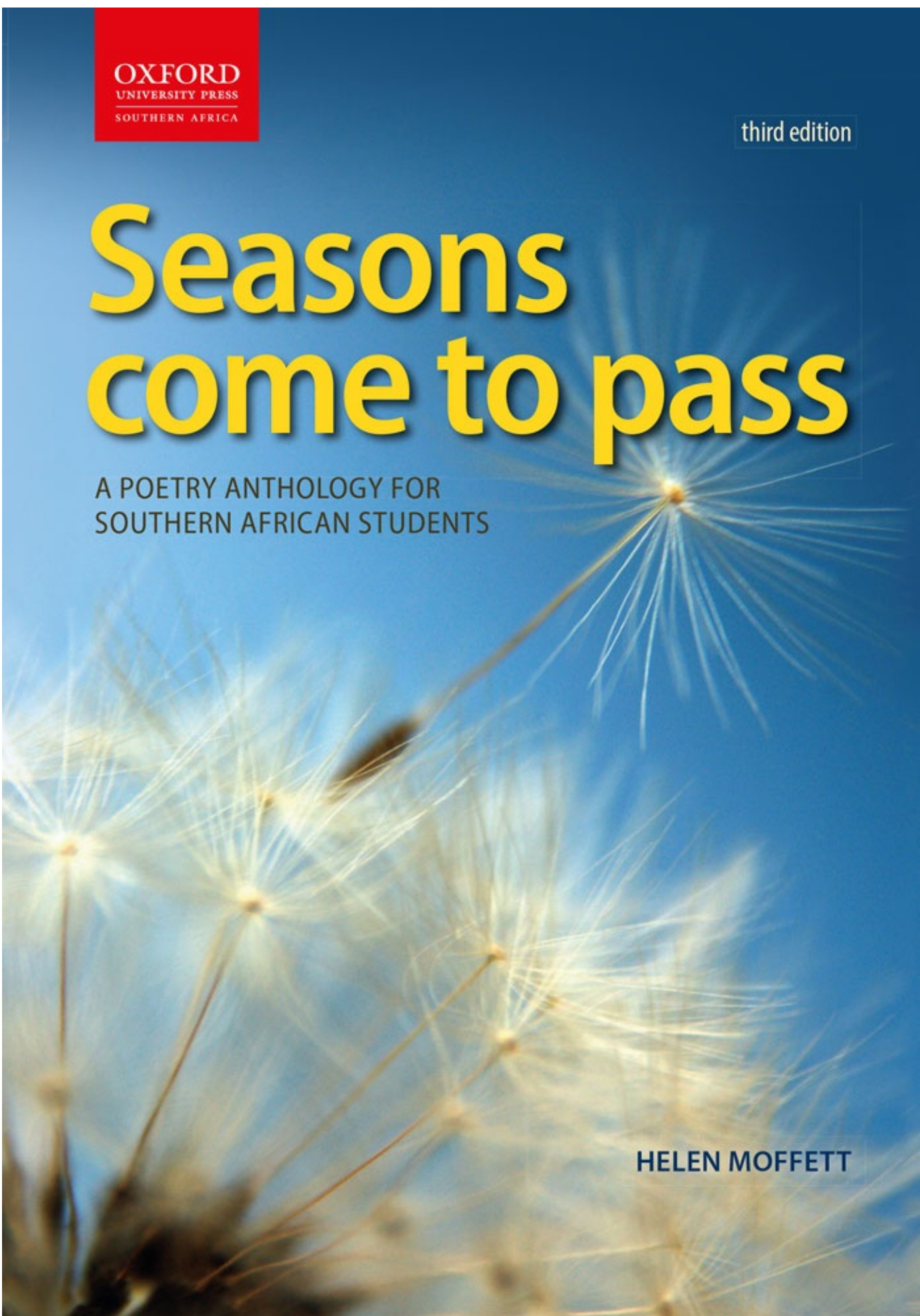
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Seasons come to pass

A POETRY ANTHOLOGY FOR
SOUTHERN AFRICAN STUDENTS

HELEN MOFFETT



Seasons Come To Pass 3e

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In loving memory of Es'kia Mphahlele (1919 – 2008),

co-compiler of this anthology,

trailblazer, literary giant, teacher and mentor.

Thanks are inadequate for all you did,

all you were.

Tsamaea hantle, ntate.

How to use this book

The purpose of this poetry anthology is to support the learner or student who is coming to grips with poetry written in English at senior high school or university undergraduate level – although I hope that anyone who would like to learn more about poetry enjoys the selection of poems here, and finds the supporting notes helpful.

Before starting on the poems, it is recommended that you read the Introductory Notes very carefully, and discuss them with your lecturer, tutor, teachers and fellow students, if this is possible.

These notes are divided into two parts: the first section is designed to give you a very brief overview of the historical backdrop against which the English language and its literature evolved. This is not intended as a list of facts you need to study or memorise in order to come to grips with poetry; instead, the idea is to give you a broad time-frame into which you can fit the poems you will read. It will give you a sense of how poems from various periods in history fit together, as well as sketching how scientific, religious, philosophical, geographical, political, artistic, social, and cultural shifts over time shaped the development of English literature and poetry. A very rough outline of how English assumed its present shape will also explain both the infuriating (and confusing) inconsistencies and the rewarding richness of the English language.

The second part of the Introductory Notes gives some basic ‘how to’ guidelines on analysing poetry, along with examples. These are suggestions only, but you may want to refer back to them and develop them as you become more practiced and confident in your dealings with poetry. Bear in mind that in learning to read poetry closely, appreciate it and analyse it, you are acquiring a skill, not learning a syllabus. Developing sensitivity to the language around you and evolving your own personal set of critical skills can benefit you in your future studies, work and recreation, and can add to your self-confidence and communication skills. Obviously, these analytical skills can be applied to literature, arts and popular cultural material in any language, not just English.

It’s important not to skip this section, even if it seems strange at first: giving written instructions on how to approach poetry is not ideal – it’s like trying to show someone how to swim or play a musical instrument by writing to them instead of demonstrating how it’s done. This is why examples have been given – and also why you should keep returning to this section once you are more familiar with the poems in this collection. You should also discuss the suggestions made here with other students, friends, and even family members. The more you apply the strategies suggested here, the more you will refine and adapt them.

Some of the poems have suggestions for further discussion and debate, often in the form of questions to consider. You (and your teacher or lecturer) might like to use them in the classroom or in a study group with others. You might enjoy talking through them with a friend, or you could use them on your own. Perhaps your tutor might like to set some as written exercises, or you might like to draw up similar workshops, using the ones here as examples.

You’ll notice that it’s also sometimes suggested that you compare certain poems. This is because while it is best to present poems in chronological order to prevent historical confusion, one of the most exciting ways of reading poetry is to look at how specific poems interact with each other across time and distance, adding to our understanding of certain perennial themes and issues. Poems that look very different might communicate the same basic message or emotion, while poems on similar topics can present very different views – which can spark interesting debates.

As explained in the Introductory Notes, it is extremely important that you have the necessary contextual

information to get the most out of a poem. Brief biographies of each poet are provided, and supporting notes that provide contextual material and other useful information are supplied when necessary. Unfamiliar words are explained in the margins, and more obscure references are explained in the form of footnotes.

You will also notice that some words or terms have been marked with an asterisk (*). This indicates that a short definition can be found in the Glossary at the back of this book. The scope of this book allows only the bare minimum of information, so you are encouraged to look further afield for more detailed information. If you have Internet access, you can use search engines such as Google and sites such as Wikipedia to explore further. This can be a lot of fun, although not all material you will find on the worldwide web is reliable, and if your search topic is very broad (if you type in 'Shakespeare', for instance), you are likely to be overwhelmed by the volume of information available, not all of it good.

If you have access to a library, a good place to start is the reference section – even very small libraries usually have a set of dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and these can be less daunting than a long row of books. These sources are not always completely up-to-date, but they can be a helpful place to start gathering material, especially on historical topics and authors from the past. By looking up the name of a poet, or a type of poem (such as a sonnet or a ballad), you should be able to find well-written, reliable and short pieces that explain the facts.

Above all, I hope that this book helps you to enjoy poetry. Even those who are not fans of poetry find themselves turning to prayer and song (both forms of poetry) at certain moments, or searching for the right poem to read at a time of great joy or loss. In the words of the great Chilean poet and politician Pablo Neruda, 'poetry/survives/against all odds'. It is one of the oldest and most evergreen forms of human creative expression – and studying it can be an adventure.

Introductory Notes

English history and literature: A contextual time-frame

Few small islands have been as repeatedly invaded, pillaged, ransacked, and finally settled as a colonial territory, as the damp and green British Isles off the west coast of Europe. At a time when the pyramids of Egypt had been standing guard over the tombs of the Pharaohs for over two thousand years, four centuries after the armies of the young Greek general Alexander the Great had reached as far as India, and about a hundred years after the birth of Jesus, the first conquerors established their outposts on British soil.

Roman conquest

These were the Romans, whose military power and sophisticated civilisation easily overwhelmed the British peoples. However, there was no notion of British identity or nationhood at this early stage; the inhabitants of the British Isles were made up of isolated and often warring units, who were fiercely tribal, deeply superstitious, and possessed of a rich folklore.

The languages they spoke bore no resemblance whatsoever to the English that is spoken today; they were drawn from a language pool broadly identified as Celtic. Few Celtic languages have survived, although various forms still persist in Ireland, Wales and the remoter parts of Scotland. Traces of the Celtic languages are hard to find in English today, although some words and sounds can still be found. For example, the Scottish word for lake, 'loch', has the last two letters pronounced as a soft 'g' (a gentler version of the way the letter 'g' is pronounced by Afrikaans and German speakers). This derives from Celtic origins, and is a sound that has since fallen away in modern English usage. Speakers of Celtic languages stress the beauty and musical qualities of these ancient dialects, and they are associated with poetry, story-telling, the singing of songs, and prayer. The attempts to keep these languages alive in present-day Britain are linked with nationalist movements, particularly in Ireland, which has a longer history of colonisation by the British than any other territory in the world.

It is not surprising that Celtic languages persist only in the western and northern corners of the British Isles, when we consider that most invasion and settlement came from the south and the east. The clans that resisted the conquerors retreated to the more inaccessible and mountainous parts of the country. Even trained Roman troops could not penetrate into what is present-day Scotland, and in fact, they experienced so much harassment from aggressive local tribes that they built a defensive wall across the northern boundary of the conquered territory. (See Auden's 'Roman Wall Blues'.)

The Roman conquest meant that Latin became the language of education, law, commerce, and administration. Over a period of time, many Roman settlers blended their culture with that of their new home. Nevertheless, Britain was not considered a particularly useful or strategic colony, and with the final collapse of the Roman Empire, the occupying militia returned home, leaving behind the legacy of their language, architecture, and engineering. Those who stayed behind were absorbed into the local population. However, the same Germanic tribes whose aggression had contributed to the downfall of the power of Rome now threatened the inhabitants of the British Isles as well.

Angles, Saxons, Vikings, and Danes

Dating from about the fourth century CE, Britain's eastern shores were battered by wave after wave of aggressive Angles and Saxons, tribes from what is today central Germany. Further north, the eastern shores of Scotland were also under attack from Norse or Viking tribes from the Scandinavian regions of

northern Europe (see ‘[The Viking Terror](#)’). Many of these Germanic tribes had developed superior seafaring skills to their neighbours, and were therefore easily able to mount raids on the unfortunate British. It is tempting to wonder whether the xenophobia (fear or hatred of foreigners) with which the British are sometimes charged perhaps dates from these bitter times, when the sight of alien sails on the horizon usually meant that the local men could expect to be killed or enslaved, the women raped, their dwellings burned or wrecked, their livestock slaughtered, and their crops stolen. Still deeply fragmented along tribal lines, the British could put up no sustained resistance to the invaders, and by the seventh century Britain was almost entirely subject to Anglo-Saxon rule. As centuries passed, the settlers became increasingly identified with their new home, and their languages took their turn in further submerging the already Latinised Celtic languages.

Within a few centuries Britain was relatively stable, with original inhabitants and descendants of settlers well integrated. No matter how brutal their invasion practices were, the Germanic tribes had no interest in ruling a conquered land as a dominion (as the Romans did), but preferred to make it their new home, both assimilating the native inhabitants and themselves being assimilated. The country was fragmented, however, as the earlier arrivals, the Anglo-Saxons, found themselves wrestling with the later Danish invaders for control of the island. Meanwhile, both groups of settlers were to come under threat from a different quarter.

The Norman conquest

The ruler of the province of Normandy in northern France laid claim to the throne of Britain, and in 1066 his Norman troops invaded England, defeated the Saxon king, and laid down their own system of administration, law, customs and leadership, as well as yet another language: Norman French. The English, already a highly mixed nation, were once again subject to alien rule, and once again the invaders slowly became assimilated into the melting pot of English culture. To further complicate matters, medieval Latin (which differed from Roman Latin) was introduced as an official language in order to cope with the difficulties of administering a multilingual nation. So the forceful, heavy, and sombre language of the Anglo-Saxons met and married with the graceful, colourful, and musical French of the Normans, with a good dash of the formality of Latin stirred in. Today, many English verbs – ‘action’ words – are Anglo-Saxon in origin, while many adjectives and adverbs – ‘describing’ words – come from the French.

It is only once we understand this history that we can appreciate both the richness and the inconsistencies of the English language. The many languages that have fed into it have created an almost bewildering array of synonyms – different words with the same meaning – and this gives English literature its rich texture and extraordinary powers of description. On the other hand, there is an equally bewildering range of differing pronunciations, spellings, idiomatic expressions, and grammatical quirks that are all exceptions to the rules of the language. A cartoon that reflects this shows a crowd of panicked foreign students stampeding out of an English language class on pronunciation: the puzzled lecturer, who had just written the words ‘rough’, ‘through’, ‘plough’ and ‘trough’ (pronounced ‘ruff’, ‘throo’, ‘plow’ and ‘trof’ respectively) on the board was asking, ‘What did I do wrong?’

The medieval era

The centuries that passed after the Norman conquest eventually led to the development of a literature, during the later Middle Ages, that is accessible to modern English speakers. English was slowly shaping into the form in which we know it today. Medieval English (known as Middle English by scholars, to distinguish it from Modern English) usually seems foreign to the first-time reader – but it can be

recognised and read. Of course, there was no official adoption of a national language; the English spoken throughout the Middle Ages was made up a range of broadly similar, but regionally influenced dialects, which differed in some important respects. The English spoken today is the descendant of the south-eastern dialect used by Chaucer, and it came into predominance partly because it centred on the capital city, London, and the River Thames (along which international and local shipping and commerce flowed) and partly because of the invention of the printing press. The first books to be printed were written in the south-eastern dialect, and thus entrenched its status.

Printing made books and written material available to ordinary people for the first time. Up till then, books could only be copied by hand, a slow and expensive process. This occupation had mostly been the preserve of priests, monks and some nuns, along with a small clique of aristocrats, who were able to afford the luxury of scholarship. So printing had a profound impact on literacy, as it moved the activity of reading beyond the grasp of the church and a few members of the aristocracy. Literature of this time still relied heavily on oral roots, however; poems and stories were largely passed on by reading or reciting aloud. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, for example, is cast as the stories told for entertainment in a pub by a rowdy band of pilgrims travelling towards Canterbury, and many medieval lyrics were songs that were learnt by heart and passed on, with the names of their original creators left behind and lost.

The literature from medieval England speaks of a rural, agricultural nation, superstitious in spite of the hold the Catholic church exercised over every aspect of life, deeply rooted in and dependent on the cycle of nature. Society was organised along feudal lines, with the landowning classes believed to have a God-given nobility and authority to rule over the 'common' people. However, the gradual rise of a wealthy and urban middle class, which had access to education, slowly weakened the rigid hierarchical structure of society.

Medieval people did not share the modern urban squeamishness about birth, sex, and death; these were part of everyday experience in a society in which privacy was a rare luxury. For example, a dead body would have been a common sight; people died at home, and members of the community would gather to lay out the body. Women were openly second-class citizens, considered the property of either male relatives or their husbands. They had no legal rights, and little or no say in who they married. Most marriages were arranged for economic or political reasons, rather than romantic ones, and a wife was valued for her ability to work hard and her fertility. Today there are still countries and cultures in which little has changed in this regard.

Blatant anti-Semitism was considered normal and acceptable, and attacks on Jewish communities were among the uglier aspects of medieval life. This was also the time of the Crusades; these were pilgrimages by European Christians to the Holy Land (present-day Israel), many of which involved waging war on the Arab 'infidels' or 'heathens' who lived in these sacred territories.

Arab culture and science

The contact with Arab culture carried benefits for Europeans, however; many of the great libraries of the Islamic empire (which spread from the Middle East through North Africa to southern Spain) held the writings of the ancient Greek scholars, whose work had been largely lost to Europe during the Dark Ages that followed the collapse of the Roman empire. The work of Arab scientists, especially in astronomy and mathematics, was especially influential – the system of numbering we follow today is called 'Arabic', and comes from the principles developed by Arab scholars.

The Renaissance

Two central shifts in European cultural and religious life brought the Middle Ages to a close, and led to

the transformation of the colourful, cyclical, and sometimes violent way of life of most medieval folk living in Britain. These were the Renaissance – a flowering of new scientific and literary knowledge that began in Italy and spread through Western Europe – and the Reformation, which split the Christian church down the middle, with complex political and social results that were to echo for centuries.

The Renaissance had its roots in, among other things, the rediscovery of the scientific, literary, and philosophical writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans by several brilliant Italian scholars. This coincided with a rise in status of vernacular (indigenous) languages and the development of vernacular literatures. New forms of writing were being experimented with, and new scientific, geographical, and astronomical discoveries were being made that banished the beliefs of the medieval world for good. A new emphasis was placed on education and culture, with secular (non-religious) scholars moving into what had for centuries been the domain of the church.

The Renaissance came to the island fortress of Britain a little late, but there it enjoyed a particularly rich flowering, sometimes called the ‘Golden Age’. After nearly a century of devastating civil war between different contenders for the throne of England (known as the Wars of the Roses) during the fifteenth century, the Tudor dynasty was securely established, with first Henry VIII and then Elizabeth I on the throne. The preceding century had been a fairly barren period in literary terms, apart from the first comprehensive effort to weave the many legends of King Arthur and his knights into one major work (Sir Thomas Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur*), and the development of the lyric poem. Now, however, literature and the arts flourished, and rapidly reached new heights.

Dramatists such as Jonson, Marlowe, and Shakespeare were producing plays of astonishing wit, wisdom, and originality; in their hands, as well as in those of many other gifted poets, such as Spenser and Sidney, language was being used with new flair. There were new innovations in poetry, at first borrowed from classical writers, then developed and adapted with growing confidence and vigour. (You might want to look at some Renaissance sonnets as an example of the kind of poetic innovations of these times.) Meanwhile, sailors such as Sir Francis Drake and Sir Walter Raleigh were sailing round the globe, establishing Britain’s seafaring power for the first time. Many exploratory voyages were little more than glorified raiding parties, but these nevertheless brought great prestige to the monarchy of England.

The Reformation

This apparently golden age was nonetheless a bloody one, largely because of the Reformation referred to above. In 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther made public his objections to the practice of selling indulgences (crudely put, the forgiving of sins and guaranteed admission into heaven in exchange for money – see the notes to Chaucer’s ‘The Pardoner’s Prologue’, for more details), and began a process of rebellion against the Catholic church that was to change the face of Western Europe. At the time, Catholicism was the only form of the Christian religion. What began as an attempt to reform the church and purge it of its faults led to a split or schism. The various Protestant groupings (so named because of their protest against the various failings of the Catholic church) broke away and formed new religious denominations of their own. The results were sometimes tragic, as communities were divided against each other, political allegiances shifted, and civil wars broke out. For several centuries, Catholic and Protestant monarchies in various countries battled each other for power. The succession of a Protestant monarch often meant persecution for Catholics, and vice versa. Rebellions were often planned on religious grounds, with invariably violent results. (See an example of a poem by a young man condemned to death for his part in a Catholic plot against the Protestant queen Elizabeth I.)

The Tudor king Henry VIII began the process of the English Reformation by announcing himself to be

the head of both Church and State in England, establishing new bishops (who promptly gave him permission to divorce his first wife and marry his mistress), breaking up the monasteries, and distributing the lands and wealth of the church among his nobles.

The Elizabethan age

After his death, his daughter Elizabeth embarked on her long and successful reign, which established the sway of the new Protestant Church of England. The great writers mentioned above (Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare and Marlowe) are mostly associated with her reign, which was a period of exploration, cultural development, and glamour. Elizabeth herself was a noted scholar, whose work included poetry and translations. She died childless, and was succeeded by her cousin James, the king of Scotland.

Parliament and Puritanism

James's successor, Charles I, was to run into trouble. During the seventeenth century, a new movement began among those who wished to extend the power of parliament. (This was not the same as a modern, democratically elected parliament, as members inherited their seats rather than being voted in. Nevertheless, laws were debated and voted on, and this obviously had the potential to restrict the authority of the king.) Many parliamentarians, fuelled by a desire to carry the Reformation to further and stricter extremes, wished to limit the privileges and powers of the monarchy, and legislate their own brand of religious Puritanism, a strict type of Calvinism that frowned on pleasures such as dancing, drinking, gambling and so on. The first settler colonies in North America were established during this period by Puritans who wished to be free to practise their religion without interference.

Civil war

The growing tension between the two factions led inevitably to civil war between supporters of the monarchy (the Cavaliers) and the parliamentary forces (the Roundheads). This ended with the defeat and execution of King Charles I, and the establishment of parliamentary rule under Oliver Cromwell. Culturally, this was a repressive time: dress, entertainment, and so forth were governed by strict rules. One of the first steps taken by the Puritans was to close the theatres; after a century and a half of brilliance, the light of English drama finally went out. However, after eleven years, popular pressure led to the restoration of the monarchy, with the return of Charles II from exile.

Against the backdrop of this political and religious upheaval, and in spite of the blow to drama with the banning of plays, this was a fruitful period in English literature, especially for poetry. The great poets of this era were ranged on all sides of the political spectrum; Carew, Vaughan (see www.oxford.co.za) and Herrick were supporters of the monarchy (and are still referred to as Cavalier poets); Bradstreet was a Puritan who sailed to the new colony of America to practice her religion in freedom; Milton and Marvell supported parliamentary rule and used their talents in government service. Nevertheless, these poets are not remembered for their political allegiances, but for the brilliance of their wit and ideas, and for their contributions, together with Donne and Herbert, to the original and intellectually challenging school of what was later termed Metaphysical poetry. ([See here](#) for further discussion of this type of poetry.)

The Enlightenment

Compared with the passion of the preceding centuries, the eighteenth century may seem a little tame. Sometimes called the age of Enlightenment, or the age of reason, this was an era in which extreme religious and political beliefs gave way to a more questioning and rational public morality. New scientific discoveries by scientists such as Isaac Newton gave rise to a belief in an organised and ordered

universe, and writings by philosophers such as Descartes and Voltaire preached tolerance and the importance of rational thought. This was very much a time of ‘the head rather than the heart’.

In literary terms, the first half of the eighteenth century was to see the rise of the novel, with writers like Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson paving the way for the skilled novels that Jane Austen was writing by the end of the century. This was also the great age of satire; poets such as Pope ridiculed the foolish behaviour and excesses of their contemporaries in long and technically skilled works. The popularity of satire reflected real concern for responsible behaviour on the part of the land-owning upper classes; see, for example, Samuel Johnson’s ‘[A Short Song of Congratulation](#)’. Johnson also compiled the first dictionary of the English language, with typical eighteenth-century enthusiasm for classifying and ordering information. This played a vital role in finally stabilising and standardising English.

Romanticism and the Industrial Revolution

The emphasis by thinkers such as the French philosopher Rousseau on the rights and dignity of humankind was to plant one of the fundamental seeds of the Romantic movement, which was also an inevitable reaction against the detachment of much Enlightenment thinking. Romanticism, which in England bridged the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, emphasised the importance of emotion, and preached a return to Nature as a source of moral and creative guidance. Beauty was especially valued for its ability to instruct, comfort, and inspire.

With the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, with its immense and often destructive impact on the English landscape, the recognition that natural loveliness was under threat was combined with a growing movement towards democracy, as well as indignation at the conditions in which the new urban labouring classes worked. Most of the early Romantic poets, most notably [Wordsworth](#) and [Coleridge](#) were initially supporters of the French Revolution, with its rallying-cry of ‘liberty, equality and brotherhood’.

The rise of Romanticism meant a completely new direction for poetry. Although some Romantic poems, with their passionate and unselfconscious pouring forth of emotion in response to beauty, may sometimes seem alien to modern readers, we are all post-Romantics to some degree; the Romantic vision of poetry as a vessel for passing on beauty and truth has left an indelible mark on the way we read literature. The idea of nature as a teacher and source of inspiration is also part of the heritage of Romanticism. Another interesting shift was in the perception of the role of the poet; the Romantics saw themselves as visionaries, with a mission to search for higher truths, and a responsibility to challenge orthodoxy. The later Romantics poets especially considered it their moral duty to rebel against society’s norms and regulations. (See the biographical information on [Byron](#) and [Shelley](#).)

The Victorian era

Romanticism blended into the Victorian age in 1830, when Victoria ascended the throne of Britain and began a long and relatively stable reign. This was the great age of empire; European nations were staking their claims to territorial ownership all over the globe, and Britain led the race. This was partly because of the need for raw materials for the factories of England, now in full swing. Legislation scrambled to keep up with the social impact and ensuing problems of industrialisation and urbanisation. Social reform and scientific progress rubbed shoulders with extreme poverty and often appalling working conditions. Slavery was abolished ([see here](#) for an example of an anti-slavery poem), but child labour went a fair way towards taking its place.

This era marked the growth of an educated middle class with leisure and money to spend on books, entertainment, and consumer goods. Fundamental issues were being brought into question: Karl Marx’s economic theories and Darwin’s theories of evolution (which challenged the Biblical creation myth) cast

doubts on previously unchallenged assumptions. One of the results was considerable nostalgia for a mythical and less complex past. Victorian artists and writers turned to legends, myths, an idealistic vision of rural life, and the distant past for more comforting sources of inspiration.

The nineteenth century also marked the beginnings of the struggle for legal and political representation by women. This was met by a flurry of writing advocating the home and domesticity as women's natural and ordained sphere. Nevertheless, women's activities in and contributions to all spheres of life increased: Florence Nightingale established nursing as a respectable profession for women; charity work by middle-class women and governessing by their less wealthy sisters slowly developed into social work and teaching; and female writers flourished as never before.

In general, this was a period of considerable richness in literature: poets such as Lord Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning provided a feast of lyrical, narrative, epic and reflective poetry. Likewise, novelists such as Charles Dickens, the Brontë sisters, George Eliot (the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans), and others were at the height of their powers.

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the rise of the pre-Raphaelite movement, a reaction against the values of the bourgeoisie, and a rather unrealistic attempt to return to medieval values. It produced not only a colourful and sometimes sentimental school of painting, but also poets such as Christina Rossetti. Their emphasis on the value of nostalgic beauty and mysticism was to influence the aesthetic principles of both artists and writers well into the twentieth century.

It was also during the Victorian age that the literature of the colonies and of North America became more widely known. American philosophers such as Thoreau and writers such as Longfellow, Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe were popular on both sides of the Atlantic. The waning of the century saw an increase in 'empire' literature, with the works of colonial officials and travellers such as Rudyard Kipling becoming part of the body of English literature. In South Africa, the writings of Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith were admired.

The South African War and the First World War

At the time of Queen Victoria's death, the British empire ('on which the sun never set') was at its height of power; however, there were rumblings of discontent. The Anglo-Boer War, now more correctly known as the South African War, fought at the turn of the century over the establishment of Boer republics where gold had been discovered, led to eventual victory but considerable loss of prestige for the British. (See Drummer Hodge and The Cry of South Africa for poems and more information on this topic.) However, what finally destroyed all remnants of the Victorian way of life and 'blew a hole in the face of civilisation' was the First World War, or the Great War (1914–1918). Most of Europe and its colonies were involved in this long and bloody war, which cost the lives of millions, and which was to sow the seeds of the next world war. (For more details, and some examples of poets of the Great War, see The Soldier and Futility.)

It is hard to draw a dividing line between the late Victorians and the early Modernists in literature. The poetry of Hopkins, for example, who falls into the Victorian period, is strikingly modern in its style and effect; whereas the work of several great twentieth-century poets (such as Yeats, and even later, Dylan Thomas) drew heavily on the traditions of nineteenth-century poetry.

Modernism

Modernism refers among other things, to the breakdown of 'realism' in art. This meant that, for example, a painter no longer necessarily represented subjects as they would appear to the naked eye. Writers, musicians and artists reinvented the rules, developing sometimes astonishing and provocative new

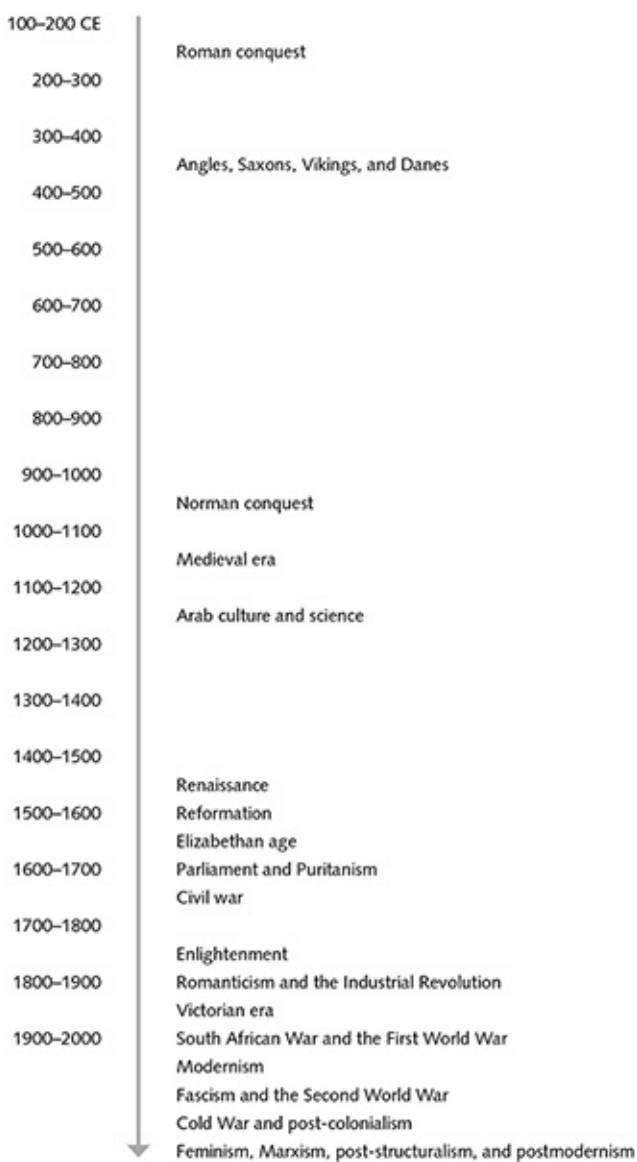
techniques. The notion that art could shock, disturb, and challenge as well as entertain, educate, and inspire became explicit for the first time. With the rise of the Freudian and Jungian schools of psychoanalysis, and the recognition of the subconscious and unconscious components of the mind, it was inevitable that creators would begin to explore their inner as well as their outer worlds. Poetry especially moved into the realm of association rather than explanation, with words being used for their evocative effect, rather than as explicit means of communication. (See, for example, the poems by T. S. Eliot.)

Fascism and the Second World War

The issues of censorship and political alignment of literature were especially vital in the decades after the First World War, which saw the rise of fascism in Europe. Many intellectuals and activists had to flee their native countries, Germany in particular, where the rise of Nazism under Hitler was eventually to precipitate the Second World War (1939–1945). This war was to introduce two new horrors that have haunted human consciousness ever since. The first was the Holocaust (the systematic segregation of Jewish people into concentration camps, where six million of them were murdered in an insane attempt to establish ‘racial purity’). The second was the dropping of the atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. This inflicted devastation, death, and long-term radioactive poisoning on a scale that had previously been unimaginable.

The Cold War and post-colonialism

After the war, the countries of the northern hemisphere settled into the ‘Cold War’ – the state of hostility between what was then the Soviet empire, and the Western democracies. Meanwhile, independence movements were growing throughout the southern hemisphere, with various colonies demanding and achieving independence from their former colonial ‘masters’. This process was often bumpy and sometimes even chaotic. However, in terms of literary output, there was tremendous growth in what came to be known as post-colonial literature and culture in various newly independent countries, particularly in Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and Africa.



Feminism, Marxism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism

The latter half of the twentieth century has been noteworthy for the richness and complexity of critical debates that have sprung up around literature. Different theories of literary criticism have been fiercely contested, and Marxist, feminist, and post-colonial ideologies have all been brought to bear on the way we read literature and the questions we ask of it.

In particular, there was a hotly debated and defended shift from the principles of so-called ‘new criticism’ to those of post-structuralism. ‘New criticism’ followed a system of closely scrutinising works of literature in order to identify their moral and aesthetic values (the word ‘aesthetic’ implies qualities of beauty that give pleasure and inspiration). It therefore assumed a universal set of standards by which art can be assessed. Post-structuralist theories, however, are broadly concerned with revealing the way language is structured into hierarchically ranked binary oppositions (male/female, white/black, urban/rural, society/nature, sun/moon), and the power dynamics that are exposed in texts as a result (a form of analysis known as deconstruction).

New theories concerning how history is retrieved, as well as input from various ideologies, have also led to a more sophisticated approach to the social and historical context of literature. Post-colonial and feminist critiques in particular have placed the burning questions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and culture at the centre of literary and other analysis.

In terms of philosophical models, we are now very much a postmodern world – one that acknowledges that one over-riding or dominant philosophy cannot explain everything. Certainly the myth of objective

and detached criticism is now a thing of the past. Possibly the most obvious effect of these debates is that literary criticism, of whatever kind, is now considerably more self-conscious and aware of the complexities of the global community.

As twenty-first-century readers, we try to bear in mind how our identity, assumptions, our location in terms of class, nationality and ethnicity, and our social and cultural values determine and shape our responses to art and entertainment – including literature.

Analysing poetry

The difference between poetry and prose

Before we can begin to analyse poetry, it is necessary to grasp what it is that makes poetry different from other forms of literature. In particular, how does it differ from prose?

To begin with, poetry is a particularly dense and concentrated form of expression. Every single word is chosen for effect, and then combined with others and shaped with a specific end in mind. Poetic language goes much further than conveying factual information; its aim is to generate strong responses, to vividly recreate a specific scene or mood. Imagery, or vivid use of language, is at the heart of poetry. It must be remembered that words are not always restricted to their specific dictionary meaning or factual content. Many words in the English language have acquired layers of meaning, and it is these implied meanings – associations or connotations – that poetry thrives on.

There are two essential hallmarks that distinguish poetry from prose (the everyday form of writing that we find in novels, newspapers, business letters, and so forth). These are sound and shape.

If we consider sound first, we find that unlike most other forms of literature, poetry must read aloud to be properly appreciated. Poems are designed to be heard with the ear as well as seen by the eye. Words are chosen by poets not only for their meaning and associations, but for their musical and sensuous qualities.

Rhythm and rhyme, in particular, are components that set poetry off from other forms of writing. Although modern poets have experimented freely with rhythm and rhyme, these features are often governed by complex rules similar to those found in musical composition; in certain types of poem, there will be a set number of ‘beats’ or stresses per line, just as a phrase of song can be broken up into bars and beats. It is not always necessary to know the technical terms used to describe these principles, but it is important to be able to identify the rhythm and rhyme scheme of a poem. For example, the rhythm can be quick, slow, smooth, monotonous, faltering, and so forth – the possibilities are endless.

The next important distinguishing feature of poetry is its shape. This refers to the distinctive appearance of poetry on the page; a poem is immediately recognisable because it is laid out in lines. This lends special emphasis to the words of a poem, as we have to consider their arrangement and layout. Just as prose might be compared to flowers growing at random in a field, the art of poetry might be likened to the careful arrangement of flowers for effect in a vase. Placing words in a line sets them apart, and creates a little pause before the next line begins. We can see the effect that arranging words into lines has if we look at these extracts from ‘The Abandoned Old Woman’ by Stephen Watson (from *Return of the Moon*):

Our mother, old, unable to walk,
lay there, incapable,
alone in her old grass and reed hut.

....

It was none of our fault;

we were all of us starving.
No-one could help it,
that we had to leave her behind.

The meaning of these lines would not change if we wrote them out as prose sentences: 'Our mother, old, unable to walk, lay there, incapable, alone in her old grass and reed hut... It was none of our fault; we were all of us starving. No-one could help it, that we had to leave her behind.' However, the emotional impact of these words is greatly lessened if they are presented this way. Their message becomes more matter-of-fact, and less poignant, when the words are run together over the full width of the page. Look at the contrast between the two ways of writing out these sentences, and note how the shaping of sentences into lines gives extra emphasis to the words at the beginning and end of lines.

It is worth checking the words chosen by the poet to start and end lines; these are often significant. The ordering of the poem into lines also sometimes creates what are called 'run-on' lines, when the flow of the words travels across a line break without a pause; for example, Delius's 'Deaf-and-dumb School', begins: 'On a black tarmac playground dark/ Nuns, ...'. Here the end of the line comes before we see what word the adjective 'dark' is describing. In this case, the run-on line breaks up the phrase, so that we are forced to pause and consider the implications of the words used. In other instances, this device can be used to quicken the pace of these lines, or to subtly alter or emphasise the meaning of the words concerned.

So the arrangement of words into lines in poetry is by no means arbitrary. Just as rhyme and rhythm contribute to the effect that poetry has on the ear, the shaping of words into lines gives poetry its visual impact. The following poem by Lionel Abrahams, on the difference between poetry and prose, might be helpful in consolidating these distinctions:

Note in Prosy Verse

Prose on the page
fills the space from margin to margin.
Like water or unmoulded clay it has no shape
of its own. Prose words are bodiless symbols
combining in messages which only the mind can translate,
and only then their infinite meaning begins.

Verse is shaped in its own shape
visible even before the reading begins.
The lines end where they mean to end
and the form they compose does not lie
passive on the paper but strives
to lift off, to fly free like a moth,
or rather a breath. It remembers
that once it was speech or even was song.
Poetry possibly favours verse because
a poem begins as an impassioned thought,
a felt idea so strong it has to
tell itself and end with being felt again.
The poem thus needs embodiment:

each word must ring its sound, each line its tune.

The shapes on the paper are never the poem
but only the signs that a poem has been made.

Embodied, audible, palpable,
the whole made thing is made to make
the meaning felt, not merely known.

Having identified some of the features that differentiate poetry from prose, we come a little closer to engaging with poetry itself. We have also established some useful areas to investigate when we move on to analysis.

Getting to grips with a poem: preparatory work

The next question is, how do we approach a poem? A great deal of ground needs to be covered before the actual analysis of a poem can begin. The importance of this preliminary work cannot be stressed strongly enough; thorough preparation is crucial if we are to complete a successful analysis of our chosen poem. Obviously we cannot leap in with a detailed discussion of an image used in the first line if we have not established what kind of poem we are dealing with, know little or nothing about its context or history, or if we are still not certain of the meaning in some parts.

These initial stages in the process of getting to grips with a poem can be enjoyable as well as fruitful. While you can work through them alone, it's much livelier to do this in a tutorial or study group. Even friends and family can be drawn into the discussion.

One suggested outline for this preparatory process could be the following:

1. Discussion
2. Dictionary
3. Context
4. Connections
5. Paraphrase.

Discussion

It is extremely helpful to discuss the poem with others in an informal context. Here you will be asking questions such as 'What is the poem about?'; 'What does it mean?'; 'What sort of poem is it?'; 'What does it remind me of?'; 'What is its basic message?'; 'Does it communicate this effectively, and if so, how?' At this stage, you are sorting out your initial responses to the poem, as well as familiarising yourself with its outline and overall meaning. You will find the questions being asked will shift from the general to the specific; from 'What's it about?' to 'I don't understand what the last two lines mean – does anyone have any ideas?'

Dictionary

Next, you will find it worthwhile to identify and look up the meaning of all unfamiliar words. Every word in a poem counts, so it is essential to establish exactly what each one means. This is the point at which you will need to use a dictionary. It is worth double-checking words that you are fairly sure you understand; dictionaries often alert the reader to the more obscure meanings of words, and this can sometimes enrich the understanding of the poem.

Context

However, looking up unknown words in a dictionary is not always enough to answer all the questions that arise about the meaning of a poem. This leads us to the question of context. Here we must decide what background information we need if we are to understand and enjoy a particular poem. This is one of the more important areas to investigate before beginning an analysis; many poems from past centuries may seem rather pointless, or even slightly ridiculous to the modern reader if their historical and political context is not known. Blake's 'And Did Those Feet' (see www.oxford.co.za) is an example of a poem that seems at best eccentric and at worst incomprehensible unless its specific background is understood. And some poems by the Romantic poets can seem alien, flowery, and exaggerated unless we have some understanding of the poetic philosophy they represent.

Here it is helpful if everyone pools their knowledge. Some of your classmates may already have done some research; or your lecturer may be able to fill in background details. The poem itself might have explanatory footnotes. If you still feel that there are gaps in your understanding of the poem and its context, you can also use the Internet to search for information on particular topics, although try to keep the parameters of your search quite narrow. You will find an encyclopaedia, or guide (sometimes called a companion) to English literature a welcome resource. These can be found in the reference section of your local or university library. Use them to look up poets, literary periods or genres, which will be listed alphabetically.

Connections

A rewarding way of carrying any discussion of context further is to work out whether there are any points of contact between the history and circumstances of the poem under discussion, and your own present-day situation. For example, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's indictment of her country's political complacency and lack of compassion (see '[A Curse for a Nation](#)') has an extremely contemporary feel to it – the criticisms it makes apply as much to many modern democracies as they once did to nineteenth-century England. Likewise, many women married within traditional or conservative communities today will be able to identify with Lady Mary Chudleigh's seventeenth-century poem, '[To the Ladies](#)'. And in the case of many poems by South African or African writers, any discussion of their work would be pointless without some understanding of the histories of colonialism and apartheid; this background will have powerfully affected the day-to-day lives of many readers of this anthology.

A note of caution here: establishing the parallels between your own situation and that of a long-dead poet can be exciting, but it is not a substitute for analysis. Unless you are specifically asked to do so in an assignment, do not use a poem as a launching pad for telling your own personal or political history. Nevertheless, establishing links across centuries or cultures (or both) is a valuable part of the preparation for analysis.

Paraphrase

To consolidate the ground covered in your discussion and research, it often helps to paraphrase the poem. This means retelling it in your own words. It is worth stressing that this is an extremely helpful exercise if done before attempting an analysis, but it should not take the place of analysis itself – a common mistake made by students.

One way of illustrating the difference between the two procedures – paraphrase and analysis – is to imagine two different ways of looking at a painting. An initial approach might be to list the different components found in this imaginary painting; noting, for example, that it contains the colours green and blue with small amounts of yellow, and that it shows tall trees, a cloudless sky, and a winding road. The second response, by comparison, would go further by describing how these components work together to

suggest a certain *mood*. It might read:

The use of the cool blue and green colours conveys a calm and natural atmosphere, which is given a hint of warmth by the slight touches of yellow that brighten the landscape. The height of the trees gives a sense of upward movement to the composition; the cloudless sky suggests unbroken tranquillity (there are literally no clouds on the horizon); and the winding curves of the road enhance the sense of natural harmony. No harsh colours or jagged lines disrupt the peaceful mood of this painting. This is a nostalgic recreation of a beautiful and idealised rural scene.

The first approach is similar to paraphrase, the stage in which the ‘ingredients’ of the poem (or this case, a painting) are listed, sorted, and clarified. However, it is the second process, which reflects on the *effect* of these components when combined, that constitutes analysis.

Another way of demonstrating the difference between the two processes is to look at following accounts (adapted from student essays) of the first two lines of Christina Rossetti’s ‘A Birthday’:

My heart is like a singing bird
Whose nest is in a watered shoot.

The speaker’s organ of circulation is like a small melodious feathered creature that has made a place of rest in a plant which has a plentiful water supply.

By beginning with the word “my”, the speaker makes the description of her joy personal. She uses the image of a singing bird to convey a sense of natural and spontaneous delight. The fact that the bird has a nest adds a sense of security; the word “nest” has connotations of safety and warmth. The “watered shoot” also suggests something that is growing and flourishing in a fertile environment. One conclusion might be that the speaker has secure emotional grounds for her happiness – perhaps she is in a new relationship; the word “shoot” (which suggests new or fresh growth) might refer to this.

The first extract is a rather exaggerated illustration of paraphrase, whereas the second is an example of close analysis. (While it is not necessarily an ideal example of analysis, the contrast between this approach and that of paraphrase should clearly illustrate the differences.)

This suggested programme of preparatory work on a poem need not be followed in the order described. For example, you might like to do research on the context of the poem and look up new words in the dictionary before the class discussion takes place. Or the discussion itself might centre on the connections the poem suggests to you and your fellow students. Your teacher might also suggest that you paraphrase the poem as a written exercise as an initial stage before moving on to an essay analysing the poem.

Critical analysis: a definition

By now, you have no doubt formed an impression of the process of analysis, which has been repeatedly referred to above. However, a fuller definition is necessary, as is some discussion of the more problematic aspects of this process. Critical analysis (sometimes referred to as practical criticism or close reading) is a contested, but nevertheless valuable tool when beginning critical reading, and a rewarding skill that can be applied in a variety of different situations. It involves reading something (in this case, a poem) very carefully and closely, word by word and line by line (usually in chronological order) in order to identify the parts that make it up and evaluate their effectiveness.

The next step is to describe the mood and tone (or resonance) created by this particular blend of words, images, visual shapes, and sound effects. (This is one of the features that distinguishes critical analysis from paraphrasing; see the examples given above.) Finally, depending on the theoretical tools being used, critical analysis sometimes ends with an assessment of the ‘value’ of the poem or its message, or comments on what it reveals about social dynamics.

Critical analysis has limitations; it stems from a school of mid-twentieth century literary criticism that has come under fire for its assumption that all readers have access to a the same set of absolute and universal values or criteria that can be used as yardsticks to measure a piece of art (see [timeline](#)). This is clearly not the case. For example, many Westerners might find the symphonies of Beethoven or Mozart exquisitely beautiful, and claim that such beauty is universal; yet to a Tibetan monk, whose chants are sung according to an entirely different tonal scale, they might sound like the most hideous and confusing noise. (Just think of how different generations within the same family often find each other's choice of music unbearable.)

Furthermore, many scholars have pointed out that it is not always appropriate or even possible to judge whether art is 'good' or not (this kind of evaluation is implied in the principles of new criticism), as this raises the thorny questions of what constitutes 'good' or 'bad' art, and who gets to define and decide on these standards. Recent trends in literary criticism have focused instead on what art reveals about society, what power relations it describes, the ideological and political shifts and stances represented in cultural expression, and the extent to which a literary or artistic work can act to undermine or subvert the social norms.

However, it is unrealistic to try to avoid making any value judgements when assessing any piece of art, including a poem. A glance at the film reviews online or in any newspaper will reveal the extent to which we rank culture and entertainment according to a graded scale of values – a 'five-star movie' is generally one with an excellent script and performances, one with 'three stars' is considered to be fairly entertaining, and a 'one-star' film is a piece of trash to be avoided. So to a degree, the tendency to evaluate art and entertainment according to a broad set of 'standards' is embedded in most of our cultures. Perhaps the important thing to bear in mind is that the question 'Is this a good poem?' is not the only one to ask; there are other important questions that might reveal rewarding insights.

Nevertheless, in spite of its limitations, critical analysis remains a valuable 'first stage' in acquiring critical skills. Many students find it useful in their everyday work and study; its principles can be applied when reading newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and business letters; when watching films, television or plays; even when listening to the radio or to music. It can be of practical use when querying material you suspect of being less than honest or straightforward; propaganda, for example, or simply the small print in a document you are asked to sign.

If you are interested in alternative theoretical or ideological approaches to literature, you will find that close reading remains a useful tool to have in your stock of critical skills. The ability to critically analyse poetry also remains an important part of most English poetry courses at tertiary educational institutions, and it is a skill that you are likely be required to demonstrate in your poetry essays and exams.

Guidelines for analysing a poem

Once you have completed the preliminary stages, you have reached the point of plunging into the poem itself. The following steps are very basic and flexible guidelines for carrying out an analysis; as you gain more confidence, you will be able to refine this list, add pointers of your own, and change the order around to suit your approach.

First of all (bearing in mind the distinguishing aspects of poetry discussed above), familiarise yourself with the sound and shape of the poem. Remember that poetry is created to be heard and seen, not just understood. If you have not already done so, begin by reading the poem aloud, or asking someone else to read it to you. Listen as if it were a piece of music. This will alert you to various important aspects of the poem; its rhyme scheme, pace and rhythm, the specific sounds of its words. Does the poem sound lulling and soothing? Brisk and quick? Harsh and jarring? Racy and breathless? Or do contrasting sounds follow

one another to change the effect on the ear? Hearing the poem also gives an initial impression of those poetic devices which are used to create specific sound effects, such as alliteration or onomatopoeia (see below for definitions and examples).

Next, look at the overall shape and structure of the poem. Note whether it is divided into stanzas, and where these breaks fall. It is also worth counting the number of lines, especially in shorter poems: this is often the easiest way to spot a sonnet (which always has fourteen lines). The shape will often help us to identify the type of poem; repeating choruses, for example, usually point to a song or ballad. Check for lines that are repeated, or that stand alone (these are usually significant).

At this stage, you should have enough material to draft brief introductory notes, if you are planning to turn your analysis into an essay. By now you know what kind of poem you are dealing with, understand its general meaning, and have some sense of its context and atmosphere. You might want to leave your introductory paragraph till later, when you have finished working your way through the poem; on the other hand, jotting down your overall sense of the poem at this stage might help you to deal with the most intimidating stage: getting started.

What follows forms the ‘meat’ of the analysis; the examination of the poem line by line and word by word. It is best to proceed chronologically, and work your way through from beginning to end without skipping sections or backtracking.

Begin with the title, if the poem has one. (Poems without titles are usually identified by their first line, which is used as a heading under which the poem stands.) Some titles simply state the topic, but more often they contain essential additional information which illuminates the poem that follows. They can also establish an aura or atmosphere before the poem itself starts; the French title of Keats’ ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ helps to create a mysterious and exotic mood even if we are not certain what it means. Bear in mind that even short, simple titles can make a profound contribution to the poem as a whole; the title of Wilfred Owen’s poem ‘Futility’ expresses the speaker’s opinion of war with a bitterness that is largely absent from the poem itself.

Now examine the poem line by line, keeping an eye open for any words or phrases you find striking. As you proceed, bear the following checklist in mind. The pointers and questions it suggests are not meant to be prescriptive, and should not be followed rigidly, as each poem will present slightly different challenges. Nevertheless, it will provide you with options for making your analysis as thorough and rewarding as possible.

Identify significant words, and note where they are placed in the structure of the poem. Do they fall at the beginning of lines or stanzas? Do they stand alone? Are they repeated? Is our attention drawn to them because they ‘jar’ or ‘jump out’ of an otherwise smoothly flowing line? Is there anything else unusual about where they are placed?

Look more carefully at any *repeated words or lines*. What effect does the repetition have? Does it lend special emphasis? Does it act as a chorus? Is the effect that of a lullaby or song? If a line or phrase is repeated at intervals throughout the poem, check whether the impact of the words remains the same. If any changes are made to a repeated line, what effect does this have?

Check punctuation, which becomes particularly expressive in poetry. Dashes, colons, semi-colons, exclamation and question marks will have obvious effects on the meaning of the poem; also investigate the placing of commas and full stops. Do any of these fall in unusual places? How do they contribute to the pace of the poem; do they hurry it along, or break it up? See Tennyson’s In Memoriam poems for examples of how punctuation can underline the message contained in words.

If you are really stuck, you could *break the poem down into its grammatical components*. This can be surprisingly revealing. A poem crammed with verbs will be punchy, full of action, brisk and swift; one that uses many adjectives and adverbs is more likely to be descriptive, flowery and slow-paced. It is also often rewarding to look at the pronouns used; the third-person pronoun ‘one’ is associated with a style that is formal, detached and even cold; the second-person pronoun (‘you’) is much more immediate and informal in its effect, but still indicates a degree of distance; and the first-person pronoun (‘I’, ‘we’) is intimate, personal, and confessional. The use of ‘I’ can also indicate power, as the speaker then ‘owns’ the words spoken, and has control over any description that follows.

Pay attention to *word-music*. This draws on the earlier stage of listening to the poem to assess its sound effects. Two common poetic devices or techniques that specifically affect how poetry sounds are *onomatopoeia* and *alliteration*. Knowing how to spell these terms is not as important as being able to recognise them! Onomatopoeia involves using words that sound like the action or object described; some examples are ‘the **hissing** of waves on sand’; ‘the **clip-clop** of hooves’; ‘the **clashing** cymbals’. Alliteration is the repetition of the same letter or sound in several successive words; for example, ‘**g**reen and **g**olden **g**rows the **g**lass.’ The first stanza of ‘Binsey Poplars’ by Hopkins features alliteration in almost every line; read it for further examples. Sometimes both alliteration and onomatopoeia can appear together in the same phrase: ‘the mournful moan of doves’. It should be clear that these are often very evocative or sensuous aspects of a poem, which can add colour and texture.

Rhythm and rhyme scheme have been mentioned above. Now is the time to note where and how the rhythm of a poem changes, and to ask why that specific change takes place. (Marvell’s ‘To his Coy Mistress’ is an excellent example of how changes in rhythm reinforce the argument of the poem.) Also consider the rhyme scheme; how many rhyming sounds are there, and in what pattern do they occur? What do these sounds suggest to you? The rhyme scheme is often important in that it contributes control and structure to the poem. A poem governed by a strict sense of rhyme and rhythm will often come across as complex and carefully crafted, whereas a poem in free verse (no rhyme scheme) tends to be loose and informal.

Also consider how the rhythmic and rhyming features of a poem contribute to or amplify its meaning. Usually, they intensify the message of the words – see, for example, Wyatt’s ‘My Lute, Awake!’ and Tichborne’s ‘Elegy’. However, there is sometimes a deliberate contrast between the argument of the poem and its rhythm and rhyme scheme; see Millay’s ‘I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed’ for an example of sharp contrast between the elegant formality of the strict rhythm and rhyme scheme (and equally elegant vocabulary), and the funny, cynical, and saucy message of the poem.

One of the more important (and enjoyable) parts of analysis is the *examination and assessment of the images, or ‘word-pictures’,* that appear in the poem. Broadly speaking, images refer to anything described in particularly vivid and picturesque language. However, most imagery involves a comparison (either explicit or implicit) of some kind. Comparisons involve a transfer of associations between two different things that nevertheless share a specific quality or have some features in common. In other words, if we wish to suggest that someone is brave, we can either say so directly, or we could describe them as a ‘lion’. This does not mean that they have literally changed species; instead, everything we associate with the word ‘lion’ (courage, majesty, power

and so forth) is transferred momentarily to that person. The power of comparisons to illuminate and illustrate should be obvious; it is far more dramatic to greet a courageous friend with the words 'You are a lion!' than to state 'You are brave'.

Comparisons can be found in two forms in literature: as *metaphors* and as *similes*. In the case of a simile, the comparison is made explicit by the linking words 'as' or 'like'; for example, 'she is as brave as a lion' or 'he sings like an angel'. Metaphors collapse the comparison into a single image; for example, 'She is a lion'; 'His song is angelic'. Metaphors and similes are often found in everyday speech ('politicians should get off the gravy train'; 'the price of petrol is daylight robbery'; 'it's like taking sweets from a baby' and so forth), and can be quite commonplace. Your task is not simply to identify the metaphors and similes in the poem, but to judge their effectiveness. Are they ordinary? Vivid? Unusual? You will also need to 'unpack' the associations involved; to return to our 'lion' example, it is obviously not enough to say in your analysis: 'In this metaphor, the person is compared to a lion.' You would need to list the qualities suggested by the image of a 'lion', and to link these associations with the person being described.

In a poem, imagery can be used in an accumulative way. One image often builds on another, weaving different associations together into a united whole. This means that you should not study the images in the poem in isolation. Check to see if they are linked to one another, or whether you can trace any development between them. The suggestions for discussion on Mtshali's poem 'Men in Chains' provide some practical questions on metaphor and simile.

It is essential to bear *mood or tone* in mind. These are very difficult qualities to define or pin down. One way of clarifying mood and tone might be to refer to the emotional resonance of the poem; what feelings does it evoke? If you struggle to express these, the following questions might help (use them to help you identify your responses, not as part of a formal analysis): what flavour does the poem have? If you had to illustrate it, what colours would you choose? Would they be bright, warm, murky or cool? If you had to choose music to match the poem, what kind of music and instruments would you pick? Ominous drums, laid-back jazz saxophones, brisk and energetic rap, a dreamy waltz?

It is also important to track the shifts in tone; do you notice any abrupt changes? Are there parts where it is more intense? One way of monitoring these often subtle changes is to ask what effect is being created at various stages in the poem. At this point, our guidelines may seem frustratingly vague; it might help to turn back to the examples of paraphrase and analysis above. Here, one of the features that distinguishes the written samples of analysis from those of paraphrase is that the former include descriptions of mood and tone. As you read and analyse more poetry, you will develop your own 'mood thermometer', but this aspect of analysis takes practice at first.

Finally, it is extremely important to keep asking the questions *how* and *why*: *How* was this effect achieved, and *why*? (Analysis demands endless curiosity.) These questions are essential to prevent our analysis from reverting to a catalogue of parts. It is all too easy to reduce our findings to a mechanical list, which might run something like this: 'this poem features a metaphor in line 4, alliteration in line 5, use of the first person throughout, three semi-colons, and the repetition of the last line of each stanza'. We must engage with each poem that we analyse, remaining alert to the shifts and transformations within the tiny landscape it seeks to create; repeated questioning will aid us in this task. The 'how' question also acts as a reminder that in written analysis, it is vital to quote from the poem to support our arguments.

Once you have worked your way through the poem with this checklist, you are likely to see new connections and relationships between the different parts. As the poem is put back together again, a message may emerge that was not clear before. If the analysis has been successful, you will find that you have gained a new appreciation of the poem, or developed a more sophisticated critique of it. You might like to use these discoveries as the basis for concluding remarks, if you are planning to turn your analysis into an essay. This is also the stage at which you might find it interesting to swap findings with fellow students, noting the differences and similarities between your efforts.

Above all, it must be remembered that the task of analysis is an individual process. This is because our response to poetry is extremely personal. Each reader will interact with the text in a different way; individual taste, differing value systems, cultural heritages and so forth will all determine our responses to some degree. Life would be very boring if we all liked identical clothing, food and music, and indeed the value of diversity has become a catch-phrase in recent years. This principle is a valuable one in the development of critical skills; you should be encouraged to make personal choices and express preferences when engaging with poetry. A revealing exercise would be for you and several classmates each to list your favourite five or ten poems from this anthology, and state your reasons for choosing them. You will find the wide range of choices that is bound to result very enlightening. But remember that you will seldom be examined on whether or not you like a poem and why.

It must also be stressed that *there are no right or wrong answers when analysing a poem, although there might be weak and strong answers*. Strong answers are those that reflect sensitivity towards the language and intention of the poem, and which provide evidence from the poem for each conclusion drawn. Remember that two different interpretations of the same poem might be equally valid, even if they contradict each other. If both arguments are clear, logical and well supported, both should be equally worthy of praise.

Writing a draft essay

If you are asked to write a critical analysis of a poem, then to some extent the shape of that poem will determine the shape of your essay. Begin with some broad introductory statements; these should arise out of your pre-analysis preparations (described above). If there is vital contextual information that shapes your reading of the poem, now is the time to set it out. Next, collate the notes you have made on the poem itself (following the guidelines for analysis suggested above), and organise them so that the individual points are clear as you write, and the line of discussion flows easily. Remember to proceed chronologically through the poem; do not hop from discussing line 11 to line 22 and then back to something you have noticed in line 17. However, if the poet is developing a particular image that is subtly changing, then refer back to the points you have already established, but without repeating yourself. For example: ‘The description of the house, which was presented as a warm, cosy environment in the second stanza, has become increasingly eerie and threatening by the time we reach stanza four.’

It is extremely important to support your opinions by quoting from the text, even if only a few words are used. Turn back to the hypothetical analysis of a painting, and imagine that it reads ‘This painting has a cool, calm and natural feel, with touches of warmth. It has a sense of height and upward movement, and conveys a tranquil atmosphere of harmony.’ This leaves us with a description of the onlooker’s personal feelings and responses rather than an analysis. Yet these claims become perfectly valid if they are supported with evidence. Vague statements (such as ‘this poem has a good feeling’) are not much use, so ensure that your responses to the poem are firmly grounded in the text. It is a good idea to quote those words or images that trigger a specific response.

Finish by drawing some kind of conclusion, or by summarising your findings: this is a good place to

restate your basic interpretation of the poem. Some sample endings: at the end of an analysis of an anti-war poem, for example, you might write something along the lines of:

This bitter catalogue of the brutality and destructive power of warfare spells out the message that war is both immoral and futile;

or, at the end of a poem about township life, you might conclude:

This poem combines a celebration of the liveliness and resourcefulness of township dwellers with a stinging indictment of the apartheid policies that led to the creation of these settlements, and the economic policies that keep them in poverty.

This is probably the best point at which to include your own personal response to the poem, but be careful to focus on summing up the essence of the poem itself, rather than ending with a mini-essay on your own beliefs and views.

If you are asked a specific question that also involves a close reading of the poem, the process may become a little more complicated, but the essential procedure remains the same. In these cases, you are analysing the poem in search of specific evidence. For example, if you are asked to write an essay on the use of irony in a poem, you will need to tease out all aspects of the poem that contribute to this feature. Try to establish exactly what is expected of you.

Always begin by ‘analysing’ the question itself: break it down into its component parts, and ensure that you understand what these mean; use a dictionary if necessary. Later, when you have finished the rough draft of your essay, go back to the question, and check that every aspect of it has been covered.

Close critical analysis is extremely useful if you are asked to compare two or more poems in an essay, as the closer the scrutiny of each poem, the richer the level of contrasts and parallels between them.

Also bear in mind that it is vital to write all your essays in draft form before beginning the final copy. You should now edit your draft with a critical eye. By all means ask friends and fellow students for their comments. (This is quite different from asking them to do the work for you; get as much feedback as possible at this stage.) Your lecturer might also be willing to comment on your draft before you submit your final essay. Your work can only benefit from reworking and polishing. The notion that we need to ‘get it right’ the first time we write something, either by hand or on a keyboard, is extremely unhelpful. I strongly recommend writing a first draft by hand, and then typing this up, as this forces one to move to a ‘second draft’.

How much should you rely on the published works of scholars when planning and writing a critical analysis? During the initial stages of learning this skill, you should not place too much reliance on the works of commentators and critics. Rather read up more about the background of the poem, or read further poems by that poet.

It is all too easy to be intimidated by critics who are experts in their field, and to submit your opinions to theirs. There is also a tendency to feel that because their assessment of a poem or poet is in print, it must necessarily be correct and of more value than anything you can offer. This means that you run the risk of turning your analysis into a patchwork of other people’s ideas and interpretations. It also detracts from the pleasure and sense of exploration of establishing your own personal response to a poem. Bear in mind that your goal is to develop your own critical skills, rather than to defer to the opinions of others.

To provide some practical help with the process of moving from analysing a poem to writing a formal essay on it, I have provided some examples of poems (‘Binsey Poplars’ by Gerard Manley Hopkins and ‘For Albert Luthuli (21.7.67)’ by Jennifer Davids) that have rough notes scribbled all over them. It helps a lot to begin by jotting down your analysis all over the poem itself; this process of ‘dissection’ makes the

poem less daunting, and means that you are less likely to leave out important points. I have also provided some samples of written analysis, to demonstrate how your rough notes can be transformed into a formal essay, or at least the first draft of one.

Below are two possible beginnings for a written critical analysis of this poem, based on the notes made on the poem. Please note that both are equally valid interpretations. Although you might find one or the other more convincing, both support their conclusions with evidence drawn from the poem itself – one is not more ‘correct’ than the other. The two different versions are provided specifically to show you that the same general discussion of a poem can lead to essays that emphasis different points, or have different styles, while both meeting the standards required for critical analysis.

Binsey Poplars ← newspaper headline?

FELLED 1879 ← date of 'death' - gravestone?

My aspens ^{loving} dear, whose airy cages ^{alliteration - rustling leaves?} quelled,
 Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun,
 All felled, felled, are all felled; ^{death knell of soldiers?}
 Of a fresh and following folded rank
 Not spared, not one
 That dandled a sandalled ^{lazy, relaxed images}
 Shadow that swam or sank
 On meadow and river and wind-wandering
 weed-winding bank. ^{words suggest shape of river: slow, curving}
 O if we but knew what we do ^{shift: from description of trees to sermon on the environment}
 When we delve and hew –
 Hack and rack the growing green!
 Since country is so tender ^{delicacy, nature is feminised}
 To her, her being so slender,
 That, like the sleek and seeing ball
 But a prick will make no eye at all, ^{image of extreme vulnerability: ouch!}
 Where we, even where we mean
 To mend her we end her, ^{words look similar, but have opposite meanings}
 When we hew or delve:
 After-comers cannot guess the beauty been. ^{Most NB point of poem. Irony: the beauty lost has been recounted in the poem}
 Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
 Strokes of havoc únselve
 The sweet especial scene,
 Rural scene, a rural scene, ^{repetition: chanting, mourning}
 Sweet especial rural scene. ^{harsh, extreme word}

1st person pronoun
 personal, possessive
 no mercy
 1-4: move from harmless words to language of torture
 repetition: emphasis on how little it takes to create devastation

Essay 1:

This poem is one of mourning for the loss of a group of trees that were an integral part of a beautiful country scene. The title resembles the headstone of a grave, with the date and manner of death ('Felled 1879') written below the name. This immediately strikes us as unusual, as it suggests that these trees are being commemorated in the same way that we mourn loved ones who have died.

This provides evidence that the poplar trees are extremely important to the speaker, who speaks of them as if they were humans he loved very much. This is confirmed by the first words of the poem: 'My aspens dear'. The use of endearments and the first person implies that he had a personal relationship with the trees, and strengthens the impression that this poem is an elegy (a poem of mourning).

The first two lines reveal both the speaker's love for the trees and their beauty. The words 'airy cages' give a strong visual impression of the shape of the trees, with the branches and leaves forming the bars of the 'cage'. This image looks like an apparent contradiction (or paradox); the sense of freedom and light conveyed by the word 'airy' dissolves the sense of enclosure that 'cage' gives. The music of the words 'quelled,/Quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun' tries to imitate the sound of rustling leaves, as we find repetition of both words ('quelled,/Quelled') and sounds ('que' and 'lea'). The images also suggest the constant interplay of light and shade caused by the movement of branches and trees.

implies gift or memorial **For Albert Luthuli (21.7.67)** *← date of death*

also means change You a fragment of the sun *→ light, warmth*
← go turn the world *← world revolves around sun*
in the long strength
of your fingers *famous for 'knocking on a door'*

paradox
↑
Bounded
you gave me
knowledge of freedom

↓
developed further
Silenced
you taught me
how to speak

*Luthuli was killed in a train accident;
also metaphor for a journey*

Somewhere a train
has reached a destination
and tonight *contrast to sun*

effect of Luthuli's death [the cold fist of winter *contrast to fingers (line 4): a fist is closed, potentially violent*
clenches around the world

But beyond it *freedom, no limits*
the endless pulsations of space

grow louder
and stars breaking the dark *traditional image of hope*
grow large

Walk now father *close personal relationship, loving*

unchecked
from sun to sun *→ takes his place in the universe*

significant, as Luthuli was banned: death restores his freedom

Essay 2:

This poem traces the intense emotional involvement of the speaker with a specific place of natural beauty, and charts his passionate response to the destruction both of this particular spot and the rural environment in general.

The title makes one think of an obituary column in a newspaper, with the name of the deceased and the date of their death laid out as a headline. In this case, the 'dead' are the poplar trees near Binsey (a village outside Oxford, where Hopkins

studied). Obituaries are often written by someone close to the person who has died, and in this case the speaker feels personally involved.

We know this because the first word of the poem is the first-person possessive pronoun 'My'. This suggests that the speaker 'owns' the aspens, or feels extremely possessive of them. The use of the first person tells us that the speaker is no detached onlooker; he is personally affected, and feels he has the right to describe and define both the beauty of the trees and the extent of his bereavement.

The physical beauty of the trees (described in the first and second lines) makes way for the death knell in the third line: 'All felled, felled, all are felled.' Here the swift, light rhythm of the first two lines, which suggests the rapid and graceful movements of poplar leaves in the wind, is displaced by a slow and repetitive beat, like the tolling of a bell to announce a death. The word 'felled' both looks and sounds like the word 'knell'.

'For Albert Luthuli' is a good example of a poem that needs a fair amount of contextual background filled in before any analysis can begin. As this was written on the occasion of Albert Luthuli's death, it is important to know who he was and something about his life. At the very least, we need to know that he was one of the great leaders of the ANC during the 1950s and 60s, a chief, and a Nobel Prize winner. He was constantly harassed by the apartheid regime, and eventually placed under a banning order. This restricted his movements, forbade political involvement, and attempted to isolate him. Luthuli is perhaps best remembered for a speech in which he spoke of 'knocking on a door', a metaphor for his life's engagement in the struggle against apartheid. He died in a train accident, on the date mentioned in the title of the poem. This information sheds light on several of the references in the poem.

Here we have provided some examples of how imagery might be analysed. Note that this is not a complete essay; there is no introduction and conclusion, and not all the images in the poem are discussed. The intention is to demonstrate how interlinking imagery in a poem might be approached.

One set of images traced throughout this poem are those of the world, the sun and the stars in space ('fragment of the sun'; 'world'; 'endless pulsations of space'; 'stars breaking the dark'; 'sun to sun'). These are significant because they suggest absolute freedom. The universe is infinitely huge, and there are no boundaries in space. Chief Luthuli was restricted throughout his life – first by the discriminatory laws of apartheid, and then later by his banning order, which placed him under house arrest and tried to end his political activism. The choice of images of freedom is thus particularly telling.

The first and last lines of the poem both use the sun as a metaphor, which links into this theme, but also operates on other levels. By describing Luthuli as a 'fragment of the sun' at the beginning of the poem, the speaker immediately conveys the sense that he is a source of warmth, light and inspiration. At the end of the poem, however, the image has changed slightly; now it is suggested that Luthuli takes his place in the universe as a sun among suns ('Walk now father ... from sun to sun'). This could mean, first of all, that even after his death he remains a source of light and guidance; it also gives a sense of his stature and dignity. Finally, it could also mean his death has given him the freedom of the entire universe, in sharp contrast to the restrictions he endured in life.

Another image that is developed involves hands. The speaker describes the 'long strength' of Luthuli's fingers; later we read that the 'cold fist of winter/ clenches around the world'. These images remind us of Luthuli's famous phrase 'knocking on a door'. We use our hands to knock, and so the power of Luthuli's words, which constantly 'knocked' at apartheid's door, are translated into an image of hands and strong fingers. The speaker considers the power of Luthuli's words/hands to be so great that they can 'turn' (or change) the world. This image of 'fingers' contrasts with the later image of a fist, which is used to describe the immediate impact of Luthuli's death. Unlike fingers, which can hold, point, guide or knock, a fist is closed, potentially violent and unable to give or receive. One interpretation of the 'cold fist of winter' is that it is a metaphor for apartheid and its violence; without the guiding light and warmth ('fragment of the sun') of Luthuli's leadership to combat it, apartheid 'clenches around the world' like a fist. This image also suggests the experience of being 'gripped' by grief and loss.

Writing poetry exams

Finally, some hints about poetry exams. Many good students underperform in exams simply because they

reproduce material they have already prepared, instead of answering the specific questions asked.

Just as in the essay, it is vital that you read the question carefully, break it down into parts, and analyse it. For essay-type questions, it is essential that you spend the first five minutes of your allotted time for that question doing this. Next, scribble notes on the poem provided in the question paper. Once you have done that, work on a very short rough draft of your essay on a scrap piece of paper, or the inside of the exam booklet cover. Jot down any thoughts you might have and see if you can organise them into a logical sequence. This is particularly important if you have been asked to present an argument, or to explain whether you agree or disagree with a criticism of a poem. Now is the time to draw a skeleton structure for your answer; this will help if your mind goes blank, or if you run out of ideas halfway through your essay.

It is essential that you give yourself this time for planning in an exam. Do not be daunted by the sight of your fellow students around you scribbling as fast as they can; you will benefit from taking a few extra minutes to plan your answer. Now work through the poem chronologically. If you are writing about the first stanza, and you suddenly get a fresh idea about an image in the fifth stanza, quickly jot this down on the poem itself or your rough structure, so that you will remember to include it once you are further along in your essay. The same rule applies to exam questions as to essays; try not to skip backwards and forwards in the poem. Leave plenty of space between paragraphs in case you think of something you want to add to a point you have already made. Remember to add a conclusion, even if this is only one sentence summing up your point of view or your response to the poem. If you have time at the end of the exam, read through your answer to check for errors and to satisfy yourself that your meaning is clear.

Working through your exam question according to this system can help to control anxiety and nervousness, as you have a system to follow. More important, it increases your chances of doing justice to your careful preparation.

Always remember that when it comes to writing a poetry exam, you are usually being asked to demonstrate a skill that you have practiced and mastered, rather than to repeat factual information contained in a syllabus.

Good luck!

Li Ho (791–817)

Li Ho (sometimes called Li He) was a striking contributor to the ‘golden age’ of Chinese poetry, which reached its height during the stable and cultured T’ang dynasty (618–907). Although he died in his twenties, he was famous in his lifetime for his unusual and often dark poems.

On the Frontier

A Tartar ¹ horn tugs at the north wind,
Thistle Gate shines whiter than the stream.
The sky swallows the road to Kokonor.
On the Great Wall, ² a thousand miles of moonlight.

⁵ The dew comes down, the banners drizzle,
Cold bronze rings the watches of the night.
The nomads’ armour meshes serpents’ scales.
Horses neigh, Evergreen Mound’s ³ champed^o white.

chewed by horses

In the still of autumn see the Pleiades. ⁴

¹⁰ Far out on the sands, danger in the furze.^o
North of their tents is surely the sky’s end
Where the sound of the river streams beyond the border.

bushes

Tu Mu (803–852)

Tu Mu spent time travelling between monasteries in the lovelier parts of his country, and his work celebrates the natural beauty of the Chinese landscape. He was particularly admired for his brief four-line poems (called ‘chueh-chu’ or ‘jueju’). Two examples are given here.

The Gate Tower of Ch’i-an City ⁵

The sound grates on the river tower, one blast of the horn.
Pale sunlight floods, sinking by the cold shore.
Pointless to lean on the balcony and look back miserably:
There are seventy-five post-stations from here to home.

To Judge Han Ch’o at Yang-chou

Over misted blue hills and distant water
In Chiang-nan at autumn’s end the grass has not yet wilted.
By night on the Four-and-Twenty Bridges, under the full moon,
Where are you teaching a jade girl to blow tunes on your flute?

Supporting notes

China, ruled by the cultured T’ang dynasty, was at this time the largest empire in the world. Its flourishing and rich civilisation was under constant threat of invasion by land-hungry and nomadic tribes from Mongolia and inner Asia, who were feared for their swift attack and brilliance on horseback (which gave them a significant military advantage). This is why the reference to horses in ‘On the Frontier’ conveys especial menace. It also explains why the Great Wall of China, built as a defence, looms so large. It is one of the world’s greatest engineering achievements; it is even visible from space.

Some historians argue that it was pressure on the eastern borders of Europe by these same nomads that led to the westward spread of the Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic tribes. Eventually, the force of the invaders (often referred to as Tartars or Mongols) became too strong to resist, and China was conquered and itself colonised.

You might like to compare the above three poems with Mao Tse-tung’s ‘Lou Mountain Pass’ and Ezra Pound’s ‘The River-Merchant’s Wife’, a very loose translation of a poem by the great Chinese poet Li Bai, also known as Li Po (c.701–762). Do these poems have features in common? Do you notice any points of style and imagery that differ from ‘Western’ poems you have studied?

Anonymous (eighth or ninth century)

The Viking Terror ⁶

Fierce is the wind tonight,
It ploughs up the white hair of the sea
I have no fear that the Viking hosts^o
Will come over the water to me.

bands of fighting men

Supporting notes

Although composed two continents away, this short Irish poem (found written on the margin of a religious manuscript) expresses the same anxiety that we see in 'On the Frontier'.

From about 420 onwards, tribes from present-day Germany and Scandinavia took advantage of their sailing skills to attack the coasts of Britain and Ireland, bringing their languages and agricultural skills. This period of often brutal Anglo-Saxon invasion and settlement lasted until about 615.

Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343–1400)

Chaucer was probably the greatest writer of his time and place. He was fascinated with the class structure of England, which he explores in his works. Born into the new middle class that was changing the face of feudal medieval society, he travelled to Europe as a soldier, established links with three royal courts, married into the aristocracy, and held a number of increasingly prestigious civil, diplomatic and political posts. Nevertheless, he ran into difficulties of his own making; he was often in debt, and was once charged with rape.

In an uncertain, dangerous and rapidly changing age, Chaucer produced a significant amount of great writing. His works are exceptional for their ability to capture the language and idiom of their time, while remaining open to present-day interpretation and enjoyment.

His *Canterbury Tales* has a unique place in the history of the English language; it was one of the first works to be printed after William Caxton set up the first printing press in London. This helped establish the southeast Midlands dialect (in which Chaucer wrote, and which was spoken in London) as the grandparent of the English spoken today.

From THE CANTERBURY TALES

The Pardoner's Prologue (*extracts*)

Lordinges^o – quod^o he – in chirches whan I preche,
I paine me^o to han an hautein^o speche,
And ringe it out as round as gooth a belle,
For I can^o al by rote that I telle.

sirs / said
I take pains / loud

5 My theme is alway oon,^o and evere^o was:

know
the same / always

Radix malorum est cupiditas. ⁷

First I pronounce whennes^o that I come,
And thanne my bulles ⁸ shewe I alle and some:

from where

Oure lige lordes seel on my patente, ⁹

10 That shewe^o I first, my body to warente,^o
That no man be so bold, ne^o preest ne^o clerk,

show / protect

neither / nor

Me to destourbe of Cristes holy werk. ¹⁰

And after that thanne telle I forth my tales –

Bulles^o of pope and of cardinales,

letters

15 Of patriarkes^o and bisshopes I shewe,

church fathers

And in Latin I speke a wordes fewe,

To saffron with^o my predicacioun,^o

spice up / preaching

And for to stire hem^o to devocioun.

them

Thanne shewe I forth my longe crystal stones,^o

glass jars

20 Ycrammed ful of cloutes^o and of bones –

jars

Relikes ¹¹ been they, as weenen^o they eechoon.^o

suppose / each one

Thanne have I in laton^o a shulder-boon^o

metal case / shoulder-bone

Which that was of an holy Jewes sheep.

‘Goode men,’ I saye, ‘take of my wordes keep:^o [...]’

notice

25 Goode men and wommen, oo^o thing warne I you:

one

If any wight^o be in this chirche now

person

That hath doon sinne horrible, that he

Dar nat for shame of it yshriven ¹² be,

Or any womman, be she yong or old,

30 That hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold, ¹³

Swich^o folk shal have no power ne no grace

such

To offren^o to my relikes in this place;

make offerings

And whoso findeth him out of swich blame,

He wol come up and offre in Goddes name,

35 And I assoile^o him by the auctoritee^o

forgive / authority

Which that by bulle ygraunted was to me.’

By this gaude^o have I wonne, yeer by yeer,

trick

An hundred mark^o sith^o I was pardoner.

pounds / since

I stonde lik a clerk in my pulpet,

40 And whan the lewed^o people is down yset,^o

simple / sitting

I preche so as ye han herd bifore,

And telle an hundred false japes^o more.

jokes

Thanne paine I me to strecche forth the nekke,
And eest and west upon the peple I bekke ¹⁴

45 As dooth a douve,^o sitting on a berne;^o
Mine handes and my tonge goon so yerne^o
That it is joye to see my bisnesse.

dove / barn

quickly

Of avarice and of swich cursednesse
Is al my preching, for to make hem free

50 To yiven hir pens,^o and namely unto me,
For myn entente is nat^o but for to winne,^o
And no thing for correccion of sinne.

pennies, money

nothing / gain

I rekke^o nevere whan that they been beried^o
Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied. ¹⁵

care / buried

55 For certes, many a predicacioun^o
Comth ofte time of yvel entencioun:^o [...] *evil intention*
Thus spete^o I out my venim under hewe^o
Of holinesse, to seeme holy and trewe.

spit / disguise

But shortly myn entente^o I wol devise:^o

intention / describe

60 I preche of no thing but for coveitise; ¹⁶
Therefore my theme is yit and evere was

Thus can I preche again^o that same vice
Which that I use, and that is avarice.

againstRadix malorum est cupiditas.

65 But though myself be gilty in that sinne,
Yit can I make other folk to twinne^o

turn

From avarice, and sore to repente –
But that is nat my principal entente:^o

intention

I preche no thing but for coveitise.

70 Of this matere it oughte ynough suffise.^o

to provide enough

Thanne telle I hem ensamples^o many oon^o
Of olde stories longe time agoon,

moral stories / ones

For lewed^o peple loven tales olde –
Swiche thinges can they wel reporte^o and holde.^o

simple

repeat / remember

75 What, trowe ye^o that whiles I may preche,
And winne gold and silver for^o I teche,
That I wol live in poverte wilfully?

do you think

because

Nay, nay, I thoughte^o it nevere, trewely,
For I wol preche and begge in sondry^o landes;

considered

many

80 I wol nat do no labour with mine handes,
Ne make baskettes and live therby, ¹⁷

By cause^o I wol nat beggen idelly.^o

because / in vain

I wol none of the Apostles countrefete.^o

imitate

I wol have moneye, wolle,^o cheese, and whete,

wool

85 Al were it yiven of the pooreste page, ¹⁸

Or of the pooreste widwe^o in a village –

widow

Al sholde hir children sterve for famine. ¹⁹

Nay, I wol drinke licour of the vine

And have a joly wenche in every town.

90 But herkneth,^o lordinges, in conclusioun,

Youre liking^o is that I shal telle a tale:

Now have I dronke a draughte of corny ale,^o

By God, I hope I shal you telle a thing

That shal by reson been at youre liking;

95 For though myself be a ful vicious man,

A moral tale yit I you telle can,

Which I am wont^o to preche for to winne.

Now holde youre pees, ²⁰ my tale I wol biginne.

hark

wish

beer

likely

Supporting notes

This extract from the Prologue (or introduction) to a tale told by the Pardoner (a character in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*) shows Chaucer's concern with the abuses of the medieval church. Pardoners were minor members of the clergy who were licensed to travel from place to place, granting people absolution. In the Catholic faith (the only Christian religion in western Europe until the 1520s), this meant that people would confess their sins, and be given some form of penance to prove how sorry they were. Unfortunately, money sometimes changed hands; the sinner might be urged to make a financial contribution to a holy cause, for example. This, combined with the sale of relics and the practice of paying for prayers to be said for the souls of the dead, led to widespread corruption and even extortion by some representatives of the church.

In the figure of the Pardoner, Chaucer launches a stinging attack on these practices. What is interesting is that he did so at a time when the Church had enormous political, secular, and even legal power, and practiced strict censorship. Its critics could even be executed for heresy (the religious equivalent of treason).

If the unfamiliar spelling makes this extract difficult to understand, read it aloud, pronouncing the words the way they are spelled; Middle English spelling (in an age of many dialects and no dictionaries) is rather inconsistent, but much more phonetic than Modern English. So 'preche' is 'preach', 'beried' is 'buried', 'trewē' is 'true', and so on. Also check whether any unfamiliar words resemble Afrikaans words you might know; because of the shared Germanic heritage, the meaning is often the same; 'sterve' for example, means to die in both Middle English and Afrikaans - and is obviously related to the English 'starve'.

Questions to consider

1. Given the above information, what literary and narrative techniques does Chaucer use to 'get away with' his attack on the abuses within the Church? In what ways does this extract differ from a pamphlet or letter he might have written making exactly the same criticisms?
2. If you have correctly identified irony* as one of the ways in which Chaucer gets his point across without explicitly attacking the Church, try working through the extract, identifying exactly where irony is located and how it operates. You might like to start by using the extract to draw up a list of all the ways in which a compassionate and sincere member of the clergy might be expected to act, especially towards the poor; next, list all the acts

of the Pardoner which contradict these.

3. The Pardoner is an unforgettable study of an utterly corrupt and cynical human being. Some critics argue that he is a supreme hypocrite; others say that he at least recognises his own depravity. What kind of emotional blackmail does he use? Are there modern equivalents of the Pardoner? During the late 1980s, 'tele-evangelists' in the United States and elsewhere, often hinted that prayers would be answered only if viewers gave them large donations. In many African countries, some evangelical churches and pastors have enormous power and wealth, sometimes gained in ethically questionable ways. Corruption is of course not limited to religious figures; all professions that involve power (whether psychological, spiritual, political, or economic) over other people carry this risk. Growing awareness of the issues of sexual harassment and political corruption has alerted us to some of the dangers involved. How can people like the Pardoner be prevented from abusing their power?
4. You might also like to consider the effect of censorship* on culture generally; were there similar levels of irony and satire* in resistance art during South Africa's period of state censorship? Can you think of any examples? Are we possibly returning to a period of state censorship, with the controversial Secrecy Bill moving through Parliament? How are South African satirists responding? You might like to look up websites like ZA News on the Internet for examples.

Anonymous (fifteenth century)

Western Wind

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?
Christ, if my love were in my arms
And I in my bed again!

Supporting notes

We know nothing about the author, or the circumstances in which this exquisite short poem was written. Perhaps the speaker is a traveller or soldier far from home. In medieval Europe, several famous poets were also soldiers.

Here is another very lovely short poem that uses military imagery. It was written in the twelfth century by a Spanish Moor (as the Arabs who conquered and ruled much of Spain from 711 AD until the twelfth century were known) by the name of Abū l-Qāsim al-Manishī.

Rain Over the River

The wind does the delicate work
of a goldsmith
crimping water into mesh
for a coat of mail.^o

type of armour

⁵ Then comes the rain
and rivets the pieces together
with little nails.

Short poems can be particularly effective and memorable. You can find more examples on [here](#), or you might like to look for ones that appeal to you.

Anonymous (fifteenth century)

I Sing of a Maiden

I sing of a maiden

That is makéles;^o

matchless, mateless

King of alle kingés

To her son she ches.^o

chose

5 He cam also stillé

Ther His moder was,

As dew in Aprille

That falleth on the gras.

He cam also stillé

10 To His moderes bowr,^o

room or garden

As dew in Aprille

That falleth on the flowr.

He cam also stillé

Ther His moder lay,

15 As dew in Aprille

That falleth on the spray.

Moder and maiden

Was never none but she;

Wel may swich^o a lady

such

20 Godé's moder be.

Supporting notes

'I Sing of a Maiden' is a lovely example of a lyric.* It uses simple, repetitive language and has a regular and musical rhythm. If you read it aloud, you will find it easy to imagine this poem being sung.

The poem takes the form of a prayer to Mary, the mother of Jesus. During the Middle Ages, the practice of honouring Mary was at its height, and was expressed in a variety of cultural forms – poetry, music, sculpture, tapestry, and even architecture. However, it also closely resembles much of the secular* love poetry typical of this time, which reflected the values of 'courtly love'. This began as an aristocratic game of manners in which women were set up as objects of adoration. The poet-lover (usually, but not always, male), following a strictly observed script, would praise his beloved extravagantly, claiming to suffer great anguish as a result of his love for her, and beg her to return his love, or at least show some sign of her favour. Later on, as Renaissance values replaced medieval ones, many poets were to subvert or satirise the tradition of courtly love; see Wyatt's '[My Lute, Awake!](#)' for a chilling example of how an apparently conventional courtly love poem is turned into a series of threats. Some of [Shakespeare's sonnets](#) also poke fun at the more formal and artificial features of courtly love poetry. (See www.oxford.co.za for more examples of courtly love poems from medieval and Elizabethan times.)

Nevertheless, as an influence on art, culture, and social relations, the underlying attitudes

of courtly love persist to this day. Concepts such as 'courtesy', 'chivalry', and 'gallantry' all stem from it, as do many traditional ideas concerning the roles and behaviour of women and men. The belief that men are active and direct in romantic affairs, whereas women are passive and perhaps manipulative, still persists. Many societies continue to support the idea that men should court and women should be courted.

In this poem, the simple but effective imagery of spring refers, of course, to the northern hemisphere. The coming of spring in England must have seemed like a miracle after the darkness, hunger and often life-threatening cold of winter. It was not uncommon for the poor to starve during winter, and it is not surprising that the symbolism of spring, when folk could once again feel warmth and grow food, was used in religious poetry, usually to refer to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, or the hope of life after death.

Anonymous (fifteenth century)

The Unquiet Grave

‘The wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain;
I never had but one true-love,
In cold grave she was lain.

5 ‘I’ll do as much for my true-love
As any young man may;
I’ll sit and mourn all at her grave
For a twelvemonth, and a day.’

The twelvemonth and a day being up,
10 The dead began to speak:

‘Oh who sits weeping on my grave,
And will not let me sleep?’

‘ ’Tis I, my love, sits on your grave
And will not let you sleep;

15 For I crave one kiss of your clay-cold lips
And that is all I seek.’

‘You crave one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
But my breath smells earthy strong;
If you have one kiss of my clay-cold lips,
20 Your time will not be long.

‘ ’Tis down in yonder garden green,
Love, where we used to walk,
The finest flower that e’^o was seen
Is withered to a stalk.

25 ‘The stalk is withered dry, my love,
So will our hearts decay;
So make yourself content, my love,
Till God calls you away.’

Supporting notes

This poem has many of the features of a ballad;* it tells a story, making use of dialogue, that sounds like a folk-tale or fable, and there is a supernatural element. It also has a lilting rhythm and can be sung (the folk-singer Joan Baez has recorded a version); however, it does not have the ‘chorus’ or set of repeating lines that is typical of most ballads.

Once you have read through this poem, turn to Christina Rossetti’s ‘Song’. At first the poems may seem to have only superficial similarities; both deal with the separation (or potential separation) of lovers, one of whom is alive and mourning, the other dead and

buried.

However, in 'The Unquiet Grave', it is clear that the conventions of elegy* are being gently mocked. The young lover is determined to behave in an appropriate (but not necessarily sincere) manner, and to do all the right and proper things: 'I'll do as much ... as any young man may'. His dead girlfriend is far more realistic and sensible, and points out that life must go on without her. 'Song', meanwhile, comes across at first as a sweet but rather sentimental and morbid love poem.

If you consider the following questions, you may find that your view of Rossetti's poem changes, and that you also see 'The Unquiet Grave' from a fresh perspective.

1. What do you think of the fact that both the speakers 'from the grave' are women? Is it usual to hear women's voices in love poems? What do you make of the fact that both women are dead or dying? Could the poets perhaps be using the grave as a platform from which women can have a voice or 'answer back'?
2. In real life, the dead cannot respond to the elegies that are said over their graves. Could these poets be making a point about sincerity? In Rossetti's poem, is there a harsher message? While the young woman in 'The Unquiet Grave' has plenty of sensible advice for her melodramatic lover, Rossetti's speaker seems to underline the sheer indifference of the dead to the living, and warns that once she is dead, the whole drama of mourning will be irrelevant to her. If you re-read this poem, do you pick up any darker overtones?
3. Why do you think Rossetti's poem has such a conventional form? You will notice imagery that seems very traditional, almost clichéd in fact. Could this be deliberate? Is it possible that poets sometimes use conservative and conventional techniques as a form of camouflage? Why would they do this? Under what circumstances are subversive messages likely to be disguised?
4. Look at 'The Unquiet Grave' again. Would you now agree that it makes the same basic point as 'Song'? However, its tone in expressing this message is quite different. Which is the more humorous poem? Which is more subtle?
5. Now compare these two poems with the elegiac poems from Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. It should be clear that there is a significant difference between the two sets of poems. Tennyson's are elegies in every sense of the word; do you agree that the other two are poems that look like elegies, but are actually 'anti-elegy' in intention?

Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503–1542)

Thomas Wyatt was educated at Cambridge University and served as a diplomat in various European countries, including Italy. Here he began translating the sonnets* of the Italian poet and philosopher Petrarch, which led to him introducing the sonnet form into English literature. Wyatt's career at the court of King Henry VIII, and indeed his life, were placed in danger when his mistress, Anne Boleyn, became Henry's queen. This, together with rumours of treason, meant that he endured periods of imprisonment. His style (especially in his love poems) marks a distinct shift away from the conventions of medieval verse to new, innovative, and sometimes cynical kinds of poetry.

Whoso List to Hunt

Whoso list^o to hunt, I know where is an hind,^o

likes / female deer

But as for me, *helas*,^o I may no more.

alas

The vain travail^o hath wearied me so sore,

struggle

I am of them that farthest cometh behind.

5 Yet may I by no means my wearied mind

Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore

Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore

Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,

10 As well as I may spend his time in vain.

And graven^o with diamonds in letters plain

engraved

There is written her fair neck round about:

'²¹ for Caesar's^o I am,

the king's Noli me tangere

And wild for to hold though I seem tame.'

Supporting notes

The new fascination with Italian literature that was a characteristic of the Renaissance led to a rebirth of the sonnet,* which was to flower in the hands of poets such as Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare. (See www.oxford.co.za for another example of a 'hunting' sonnet, this time by Spenser.) Wyatt was responsible for bringing the sonnets of the medieval Italian poet and philosopher Petrarch to England, and early attempts to master this new form of poem were mostly adaptations or translations of his poems.

My Lute, Awake!

My lute, awake! Perform the last

Labour that thou and I shall waste,

And end that I have now begun;

For when this song is sung and past,

5 My lute, be still, for I have done.

As to be heard where ear is none,

As lead to grave^o in marble stone,

engrave

My song may pierce her heart as soon.

Should we then sigh or sing or moan?

10 No, no, my lute, for I have done.

The rocks do not so cruelly

Repulse the waves continually

As she my suit^o and affection.

So that I am past remedy,^o

*courtship
curing, saving*

15 Whereby my lute and I have done.

Proud of the spoil^o that thou hast got

Of simple hearts, thorough^o love's shot;

By whom, unkind, thou hast them won,

Think not he hath his bow ²² forgot,

*prizes, loot
through*

20 Although my lute and I have done.

Vengeance shall fall on thy disdain

That makest but game on earnest pain.

Think not alone under the sun

Unquit^o to cause thy lovers plain,

unrequited

25 Although my lute and I have done.

Perchance thee lie withered and old

The winter nights that are so cold,

Plaining^o in vain unto the moon.

Thy wishes then dare not be told.

complaining

30 Care then who list,^o for I have done.

And then may chance thee to repent

The time that thou hast lost and spent

To cause thy lovers sigh and swoon.

Then shalt thou know beauty but lent,

35 And wish and want as I have done.

Now cease, my lute. This is the last

Labour that thou and I shall waste,

And ended is that we begun.

Now is this song both sung and past;

40 My lute, be still, for I have done.

likes

Questions to consider

1. Read the notes on courtly love poetry. Do you agree that 'My Lute, Awake!' looks like a courtly love poem? How does it outwardly resemble one?
2. In what ways is it an attack on the conventions of courtly love? How would the 'beloved' feel on hearing the speaker's words?
3. Identify the specific threats made in this poem. Does it still come across as a love poem? What emotions are being expressed by the speaker? Does this help you to track the tone of the poem?
4. Look closely at the structure of the poem. Note how the rhyme scheme operates; you will notice that the sound of the word 'done' echoes through the entire poem, and that

most of the words at the end of the lines have one syllable only. How does this support the tone and meaning of the poem? You will also notice that the last line of each stanza acts as a kind of chorus. How do the small changes in each one shift and develop the meaning? Line 5 and the last line of the poem are identical; yet the meaning has been transformed. How has it changed by the time we read the last line?

Sir Walter Raleigh (c.1552–1618)

The legend of how Raleigh laid his cloak in a puddle for Queen Elizabeth I to step on has given him a rather romantic image. In reality, like many Renaissance heroes, he combined sophisticated scholarship with exploits of war and colonisation. He was one of the first Europeans to sail to both South and North America (he is credited with introducing tobacco into the Western world). His journeys paved the way for the first British colony in North America. He was imprisoned on false charges of treason, but freed to go back to South America in search of gold. The trip was a disaster, and he was executed on his return.

His writing (much of which was done in prison) included his scholarly *History of the World*. Unfortunately, only a few of his witty and intelligent poems survive.

The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd ²³

If all the world and love were young,
And truth in every shepherd's tongue,
These pretty pleasures might me move
To live with thee and be thy love.

⁵ Time drives the flocks from field to fold,
When rivers rage and rocks grow cold,
And Philomel ²⁴ becometh dumb;
The rest complain of cares to come.

¹⁰ The flowers do fade, and wanton fields
To wayward winter reckoning yields;
A honey tongue, a heart of gall,^o
Is fancy's spring, but sorrow's fall.

bitter liquid

¹⁵ The gowns, thy shoes, thy beds of roses,
Thy cap, thy kirtle,^o and thy posies
Soon break, soon wither, soon forgotten,
In folly ripe, in reason rotten.

skirt

²⁰ Thy belt of straw and ivy buds,
Thy coral clasps and amber studs, ²⁵
All these in me no means can move
To come to thee and be thy love.

But could youth last and love still breed,
Had joys no date nor age no need,
Then these delights my mind might move
To live with thee and be thy love.

Sir Philip Sidney (1554–1586)

Sidney belonged to a generation of Renaissance scholar-soldiers who prided themselves on being equally skilled with both the pen and sword. Born into a noble and literary family, he was a successful diplomat who travelled and studied in Europe. His writings included the critical work *Defence of Poesy*, as well as poetry which, while experimenting with classical* forms, established a unique English identity that was to influence Shakespeare. He died young after being wounded in battle, and is supposed to have gallantly handed his water bottle to a dying man as he was carried off the field. His sister Mary, Countess of Pembroke, herself a gifted writer, translator and patron of the arts, completed and published his unfinished works, including his famous *Arcadia*.

Sonnet: Who Will in Fairest Book of Nature Know

Who will in fairest book of Nature know
How virtue may best lodged in beauty be,
Let him but learn of love to read in thee,
Stella, those fair lines which true goodness show.

5 There shall he find all vices' overthrow,
Not by rude force, but sweetest sovereignty
Of reason, from whose light those night birds ²⁶ fly,
That inward sun in thine eyes shineth so.

And, not content to be perfection's heir
10 Thyself, dost strive all minds that way to move,
Who mark^o in thee what is in thee most fair.

So while thy beauty draws the heart to love,
As fast thy virtue bends that love to good.
'But ah,' Desire still cries, 'give me some food.'

notice

Supporting notes

This poem is taken from the sonnet sequence *Astrophel and Stella* ('star-lover' and 'star'), supposedly inspired by Sidney's love for a woman who married someone else. It deals with an age-old problem for lovers: the tension between chaste love and lust. This theme was inventively explored by many later poets, especially the generation that came immediately after the sixteenth century. You might like to read Andrew Marvell's '[To His Coy Mistress](#)', which takes the complaint in Sidney's sonnet and gives it a novel twist. How many other poems can you find in this anthology that deal with this topic?

Christopher Marlowe (1564–1593)

Marlowe was educated at Cambridge University and was widely admired for his powerful dramatic tragedies,* which strongly influenced Shakespeare's plays. His life was full of intrigue and rather shady dealings; it is likely that he was involved in spying and fraud. He was also mixed up in a street fight in which a man died. He himself was stabbed to death shortly before he was due to be tried on charges of alleged blasphemy. It is still not known if he was in fact assassinated. Rumours persist that he somehow faked his death and then secretly authored some of Shakespeare's works, even though there is no evidence for this theory.

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love ²⁷

Come live with me and be my love,
And we will all the pleasures prove
That valleys, groves, hills and fields,
Woods, or steepy mountain yields.

5 And we will sit upon the rocks,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks
By shallow rivers, to whose falls
Melodious birds sing madrigals.^o

songs

And I will make thee beds of roses
¹⁰ And a thousand fragrant posies;
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle^o
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle;^o

skirt

evergreen shrub

A gown made of the finest wool
Which from our pretty lambs we pull;

¹⁵ Fair lined slippers for the cold,
With buckles of the purest gold;

A belt of straw and ivy buds,
With coral clasps and amber studs: ²⁸

And if these pleasures may thee move,

²⁰ Come live with me and be my love.

The shepherds' swains^o shall dance and sing

lovers

For thy delight each May morning;

If these delights thy mind may move,

Then live with me and be my love.

Supporting notes

This poem is an excellent example of the classical pastoral* tradition revived by Sidney and other Renaissance poets. Pastoral poetry was based on an extremely artificial and idealistic view of rural life, in which shepherds, shepherdesses, and their unrealistically obedient flocks frolicked together against a backdrop of eternal spring. As Raleigh

suggests in his poem, the realities of winter mud or sheep-shearing are never shown. The poet was concerned with the creation of beauty rather than with realism.

Although this poem can stand alone (and lends itself very well to close analysis), it is probably more enjoyable when compared with Raleigh's 'The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd'. Perhaps your class or study group could split into two groups, with each discussing and analysing one poem. After twenty minutes or so, each group could then report back to the other to 'combine' the debate, and to see how the conclusions reached about one poem enrich the understanding of the other. You might also like to try to find the other 'replies' to this poem (by John Donne and Cecil Day-Lewis) in a library or on the Internet.

Chidioc Tichborne (c.1563–1586)

Little is known about Tichborne other than the fact that he was Catholic, and became involved in a plot to assassinate the Protestant queen Elizabeth I. He was arrested and sentenced to a gruesome death along with the other conspirators.

Tichborne's Elegy

Elegy Written with His Own Hand in the Tower before His Execution

My prime of youth is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,^o
And all my good is but vain hope of gain;

weeds

5 The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

My tale was heard, and yet it was not told,
My fruit is fall'n, and yet my leaves are green,

My youth is spent, and yet I am not old,

10 I saw the world, and yet I was not seen;
My thread is cut, and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death, and found it in my womb,
I looked for life, and saw it was a shade,

15 I trod the earth, and knew it was my tomb,
And now I die, and now I was but made;

My glass^o is full, and now my glass is run,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

hourglass

Supporting notes

Tichborne is known for this elegy* he wrote for his wife, Agnes, the night before his execution, although he wrote several other poems as well. Although poems are not necessarily autobiographical, the force of this poem comes from the honesty with which the poet writes about his own desperate situation. It has an impact that is very different from any of the other elegies in this anthology: see Jonson's two poems; Tennyson's *In Memoriam* poems; Jack Cope and Sally Bryer's poems in memory of Ingrid Jonker; and Jennifer Davids' 'For Albert Luthuli (21.7.67)'. This is no doubt because this elegy was written by the doomed man himself.

In terms of South African history, Tichborne would have been a 'political prisoner' facing the death penalty for taking part in an 'armed struggle' or 'revolutionary violence'. Can you find any poems, speeches, letters, or stories by South Africans in similar situations?

William Shakespeare (1564–1616)

Little is known about Shakespeare's life. He did not receive much formal education. He married, had three children, and joined a theatrical company in London in the 1590s. He had a flourishing career as an actor, poet, and dramatist; he wrote, directed and acted in his own plays (over thirty-five in all), which included histories, comedies,* tragedies,* and romances.* Because they were produced directly for the stage, his plays were often not published until long after they had been performed; the sometimes uncertain status of their scripts remains a subject of lively debate.

Shakespeare was recognised while he lived as the best dramatist of his age: his memorable characters, unrivalled skill with language, and ability to entertain all levels of society mark him as the most famous playwright in the English language. His output of poetry was also considerable, and his sonnets are ranked among the finest of their kind. His contemporary, the dramatist Ben Jonson, described him prophetically as 'not of our age, but of all time'.

Sonnet: Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove.

5 O, no! it is an ever-fixèd mark

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,^o

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken. ²⁹

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

10 Within his bending sickle's ³⁰ compass come;

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

 If this be error and upon me proved,

 I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

ship

Supporting notes

The image of the ship and star in lines 7 and 8 is significant, given that this was written at a time of renewed exploration by sea and increasingly sophisticated navigation. Without modern radar, sixteenth-century sailors relied heavily on the position of stars and constellations to guide them. Today, sailors and astronomers still know how to work out the position of the South Pole by looking at the stars. If you can imagine being on a boat in the middle of the ocean without any landmarks to indicate where you are, or what direction you are going, you can appreciate the security that stars offer sailors.

The reference to Time in lines 9 and 10 draws on the common medieval and Renaissance personification of both death and time as a reaper who uses his sickle to harvest souls (or, in the case of time, youth) rather than crops. This image of the 'grim reaper' has become popular in fantasy writing, including the humorous books by Terry Pratchett.

Sonnet: Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:^o
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
5 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
10 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;^o
Nor shall Death brag thou wand' rest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

moderate

own

Sonnet: My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral ³¹ is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;^o
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
5 I have seen roses damasked,^o red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
10 That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied^o with false compare.^o

yellowish-brown

mixed, patterned

lied about / comparisons

Supporting notes

Both of these sonnets undermine the Petrarchan tradition in which extravagant and unrealistic comparisons were made between a woman's appearance and a list of beautiful objects; for example, eyes were like 'sapphires', teeth were like 'pearls', hair was 'spun gold'; necks were 'ivory towers', and so on. The first sonnet simply takes one comparison and turns its failure to adequately describe the beloved into a serious and serene love poem. The second is far more realistic, irreverent, and humorous. However, they both use the same logical reasoning.

Questions to consider

1. In 'My Mistress' Eyes', what word in the first line alerts us to the fact that this poem is not going to follow the conventional formula?
2. A careful reading of this sonnet gives two very different pictures: one of the ideal Petrarchan woman, and one of Shakespeare's lover. Work through the poem, sorting out their different sets of characteristics. How does the poet feel about the Petrarchan criteria for beauty in women? Do these criteria still exist? Where do we find them being promoted? How do you feel about them? Is there still a difference in value between the descriptions 'blonde' and 'brunette'? What about 'fat' and 'thin'? Why do you think this is so? Do similar criteria exist for men? Are there racial implications as well?
3. At times the poet's picture of his girlfriend seems quite cruel, even if funny. How do we know that this is a love poem? In sonnets, the last two lines usually sum up the message underlying the whole poem. What happens to this poem if we leave the last couplet out?

Song: Full Fathom Five Thy Father Lies

Full fathom ³² five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral ³³ made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,
5 But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! now I hear them — Ding-dong, bell.

Supporting notes

In the play , the spirit Ariel sings these words to a prince who believes that his *The Tempest* father has been drowned at sea. Unknown to the prince, his father has survived. Critics argue about whether the words are cruel or comforting, given the beauty of the images used.

is itself a particularly interesting play, because its story (of exiled nobles who *The Tempest* land on an island and take it over, enslaving the original inhabitants) lends itself to lively post-colonial* analysis. The poem 'Miranda', which is also inspired by the play, is a good example of this kind of commentary.

John Donne (1572–1631)

John Donne (pronounced Dun) came from a Catholic family and was therefore not allowed to graduate from Oxford University, where he studied. Ambitious and brilliant, he trained as a lawyer and established contacts in powerful circles. He was much in demand socially, and had many affairs. On the brink of a prestigious career as an MP, he fell deeply in love, and married secretly, a politically unpopular step that forced him to retire from public life. Later, he made a sincere conversion to the Anglican faith, and became a celebrated preacher. He was eventually made Dean of St Paul's, the biggest church in London. He was one of the first great metaphysical* poets, and his poems are typically witty and notable for their inventive use of comparisons. He is especially known for his passionate expression of both secular* and sacred* love.

To His Mistress Going to Bed

Come, madam, come, all rest my powers defy,
Until I labour, I in labour lie.

The foe oft-times, having the foe in sight,
Is tired with standing though they never fight.

5 Off with that girdle, like heaven's zone ³⁴ glistening,
But a far fairer world encompassing.

Unpin that spangled breastplate which you wear,
That the eyes of busy fools may be stopped there.

Unlace yourself, for that harmonious chime

10 Tells me from you that now 'tis your bed time.

Off with that happy busk,^o which I envy,

corset, undergarment

That still can be, and still can stand so nigh.

Your gown's going off such beauteous state reveals,

As when from flowry meads^o the hill's shadow steals.

meadows

15 Off with that wiry coronet^o and show

head-dress

The hairy diadem^o which on you doth grow:

crown (of hair)

Off with those shoes, and then safely tread

In this love's hallowed temple, this soft bed.

In such white robes heaven's angels used to be

20 Received by men; thou, Angel, bring'st with thee

A heaven like Mahomet's^o Paradise; and though

Mohammed's

Ill spirits walk in white, we easily know

By this these angels from an evil sprite:^o

spirit

Those set our hairs, but these our flesh upright.

25 License my roving hands, and let them go

Behind, before, between, above, below.

O my America! my new found land,

My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned,

My mine of precious stones, my empery,^o

empire

30 How blest am I in this discovering thee!

To enter in these bonds is to be free;

Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be.

Full nakedness, all joys are due to thee.

As souls unbodied, bodies unclothed must be

To taste whole joys. ³⁵ Gems which you women use

Are like Atalanta's balls, ³⁶ cast in men's views,

That when a fool's eye lighteth on a gem,

His earthly soul may covet theirs, not them.

Like pictures, or like books' gay coverings made

For laymen, are all women thus arrayed;

Themselves are mystic books, which only we

(Whom their imputed grace will dignify)

Must see revealed. Then, since I may know,

As liberally as to a midwife, show

Thyself: cast all, yea, this white linen hence,

Here is no penance, much less innocence. ³⁷

To teach thee, I am naked first; why than,^o

then

What needst thou have more covering than a man?

Holy Sonnet: Batter My Heart, Three-personed God ³⁸

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You

As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend

Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

I, like an usurped^o town, to another due,

taken over

Labour to admit You, but O, to no end;

Reason, your viceroy^o in me, me should defend,

surrogate ruler

But is captivated, and proves weak or untrue.

Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,^o

gladly

But am betrothed^o unto Your enemy. ³⁹

married

Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,

Take me to You, imprison me, for I,

Except You enthrall^o me, never shall be free,

captivate

Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me.

Supporting notes

The poems above demonstrate Donne's ability to write love poems that differ dramatically in style, tone, and content. 'Batter My Heart, Three-personed God' uses sexual imagery to convey religious fervour, while 'To His Mistress Going to Bed' is a frankly erotic and funny seduction poem, completely different once again from 'The Sun Rising'. Yet Donne uses a similar set of images in the latter two poems; can you identify these?

If you have difficulty in pinning down exactly what is meant by tone, a comparison of all three poems might be a useful way of seeing how tone can differ dramatically in works that might seem to deal with similar topics, and even use the same images.

The Sun Rising

Busy old fool, unruly sun,

Why dost thou thus,

Through windows and through curtains, call on us?

Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?

5 Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide

Late schoolboys, and sour prentices,^o

apprentices

Go tell court-huntsmen that the King will ride,

Call country ants to harvest offices;

Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,^o

climate

10 Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong

Why shouldst thou think?

I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,

But that I would not lose her sight so long:

15 If her eyes have not blinded thine,

Look, and tomorrow late, tell me,

Whether both th' Indias of spice and mine ⁴⁰

Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me.

Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,

20 And thou shalt hear, All here in one bed lay.

She's all states, and all princes, I,

Nothing else is.

Princes do but play us; compared to this,

All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy. ⁴¹

25 Thou, sun, art half as happy as we,

In that the world's contracted thus;

Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be

To warm the world, that's done in warming us.

Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;

30 This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere.

Supporting notes

Donne's poems are full of references to the new inventions and sciences of his age, including an awareness of the newly explored globe. In this poem, he makes use of the belief that the sun revolved around the earth (although astronomers were discovering for the first time that it happened the other way round) as the central metaphor* or 'conceit' of this poem. A 'conceit' is a particular kind of image used by the metaphysical poets, and refers to a comparison that is striking because it is original or unusual, rather than apt or accurate.

Questions to consider

1. Both the title and the first line are fairly unusual, given that this is a love poem. What tone is established in the first line? Why is it so surprising? Does it make more sense once you have read through the entire poem?
2. Throughout the poem, the speaker sets himself and his lover apart from other inhabitants of the world. What tone is used to refer to others 'out there', and who exactly are these people? Could this be related to Donne's own experience of social and political downfall after he fell in love and married?
3. As is typical of metaphysical poetry, the poet establishes an image, and then transforms it, or 'stretches' it to even more inventive limits. In this poem, the two lovers are first set apart from the world; they then become the world itself, effectively replacing the globe. Trace the exact development of these images throughout the poem; where does the change take place?
4. Look closely at how the poet structures his lines and syntax.* For example, read the first two lines of the third stanza, and check the positioning of the pronouns as well as the nouns to which they are linked. How does this emphasise the message that the first-person speaker and his lover mean the world to each other?

Ben Jonson (1572–1637)

Jonson's life was a colourful one. He was well educated, distinguished himself as a soldier, and then joined a company of travelling entertainers as an actor and a writer. His part in a slanderous play landed him in jail, and he narrowly avoided execution after killing a fellow actor in a duel. Shakespeare acted in his first play, and his career as a playwright blossomed until another defamatory play got him into trouble with King James I. However, the king eventually granted him a pension, which made him the first Poet Laureate (someone officially employed by the court or state to write poetry). His friends included Donne and Shakespeare, as well as several younger poets who called themselves the 'sons' or 'tribe of Ben'. His vigorous poetry and plays, together with his forceful personality, made him one of the foremost literary figures of his time.

On My First Daughter

Here lies, to each her parents' ruth,^o
Mary, the daughter of their youth;
Yet, all heaven's gifts being heaven's due,
It makes the father less to rue.

sorrow, pity

5 At six months' end she parted hence
With safety of her innocence;
Whose soul heaven's Queen (whose name she bears),
In comfort of her mother's tears,
Hath placed amongst her virgin train;^o
10 Where, while that severed doth remain,
This grave partakes the fleshly birth;⁴²
Which cover lightly, gentle earth.

company

On My First Son

Farewell, thou child of my right hand,⁴³ and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, loved boy.
Seven years thou wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
5 Oh, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage,
And, if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, asked, say here doth lie
10 Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry;
For whose sake, henceforth, all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.⁴⁴

Supporting notes

Given that this was an era of high infant mortality, it was certainly not unusual to lose more

than one child. Centuries later, this is unfortunately still something thousands of Southern African families suffer, especially since the HIV/Aids pandemic.

You might like to compare the poems that Jonson wrote on the deaths of his daughter and son. Try to establish what similarities there are, as well as what differences. What lies behind these differences?

Now turn to de Kok's 'Small Passing' and read it closely. At first it may seem very different to Jonson's poems; how do you think the gender of the poets shapes these differences? Can you find any similarities? Are there aspects of the tragedy of losing a child that transcend gender and historical period, and can you identify these in the poems? Interestingly enough, all three poems deal with the moral implications of mourning, and whether this is selfish or not. What different conclusions do Jonson and de Kok reach? Can you identify with both positions?

You might also want to look at the other elegies* in this book and look at how these (which mourn the loss of adults) compare with the ones discussed here, which describe the loss of babies or small children.

Robert Herrick (1591–1674)

Initially an apprentice goldsmith, Herrick studied at Cambridge University and moved in literary circles in London, coming under the influence of Ben Jonson. He was eventually ordained and took charge of a rural parish in Devon. No conventional priest, he kept a pet pig and regularly travelled to London, where he had a mistress twenty-seven years his junior. He is counted as one of the ‘Cavalier’ poets – a group of poets loyal to the monarchy during and after the Civil War (see the entries under [Milton](#) and [Marvell](#) for more details). They specialised in elegant lyrics and gallant love poems. Herrick in particular was known for secular love lyrics that emphasised the sweetness and shortness of life.

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

5 The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he’s a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he’s to setting.

10 That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry:
15 For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.^o

wait

Supporting notes

This is a famous example of a *carpe diem* poem. This Latin phrase, first used by the Roman philosopher Horace, means ‘seize the day’, and urges that pleasure should never be postponed, given the shortness of life, and youth especially. This theme was skilfully developed by several seventeenth-century poets; see, for example, Marvell’s [‘To His Coy Mistress’](#). The *carpe diem* philosophy was popularised in the Hollywood film *Dead Poets’ Society*, and continues in the ‘You only live once!’ trend.

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Herbert was born into a prominent family and performed brilliantly at Cambridge. At first he had political ambitions, and with his connections, a career at court seemed certain. However, he experienced a deep religious calling, and was ordained in the Anglican church. He brought great humility and sincerity to his spiritual duties, and wrote what is widely recognised as some of the finest devotional* poetry in the English language.

Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright,
The bridal^o of the earth and sky:
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight,
For thou must die.

marriage, union

5 Sweet rose, whose hue, angry^o and brave,^o
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

red / bright

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
10 A box where sweets^o compacted lie:
My music shows ye have your closes, ⁴⁵
And all must die.

perfumes

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
15 But though the whole world turn to coal, ⁴⁶
Then chiefly lives.

The Flower

How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
To which, besides their own demean,^o
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
5 Grief melts away
Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

demeanour

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
10 Quite underground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown^o
Where they together
All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

bloomed

15 These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
Killing and quickening,^o bringing down to hell
And up to heaven in an hour;
Making a chiming of a passing-bell 47

bringing to life

We say amiss

20 This or that is:

Thy word is all, if we could spell.

Oh that I once past changing were,
Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!

Many a spring I shoot up fair,

25 Offering^o at heaven, growing and groaning thither;

aiming

Nor doth my flower

Want a spring shower,

My sins and I joining together.

But while I grow in a straight line,

30 Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own,

Thy anger comes, and I decline:

What frost to that? what pole is not the zone

Where all things burn,

When thou dost turn,

35 And the least frown of thine is shown?

And now in age I bud again,

After so many deaths I live and write;

I once more smell the dew and rain,

And relish versing. Oh, my only light,

40 It cannot be

That I am he

On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide;

45 Which when we once can find and prove,

Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;

Who would be more,

Swelling through store,^o

wealth

Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

Supporting notes

You might find it interesting to compare 'The Flower' to Hopkins' 'No Worst, There is None'. Both deal with depression and spiritual alienation, but while Hopkins' poem seems to spring from the depths of misery (psychiatrists agree it is a textbook account of the symptoms of clinical depression), Herbert's speaks of surviving the ordeal and experiencing a sense of rebirth. Herbert's skill lies in his ability to use ordinary and natural imagery to describe a common human experience in fresh and accessible terms, in sharp contrast to the

nightmarish, tortured images Hopkins packs into his poem. Yet both describe similar emotional conditions.

Both poems lend themselves very well to close critical analysis; here again, if you are in a study group, you might like to split into two groups, each discussing and analysing one poem, then getting together to report back. You will discover that both poems are extremely rich in possible meanings (the apparent simplicity of the Herbert poem is deceptive), and should provoke some interesting debates. Although both speakers explore their relationships with God in explicitly Christian terms, the power of both poems is that the emotional territory they describe is familiar to members of all faith traditions, as well as agnostics (those who do not follow any particular faith).

John Milton (1608–1674)

Milton was educated at Cambridge University, and studied further to prepare himself for a career either as a poet or a priest. He soon gained a reputation as a writer of great imagination and skill. He travelled in Europe, meeting intellectuals and scientists such as the astronomer Galileo, before returning to find England in a state of civil war between supporters of the monarchy and Cromwell's parliamentarians. Milton was an ardent supporter of the new Puritan regime under Cromwell, and worked hard publishing pamphlets and tracts in favour of the new government, even though this contributed to his going blind. After the restoration of the monarchy, he returned to writing poetry and produced his most famous work, the monumental *Paradise Lost*, in which he set out to 'justify the ways of God to man'. His use of blank verse (poetry with no end-rhymes, previously found only in drama) was to influence the course of English poetry; he is also recognised for his contribution to the art of sonnet-writing.

On His Blindness

When I consider how my light is spent,^o

wasted

Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,

And that one talent which is death to hide ⁴⁸

Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent

⁵ To serve therewith my Maker, and present

My true account, lest He returning chide;

'Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?'

I fondly^o ask. But Patience, to prevent

foolishly

That murmur, soon replies, 'God doth not need

¹⁰ Either man's work or his own gifts. Who best

Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state

Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed

And post^o o'er land and ocean without rest;

travel

They also serve who only stand and wait.'

Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612–1672)

Bradstreet was born in England, but emigrated to the new colony of Massachusetts in North America at the age of eighteen, together with her father (who became governor of the colony) and her husband. Her family were among the first Puritan settlers who left for the New World to escape religious repression at home. She had eight children, and suffered from ill health throughout her life. A relative took her poetry to London to be published, making her the first poet of the North American colonies.

The Author to Her Book

Thou ill-formed offspring of my feeble brain,
Who after birth didst by my side remain,
Till snatched from thence by friends, less wise than true,
Who thee abroad exposed to public view,
5 Made thee in rags, ⁴⁹ halting^o to th' press to trudge,
Where errors were not lessened (all may judge).
At thy return my blushing was not small,
My rambling brat (in print) should mother call;
I cast thee by as one unfit for light,
10 Thy visage was so irksome in my sight;
Yet being mine own, at length affection would
Thy blemishes amend, if so I could:
I washed thy face, but more defects I saw,
And rubbing off a spot still made a flaw.
15 I stretched thy joints to make thee even feet, ⁵⁰
Yet still thou run'st more hobbling than is meet;
In better dress to trim thee was my mind,
But nought save homespun cloth i' th' house I find.
In this array 'mongst vulgars may'st thou roam;
20 In critic's hands beware thou dost not come,
And take thy way where yet thou are not known;
If for thy father asked, say thou hadst none;
And for thy mother, she alas is poor,
Which caused her thus to send thee out of door.

limping, faltering

Questions to consider

1. Although today it is not so unusual for a writer to compare a book to a baby, this poem is probably one of the first to have done so. The author develops this central comparison in a way that is characteristic of the metaphysical poets; can you trace this development? You might like to read the contextual notes and questions for Donne's 'The Sun Rising' first.
2. As you will have noticed, the poet draws on her practical experience as a parent to create effective imagery. What images are specifically maternal? The speaker explicitly identifies herself as a woman; why is she so 'upfront' about her gender?
3. The speaker struggles with two conflicting emotions throughout the poem; what are they? At times, one dominates, then the other overcomes it; can you trace these swings in her feelings? How do they contribute to the tone of the poem?
4. The poet makes clever use of words that have a double meaning, especially when applied separately to a book and a child; can you identify some of these words?
5. What final motive does the speaker give for publication? How does this change the conventional picture of the poet who writes only 'when inspiration strikes'? Can writing be

'hard labour'?

Andrew Marvell (1621–1678)

One of the last great metaphysical* poets, Marvell graduated from Cambridge University and travelled in Europe during the period of civil war in England. On returning, he moved in literary circles among both parliamentarians and those loyal to the monarchy. He was friends with Milton, and the two supported each other through unsettling political changes. Marvell became the unofficial laureate to the Puritan leader Cromwell, who ruled England temporarily after the war. During his lifetime, he had a reputation as a sharp satirist; today, his lyrical poems are equally appreciated.

To His Coy Mistress

Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, Lady, were no crime.
We would sit down, and think which way
To walk, and pass our long love's day.

5 Thou by the Indian Ganges' ⁵¹ side
Shouldst rubies find: I by the tide
Of Humber ⁵² would complain. I would
Love you ten years before the Flood; ⁵³

And you should, if you please, refuse
10 Till the conversion of the Jews. ⁵⁴

My vegetable^o love should grow
Vaster than empires, and more slow;
An hundred years should go to praise
Thine eyes, and on thy forehead gaze;

15 Two hundred to adore each breast,
But thirty thousand to the rest.

An age at least to every part,
And the last age should show your heart.

For, Lady, you deserve this state,^o

20 Nor would I love at lower rate.

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

25 Thy beauty shall no more be found;
Nor, in thy marble vault, shall sound
My echoing song: then worms shall try
That long preserved virginity:

And your quaint ⁵⁵ honour turn to dust,

30 And into ashes all my lust:

The grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.

Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning glew,^o

plant-like

dignity

glow, warmth

35 And while thy willing soul transpires^o
 At every pore with instant fires,
 Now let us sport us while we may;
 And now, like amorous birds of prey,
 Rather at once our time devour,
 40 Than languish in his slow-chapped ⁵⁶ power.
 Let us roll all our strength, and all
 Our sweetness, up into one ball:
 And tear our pleasures with rough strife
 Thorough^o the iron gates of life:
 45 Thus, though we cannot make our sun
 Stand still, yet we will make him run.

through

Supporting notes

This is one of the best-known *carpe diem* poems in the English language (you might like to compare it with Herrick's 'To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time'). It is also an excellent example of the metaphysical* delight in manipulating logic. For another example of a seduction poem that shamelessly twists logical argument, you might like to try and find Donne's 'The Flea' in a library or on the Internet.

Questions to consider

1. How exactly does the poet use (or misuse) logic in this poem? Try to paraphrase* Marvell's argument into a short paragraph.
2. You will notice that the poem is divided into three parts. Find where these breaks occur, and note at what stage of the argument they take place. How does the rhythm and pace of the poem change from section to section? (You will need to read the poem aloud at this point.) How do these changes reinforce the speaker's reasoning?
3. Now examine the images used in each section. What atmosphere and tone do they create, and how does this alter from section to section? What effect does the pace and tone of the last section have, coming after the first two?

Lady Mary Chudleigh (1656 –1710)

Chudleigh married young. Most of her life was spent in solitude on her husband's country estate, but she read widely and corresponded with other writers, including early feminists, and formulated progressive views of her own. Several editions of her poems were published in her lifetime; her work also includes plays and translations.

To the Ladies

Wife and servant are the same,
But only differ in the name:
For when that fatal knot is tied,
Which nothing, nothing can divide,
5 When she the word *Obey* has said,
And man by law supreme has made,
Then all that's kind is laid aside,
And nothing left but state^o and pride. *formality, display*
Fierce as an eastern prince he grows,
10 And all his innate rigour shows:
Then but to look, to laugh, or speak,
Will the nuptial^o contract break. *marital*
Like mutes, ⁵⁷ she signs alone must make,
And never any freedom take,
15 But still be governed by a nod,
And fear her husband as her god:
Him still must serve, him still obey,
And nothing act, and nothing say,
But what her haughty lord thinks fit,
20 Who, with the power, has all the wit.
Then shun,^o oh! shun that wretched state, *avoid*
And all the fawning flatterers hate.
Value yourselves, and men despise:
You must be proud, if you'll be wise.

Supporting notes

This unusually polemic* poem was written at a time when the status of women under British law meant that they were considered the property first of their fathers, then of their husbands. On marrying, they became legal minors, and had no rights to land, wealth, income, or even their own children (their husbands assumed full control over all these). This situation lasted in Britain until the late-nineteenth century. Today there are still many countries in which women are, if not legally, then socially and economically second-class citizens. In recent years, there has been an alarming trend in certain countries or societies towards stripping women of the few political and even human rights that they have. For many women all over the globe, the concerns raised in Chudleigh's poem are as pressing

as ever.

Alexander Pope (1688–1744)

A childhood illness left Pope physically disabled and in constant poor health, but he compensated for bodily weakness with mental brilliance. His translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (classical Greek works) brought him recognition and financial independence. Meanwhile, he earned a reputation as one of the best satirists* of his time, even though the accuracy of his barbs often made him most unpopular. Most of his poetry is written in rhyming couplets,* an astonishing testimony to his technical skill. Today he is best remembered as the author of the mock-heroic* poem 'The Rape of the Lock'.

A Little Learning

A little learning is a dangerous thing;

Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: ⁵⁸

There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,

And drinking largely sobers us again.

⁵ Fired at first sight with what the Muse ⁵⁹ imparts,

In fearless youth we tempt the heights of Arts;

While from the bounded^o level of our mind

restricted

Short views we take, nor see the lengths behind,

But, more advanced, behold with strange surprise

¹⁰ New distant scenes of endless science rise!

So pleased at first the towering Alps ⁶⁰ we try,

Mount o'er the vales, and seem to tread the sky;

The eternal snows appear already past,

And the first clouds and mountains seem the last:

¹⁵ But those attained, we tremble to survey

The growing labours of the lengthened way;

The increasing prospect tires our wandering eyes,

Hill peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689–1762)

Montagu was the daughter of a duke, and moved in sophisticated social and literary circles throughout her life. She married Edward Wortley Montagu secretly and travelled to Turkey with him. On her return, she introduced the practice of inoculation against smallpox into England. She was a close associate of Pope's until a public quarrel ended the friendship. She spent much of her later life in Europe. She is best remembered for her witty letters, although her poems are also interesting.

An Answer to a Love-Letter in Verse

Is it to me, this sad lamenting strain?
Are Heaven's choicest gifts bestowed in vain?
A plenteous fortune, and a beauteous bride,
Your love rewarded, and content your pride:
5 Yet leaving her – 'tis me that you pursue,
Without one single charm but being new.

How vile is man! how I detest the ways
Of artful falsehood, and designing praise!
Tasteless, an easy happiness you slight,
10 Ruin your joy, and mischief your delight.
Why should poor pug ⁶¹ (the mimic of your kind)
Wear a rough chain, and be to box confined?
Some cup, perhaps, he breaks, or tears a fan,
While moves unpunished the destroyer, man.

15 Not bound by vows, and unrestrained by shame,
In sport you break the heart, and rend the fame.
Not that your art can be successful here,
Th' already plundered need no robber fear:
Nor sighs, nor charms, nor flattery can move,
20 Too well secured against a second love.
Once, and but once, that devil charmed my mind;
To reason deaf, to observation blind,
I idly hoped (what cannot love persuade?)
My fondness equalled, and my truth repaid:
25 Slow to distrust, and willing to believe,
Long hushed my doubts, and would myself deceive;
But oh! too soon - this tale would ever last;
Sleep, sleep my wrongs, and let me think 'em past.

For you, who mourn with counterfeited grief,
30 And ask so boldly like a begging thief,
May soon some other nymph^o inflict the pain
You know so well with cruel art to feign.
Though long you've sported with Dan Cupid's dart, ⁶²
You may see eyes, and you may feel a heart.

35 So the brisk wits, who stop the evening coach, ⁶³

beautiful girl

Laugh at the fear that follows their approach;
With idle mirth, and haughty scorn, despise
The passenger's pale cheek and staring eyes:
But seized by Justice, find a fright no jest,
And all the terror doubled in their breast.

Supporting notes

English poetry since the Middle Ages has included hundreds of love poems written by men urging the woman of their dreams to return their love and begin an affair with them. This poem gives us a rare glimpse of what it meant to be on the receiving end of one of these pleas. The speaker in Montagu's poem assumes that her would-be lover is completely insincere; how many love poems or seduction poems can you find in this anthology that you suspect of falling into this category?

Samuel Johnson (1709–1784)

Johnson's early years were marked by poverty and illness, and lack of funds forced him to leave Oxford University. He spent nine years writing the first dictionary in the English language, and its publication confirmed his standing in literary circles. His writing included reviews, political articles, biographies and a novel, as well as poetry. His close friend Boswell wrote a popular biography celebrating Johnson's achievements, and this ensured the fame of both men.

A Short Song of Congratulation

Long-expected one-and-twenty,
Lingering year at last is flown:
Pomp and pleasure, pride and plenty,
Great Sir John, are all your own.

5 Loosened from the minor's tether,
Free to mortgage⁶⁴ or to sell,
Wild as wind, and light as feather,
Bid the slaves of thrift farewell.

Call the Betties, Kates, and Jennies,
10 Every name that laughs at care,
Lavish of your grandsire's guineas,
Show the spirit of an heir.

All that prey on vice and folly
Joy to see their quarry fly,
15 Here the gamester^o light and jolly,
There the lender grave and sly.

Wealth, Sir John, was made to wander,
Let it wander as it will;
See the jockey, see the pander,^o
20 Bid them come and take their fill.

When the bonny blade^o carouses,⁶⁵
Pockets full, and spirits high,
What are acres? What are houses?
Only dirt, or wet or dry.

25 If the guardian or the mother
Tell the woes of wilful waste,
Scorn their counsel, scorn their pother:^o
You can hang or drown at last!

gambler

pimp

young man

bother, anxiety

Supporting notes

This poem refers to Sir John Lade, the nephew of one of Johnson's friends, who wasted the fortune he inherited. Underlying its witty sarcasm is a very real concern for the laws of

inheritance that allowed such irresponsibility. During the eighteenth century, the role of the 'landed gentry' (minor aristocrats who inherited estates and lived off the income generated by farming or renting their land) became the subject of much debate and criticism, and responsible management was strongly urged.

You might like to compare Johnson's poem to one on a similar topic (but which presents a very different perspective) by Eva Gore-Booth: 'The Land to a Landlord'. Part of the interest comes from the fact that the two poets are very different, which gives us an opportunity to look at how gender and political orientation influence poetical argument.

Thomas Gray (1716 –1771)

Gray was educated at Cambridge. Apart from a tour of Europe with Horace Walpole, the Prime Minister's son, he lived the life of a recluse at Cambridge, where he was made professor of Modern History. His few poems show evidence of his careful research, and are mostly solemn and serious. His most famous work, 'Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard', was so popular that he was offered the position of Poet Laureate, which he refused.

Ode on the Death of a Favourite Cat, Drowned in a Tub of Gold Fishes

'Twas on a lofty vase's side,
Where China's gayest art had dyed
The azure^o flowers, that blow;^o
Demurest of the tabby kind,
5 The pensive Selima reclined,
Gazed on the lake below.

blue / bloom

Her conscious tail her joy declared;
The fair round face, the snowy beard,
The velvet of her paws,
10 Her coat, that with the tortoise vies,
Her ears of jet, and emerald eyes,
She saw; and purred applause.

Still had she gazed; but 'midst the tide
Two angel forms were seen to glide,
15 The Genii^o of the stream:
Their scaly armour's Tyrian⁶⁶ hue
Through richest purple to the view
Betrayed a golden gleam.

guardian spirits

The hapless nymph^o with wonder saw:
20 A whisker first and then a claw,
With many an ardent wish,
She stretched in vain to reach the prize.
What female heart can gold despise?
What cat's averse to fish?

beautiful girl

25 Presumptuous maid! with looks intent
Again she stretched, again she bent,
Nor knew the gulf between.
(Malignant Fate sat by, and smiled)
The slippery verge her feet beguiled,
30 She tumbled headlong in.

Eight times emerging from the flood

She mewed to every watery God,
Some speedy aid to send.
No dolphin came, no Nereid ⁶⁷ stirred:
35 Nor cruel Tom, nor Susan heard.
A favourite has no friend!

From hence, ye Beauties, undeceived,
Know, one false step is ne'er retrieved,
And be with caution bold.

40 Not all that tempts your wandering eyes
And heedless hearts, is lawful prize;
Nor all, that glisters, gold.

Supporting notes

The poet here uses mock-heroic* language and imagery to mourn a drowned cat. In other words, a fairly trivial subject (not to cat-lovers, of course) is described in a language and style much loftier and grander than is appropriate, for humorous effect. The poem follows in the tradition of much eighteenth-century satire,* which was greatly influenced by Pope.

William Cowper (1731–1800)

Cowper (pronounced Cooper) was a shy and sensitive man. After being very unhappy at school, he trained as a lawyer, but was too mentally fragile to practice. He led a quiet life, troubled by bouts of depression, during which he wrote morbid or manic poems. Fortunately, his friends and fiancée (to whom he was engaged for nearly thirty years) stood by him, and when he was in good health, he produced fine hymns, poems and comic writings. He was greatly influenced by members of the Evangelical churches of his time, who enlisted him in the anti-slavery cause.

The Negro's Complaint

Forc'd from home, and all its pleasures,
Afric's coast I left forlorn;
To increase a stranger's treasures,
O'er the raging billows^o borne.

waves

5 Men from England bought and sold me,
Paid my price in paltry gold:
But, though theirs they have enroll'd me,
Minds are never to be sold.

Still in thought as free as ever,
10 What are England's rights, I ask,
Me from my delights to sever,
Me to torture, me to task?
Fleecy locks and black complexion
Cannot forfeit nature's claim;
15 Skins may differ, but affection
Dwells in black and white the same.

Why did all-creating Nature
Make the plant for which we toil?
Sighs must fan it, tears must water,
20 Sweat of ours must dress the soil.
Think, ye masters, iron-hearted,
Lolling at your jovial boards;^o
Think how many backs have smarted^o
For the sweets your cane affords.

tables

to throb or sting with pain

25 Is there, as ye sometimes tell us,
Is there one who reigns on high?
Has he bid you buy and sell us,
Speaking from his throne the sky?
Ask him, if his knotted scourges,
30 Matches, blood-extorting screws,
Are the means which duty urges
Agents of his will to use? [...]

By our blood in Afric wasted,
Ere^o our necks received the chain;

before

35 By the mis'ries we have tasted,
Crossing in your barks^o the main;
By our suff'rings since ye brought us
To the man-degrading mart;^o
All sustain'd by patience, taught us
40 Only by a broken heart:

ships

market

Deem our nation brutes no longer
Till some reason ye shall find
Worthier of regard and stronger
Than the colour of our kind.

45 Slaves of gold, whose sordid dealings
Tarnish all our boasted pow'rs,
Prove that you have human feelings,
Ere you proudly question ours!

Supporting notes

In this poem, Cowper attacks the slave trade, an issue that was beginning to trouble the consciences of many in the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Britain had huge and profitable sugar plantations in the West Indies, but these depended on slave labour. Slaves had no rights whatsoever, and it was completely legal to use torture to punish them or force them to work harder, as we see in the fourth verse (scourges were whips with knots tied in them, and screws were clamps applied to the fingers or genitals).

A vigorous movement denouncing the cruelty and barbarism of slavery, and calling for its abolition, gained momentum towards the end of the eighteenth century, and this poem (which was sung to a well-known tune) was one of several protests circulated in the press and in the form of pamphlets. Although some of the phrases reflect a rather sentimental and sometimes patronising view of the African slave, the plea for racial understanding and equality is surprisingly modern.

Compare this poem to Grace Nichol's '[Taint](#)'; together they paint a devastating picture of the horrors of slavery. It is interesting to compare this urgent eighteenth-century plea to end slavery with a modern poem reflecting back on the long-term damage that has been its legacy. Although slavery has been officially abolished worldwide for nearly two centuries, it is on the rise around the globe in various forms, such as human trafficking. You might like to investigate this topic. What kinds of slavery exist today? What labour practices might amount to modern-day slavery?

William Blake (1757–1827)

Blake is a classic example of a genius born before his time. He had no formal education, but was trained as an engraver (book illustrator). He developed a unique artistic style, opened a print shop in London, and produced books written and illustrated by himself. These introduced his unusual and often socially critical poetry and his visionary art to the public. However, his mystic philosophies, condemnation of orthodox religion, and passion for justice meant that he was considered insane by most of his contemporaries. After his death, he was to have a growing influence on poets and artists who were inspired by his revolutionary ideas.

London

I wander thro' each charter'd ⁶⁸ street,
Near where the charter'd Thames ⁶⁹ does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

5 In every cry of every Man,
In every Infant's cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban, ⁷⁰
The mind-forg'd manacles^o I hear

chains

10 How the Chimney-sweeper's cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse ⁷¹
15 Blasts the new-born Infant's tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

Supporting notes

Blake was one of the first writers to voice his horror and concern at the effect the Industrial Revolution was having on the social fabric of England. Here he addresses the problems of rapid urbanisation. The new drive for industrialisation, and the migration of poor people from the countryside to the cities in search of jobs, led to appalling living conditions and gross exploitation. There were no laws, for example, governing labour conditions. The 'Chimney-sweepers' in line 9, for example, were small boys (the younger the better) who were made to climb up inside chimneys to clean them; many suffocated. Forced child labour was perfectly legal. The reference to the 'hapless Soldiers' (line 11), meanwhile, possibly refers to conscription. And the description of the 'Harlot' (prostitute) as 'youthful' (line 14) may refer to the fact that desperately poor families sometimes sold their daughters (many of them scarcely teenagers) into prostitution. Then, as now, virgins were much in demand in the sex trade, as they were believed to be 'cleaner'.

Perhaps Blake is most radical in his frank references to the sexually transmitted diseases

that were spreading as a result of urban prostitution. Until the discovery of antibiotics in the mid-twentieth century, syphilis was incurable and almost as deadly as HIV/Aids is today. Very often, the middle-class men who visited prostitutes would take the disease home to their wives, leading to suffering, sterility, and sometimes death – a tragic pattern scathingly referred to in the last line of this poem.

After a careful reading of 'London', turn to Serote's 'Alexandra' and 'City Johannesburg'. You will find that both poets, although writing from different centuries and continents, share a passionate concern for those social injustices that are heightened and worsened by urbanisation.

The following questions will help you to explore this connection further.

1. Both poets write in judgement of particular cities. However, in 'Alexandra', Serote's indictment of his home township is mixed with other emotions. Can you identify some of these?
2. If you work through both 'London' and 'City Johannesburg', what specific social and political evils do you find listed by each poet?
3. Now that you have established exactly what Blake criticises in urban society, note how economically he uses serious puns* and words with double meanings to get his message across. The footnotes already identify two 'double' words; can you find any others? (Look closely at line 10.) Serote, however, makes use of colourful images rather than loaded words in his poems, although there is one very clever pun in 'City Johannesburg' (check line 27). What central metaphor* does he develop throughout 'Alexandra'? In what way is it unusual? In 'City Johannesburg', try to locate each metaphor and simile.* How does each one work, and which do you find the most effective?
4. Bearing in mind your answers to question 2, can you identify any specific social and political problems or structures that were the same or similar in London in the 1790s and South African cities under apartheid?
5. Blake is particularly concerned with the problem of prostitution. Do you feel he is giving a lecture on morality? Or is his treatment of the issue more complex? How does he present it as a social, rather than a moral problem? Can you think of present-day parallels? (Look at the work done in South African cities by SWEAT – the organisation that works with and represents sex workers, as many prostitutes prefer to be known.)
6. Do you feel that the criticisms both poets make are effective? Why? How does their treatment of these issues differ from the way they might be handled by a politician or an activist? Does this suggest any further insights on the nature or role of poetry?

The Sick Rose

O Rose, thou art sick.
The invisible worm,
That flies in the night
In the howling storm:

5 Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love

Does thy life destroy.

Supporting notes

This poem acts as a mini-allegory* on many subjects: but the phallic (penis-like) image of the worm means that it is most often interpreted as a comment on sexual betrayal. In 'London', we have already seen Blake's concern for the social and gender injustices underlying the problem of sexually transmitted disease. Here he addresses the same issue more directly.

Robert Burns (1759–1796)

Burns was a patriotic Scottish poet, and his birthday is still celebrated by the Scots, most of whom consider him their national poet. Raised to be a farmer, he struggled financially and was about to emigrate to Jamaica when his first book of poems, many in the Scottish dialect, was published. It was an immediate success, and guaranteed his popularity. His new ‘celebrity’ status went hand-in-hand with a string of romantic affairs. He was also responsible for collecting, adapting and preserving Scottish folk songs. He died at the relatively young age of thirty-seven; his lively poems are still popular today.

John Anderson, My Jo

John Anderson my jo,^o John,

When we were first acquaint;^o

Your locks were like the raven,

Your bonie^o brow was brent;^o

5 But now your brow is beld,^o John,

Your locks are like the snaw;^o

But blessings on your frosty pow,^o

John Anderson, my jo.

dear

acquainted

bonny / smooth

bald

snow

head

John Anderson my jo, John,

10 We clamb^o the hill the gither;^o

And mony^o a canty^o day, John,

We’ve had wi’ ane^o anither:

Now we maun^o totter down, John,

And hand in hand we’ll go;

15 And sleep the gither at the foot,

John Anderson, my jo.

climb / together

many / merry

one

must

William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

Wordsworth was born in the Lake District, a beautiful part of England later celebrated in his poetry. After graduating from Cambridge University he spent a year in France, where he passionately supported the French Revolution, then at its height. He also fell in love with a French woman with whom he had a daughter. Back home, he was horrified when Britain declared war on France. He also found his radical principles challenged by the violent excesses of the Revolution, and became deeply depressed. A retreat to the countryside to live with his adoring sister Dorothy, together with an inspiring friendship with the poet Coleridge helped him to recover. Together with Coleridge, he produced work that was to establish the foundations of a new era in English poetry. Their concept of Nature and its beauties as a source of comfort and moral guidance was perhaps inevitable in a rapidly industrialising country; it shapes our aesthetic* perceptions to this day. Later in life, Wordsworth was appointed Poet Laureate.

Three Years She Grew

Three years she grew in sun and shower,
Then Nature said, 'A lovelier flower
On earth was never sown;
This Child I to myself will take;
5 She shall be mine, and I will make
A Lady of my own.

'Myself will to my darling be
Both law and impulse: and with me
The Girl, in rock and plain,
10 In earth and heaven, in glade and bower,^o
Shall feel an overseeing power
To kindle or restrain.

enclosed garden

'She shall be sportive^o as the fawn
That wild with glee across the lawn
15 Or up the mountain springs;
And hers shall be the breathing balm,
And hers the silence and the calm
Of mute insensate^o things.

playful

without feeling

'The floating clouds their state shall lend
20 To her; for her the willow bend;
Nor shall she fail to see
Even in the motions of the Storm
Grace that shall mould the Maiden's form
By silent sympathy.

25 'The stars of midnight shall be dear
To her; and she shall lean her ear
In many a secret place
Where rivulets^o dance their wayward round,

small streams

And beauty born of murmuring sound

30 Shall pass into her face.

‘And vital feelings of delight

Shall rear her form to stately^o height

dignified

Her virgin bosom swell;

Such thoughts to Lucy I will give

35 While she and I together live

Here in this happy dell.’^o

forest clearing

Thus Nature spake – The work was done –

How soon my Lucy’s race was run!

She died, and left to me

40 This heath,^o this calm, and quiet scene;

moor

This memory of what has been,

And never more will be.

Supporting notes

This poem is interesting for its presentation both of Nature and the ‘feminine’. One of the basic principles of Romantic poetry was to place the poet as a first-person speaker (‘I’) reflecting on the comfort and inspiration of Nature – which was usually given female characteristics. The poem would often go on to establish a relationship between the male poet and female Nature. This meant that it was difficult at first for women to write Romantic poetry, as they found themselves in the awkward position of being both speaker (subject) and spoken about (object). Later, however, many Victorian women poets were to adapt the Romantic formula for writing nature poetry in creative ways. You might want to look at Dickinson’s ‘I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed’ for an example of a startlingly unusual ‘Nature poem’.

In this poem, Wordsworth takes both a female figure and Nature and describes how one is absorbed into the other; at the end of the poem, we realise that it is also an elegy.* It is this use of natural imagery as a convention of mourning that we see Rossetti’s speaker rejecting in ‘Song’. A number of poems in this anthology make powerful or innovative use of this tradition, nevertheless; see Tennyson’s ‘It is the day when he was born’ and ‘Thy voice is on the rolling air’, Hardy’s ‘The Voice’ (www.oxford.co.za), and Cope’s ‘The Flying Fish’. Can you find any others?

Composed upon Westminster Bridge, ⁷² September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair:

Dull would he be of soul who could pass by

A sight so touching in its majesty:

This city now doth, like a garment, wear

5 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie

Open unto the fields, and to the sky;

All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.

Never did sun more beautifully steep
10 In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Supporting notes

This poem is in sharp contrast to Blake's 'London'. Nevertheless, together the two poems encompass the main characteristics of much Romantic poetry; a passionate concern for injustice; and a deep emotional and even spiritual response to scenes of beauty.

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host,^o of golden daffodils;
5 Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

crowd

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way, ⁷³
They stretched in never-ending line
10 Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly^o dance.

lively

The waves beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:
15 A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund^o company:
I gazed – and gazed – but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:

jolly

For oft,^o when on my couch I lie
20 In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

often

Supporting notes

Although in recent times the intense romanticism of this poem has sometimes been mocked, it is a classic example of how the Romantic philosophy of beauty in Nature operates. The poet sees a vision of natural beauty, which he mentally photographs and

then describes in a poem. This image of beauty is then recalled at later moments to create a sense of happiness or comfort. (In order to fully appreciate this poem, it is necessary to know that the part of the stem to which the daffodil flower is attached is very flexible; the flower thus bobs and 'dances' up and down in the slightest breeze.)

Another interesting fact about this poem is that it is one that Wordsworth 'plagiarised' from his sister Dorothy's diary. She would often write vivid prose descriptions of beautiful sights she had seen, and then show these to her brother; he would then sometimes rewrite her piece in the form of a poem. Scholars have begun to investigate the extent to which she was a 'co-author' of some of Wordsworth's more famous poems.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834)

Coleridge was a gifted but tormented person. Although he was a brilliant student at Cambridge University, his academic career was wrecked by drink, involvement in revolutionary politics, and turbulent affairs. Later he became addicted to opium, quarrelled with his close friends, struggled with depression, and made his marriage unhappy by falling hopelessly in love with another woman. He was nevertheless both politically active and a prolific writer, one of the greatest literary critics and poets of his age. He enjoyed creative friendships with a number of other writers, including Wordsworth, under whose influence he wrote his best poetry. No matter how chaotic Coleridge's personal affairs became, he remained energetic throughout his life, and was to influence a band of younger writers, including Byron.

Kubla Khan

OR, A VISION IN A DREAM. A FRAGMENT

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan ⁷⁴

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

5 Down to a sunless sea.

So twice five miles of fertile ground

With walls and towers were girdled^o round:

encircled

And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,^o

streams

Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;

10 And here were forests ancient as the hills,

Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted

Down the green hill athwart^o a cedarn^o cover!

across / cedar

A savage place! as holy and enchanted

15 As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted

By woman wailing for her demon-lover!

And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,

As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,

A mighty fountain momentarily^o was forced:

at intervals

20 Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst

Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail,

Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher's flail:

And 'mid these dancing rocks at once and ever

It flung up momentarily the sacred river.

25 Five miles meandering with a mazy motion

Through wood and dale^o the sacred river ran,

valley

Then reached the caverns measureless to man,

And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:

And 'mid this tumult Kubla heard from far

30 Ancestral voices prophesying war!

The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure^o
From the fountain and the caves.

music, sound

35 It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer^o
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
40 And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora. ⁷⁵
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,

harp

To such a deep delight 'twould win me,
45 That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!
50 His flashing eyes, his floating hair!

Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Supporting notes

This extraordinary fantasy was 'revealed' to the poet during a hallucination or dream induced by opium. It is apparently only part of what was meant to be a much longer work; Coleridge himself describes how, while writing down his vision, he was interrupted by a visitor; after their business was completed, the poet tried to continue with the poem, only to discover that he could no longer recall his dream.

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824)

Byron was one of the rare poets who achieved fame (or perhaps notoriety) in his own lifetime. While young, he established himself both as a promising politician and as the leader of the younger generation of Romantic poets, who wrote passionate poetry and cultivated defiant and glamorous images, the rock stars of their day. He had several dramatic affairs, but went too far when he fell in love with his half-sister. After she gave birth to a child, public outrage forced him to leave Britain. He stayed with the Shelleys in Switzerland and travelled in Italy, continuing to write innovative and daring poetry while living as riotously as ever. He died (in typically dramatic circumstances) while fighting alongside Greek nationalists in their struggle for independence from the Turkish Empire.

When We Two Parted

When we two parted

 In silence and tears,

Half broken-hearted

 To sever^o for years,

cut, separate

5 Pale grew thy cheek and cold,

 Colder thy kiss;

Truly that hour foretold

 Sorrow to this.

The dew of the morning

10 Sunk chill on my brow –

It felt like the warning

 Of what I feel now.

Thy vows are all broken,

 And light^o is thy fame;

15 I hear thy name spoken,

 And share in its shame.

They name thee before me,

 A knell to mine ear;

19 A shudder comes o'er me –

 Why wert thou so dear?

They know not I knew thee,

 Who knew thee too well –

Long, long shall I rue^o thee,

 Too deeply to tell.

25 In secret we met –

 In silence I grieve,

That thy heart could forget,

 Thy spirit deceive.

If I should meet thee

30 After long years,

How should I greet thee?

cheap

regret

With silence and tears.

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)

Shelley, whose poetry combines lyrical beauty with passion, was a born rebel. He was expelled from Oxford for writing a pamphlet on the need for atheism; next he eloped with a girl of sixteen. A vegetarian and political radical, he led a nomadic life as a writer before abandoning his family to run away to Europe with seventeen-year-old Mary Godwin (daughter of the feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft). He later married her, after his first wife committed suicide. Together with Byron, they were part of a circle of outrageous but creative artists. (Mary Shelley was the author of the famous horror novel, *Frankenstein*.) Because of Shelley's affairs, his marriage became increasingly unhappy. He drowned at the age of twenty-nine off the coast of Italy, after setting sail in a storm – rumours about political murder and suicide persist to this day. His claim that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' is still cited today.

Ozymandias ⁷⁶

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage^o lies, whose frown, *face*
5 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read^o *understood*
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
10 'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

England in 1819

An old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king, –
Princes, the dregs of their dull race, who flow
Through public scorn, – mud from a muddy spring, –
Rulers who neither see, nor feel, nor know,
But leech-like to their fainting country cling,
Till they drop, blind in blood, without a blow, –
A people starved and stabbed in the untilled^o field, – *unploughed*
An army, which liberticide ⁷⁷ and prey
Makes as a two-edged sword to all who wield, –
Golden and sanguine^o laws which tempt and slay; *bloody*
Religion Christless, Godless – a book sealed;
A Senate, – Time's worst statute^o unrepealed, ⁷⁸ – *law*
Are graves, from which a glorious Phantom^o may *spirit, ghost*
Burst, to illumine our tempestuous day.

Supporting notes

Here Shelley expresses his scorn at the political state of England, seventeen years after Wordsworth wrote a similar sonnet* (see www.oxford.co.za). The 'dying king' is George III, one of the Hanoverian (German) line of kings that had been installed on the English throne in the eighteenth century. His illness made him insane, and in the final years of his life his sons, the 'princes' (who were neither popular nor respected), had to manage affairs of state.

John Keats (1795–1821)

As a young man Keats studied medicine and became a chemist, a career he gave up to concentrate on poetry. Although he moved in circles that included Shelley and Wordsworth, his writing was at first attacked by critics. In spite of financial difficulties, he continued writing significant amounts of poetry, which was to earn him a reputation as one of the greatest younger Romantic poets. After nursing his brother, who was dying of tuberculosis, Keats was also infected. His deteriorating health eventually drove him to the warmer climate of Italy, where he died at the age of only twenty-six.

When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be

When I have fears that I may cease to be
 Before my pen has glean'd^o my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charactry,^o
 Hold like rich garners^o the full ripen'd grain;
5 When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
 Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
 Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
10 That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery^o power
 Of unreflecting love; – then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

*harvested
letters of the alphabet
storehouses*

magic

Supporting notes

Keats wrote this in 1818, the same year that he was diagnosed as having tuberculosis. His response was to plunge into intense creative and romantic activity. During this year, he wrote some of his best poetry and also became engaged.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci 79

O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
 Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge^o has withered from the lake
 And no birds sing!
5 O, what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
 So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
 And the harvest's done.

grass-like reeds

I see a lily on thy brow,
10 With anguish moist and fever-dew

And on thy cheek a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,^o
Full beautiful, a fairy's child,

meadows

15 Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;^o
She looked at me as she did love,
20 And made sweet moan.

belt of flowers

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long;
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A fairy's song.

25 She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna^o dew;
And sure in language strange she said,
'I love thee true'.

bread-like

She took me to her elfin grot,^o
30 And there she wept, and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

cave

And there she lulled me asleep,
And there I dreamed – Ah! Woe betide!

35 The latest^o dream I ever dreamed
On the cold hill side.

last

I saw pale kings, and princes too,
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried – 'La belle dame sans merci
40 Hath thee in thrall!'^o

hypnotised, enslaved

I saw their starved lips in the gloam^o
With horrid warning gapéd wide,
And I awoke, and found me here
On the cold hill's side.

dusk

45 And this is why I sojourn^o here,
Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

stay

Questions to consider

1. Here the poet sets out to create a 'medieval' atmosphere. Much Romantic (and later,

Victorian) art attempted a nostalgic recreation of medieval culture. To begin with, the poem takes the form of a ballad.* How do we know this? What other 'medieval' features are used?

2. How does the question and answer format function in the poem? (Note how the tone of the poem is set by the very first question in the opening two lines.)
3. How are natural phenomena used in the first few stanzas to suggest atmosphere or mood? What kind of atmosphere is created?
4. Would you agree that while the mood of the poem is melancholy, haunting, and even threatening, it cannot be described as harsh or ugly? Why not? What sensual or attractive elements are found in the poem?
5. The poem clearly deals with a supernatural occurrence. What does this contribute to tone and mood?
6. The poet's description of the fatal consequences of enchantment could well be operating on two different levels. What warning signs does the knight ignore?

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806–1861)

Barrett was a brilliant child, who was educated by the best scholars and tutors. She studied Latin and Greek from an early age, although it was fairly unusual for a girl of that time to be allowed to do so. Her ill health meant that, unlike many Victorian women, she had plenty of time for writing and reading. A secret romantic relationship with Robert Browning began through their writing to each other. She eventually ran away to marry him, against the wishes of her tyrannical father. The couple moved to Italy, and were extremely happy together. Although her poetry was at first so popular that she was considered for the position of Poet Laureate, she was attacked for the political and social criticism she voiced in her later poems. The subjects she dealt with in these poems (child labour, slavery, rape, prostitution, illegitimacy, politics, and nationalism) were considered to be shocking and inappropriate for a woman writer.

From A Curse for a Nation

Prologue

I heard an angel speak last night,
And he said 'Write!
Write a Nation's curse for me,
And send it over the Western Sea.'

5 I faltered, taking up the word:
'Not so, my lord!
If curses must be, choose another
To send thy curse against my brother.

'For I am bound by gratitude,
10 By love and blood,
To brothers of mine across the sea,
Who stretch out kindly hands to me.'

'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write
My curse to-night.

15 From the summits of love a curse is driven,
As lightning is from the tops of heaven.'

'Not so,' I answered. 'Evermore
My heart is sore
For my own land's sins: for little feet
20 Of children bleeding along the street:

'For parked-up honours that gainsay^o
The right of way:
For almsgiving^o through a door that is
Not open enough for two friends to kiss:

deny, contradict

charity

25 'For love of freedom which abates
Beyond the Straits: ⁸⁰
For patriot virtue starved to vice on
Self-praise, self-interest, and suspicion:

'For an oligarchic^o parliament,
30 And bribes well-meant.
What curse to another land assign,
When heavy-souled for the sins of mine?'

government by a few

'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write
My curse to-night.

35 Because thou hast strength to see and hate
A foul thing done thy gate.'

within

'Not so,' I answered once again.
'To curse, choose men.

For I, a woman, have only known
40 How the heart melts and the tears run down.'

'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write
My curse to-night.

Some women weep and curse, I say
(And no one marvels), night and day.

45 'And thou shalt take their part to-night,
Weep and write.

A curse from the depths of womanhood
Is very salt, and bitter, and good.'

So thus I wrote, and mourned indeed,
50 What all may read.

And thus, as was enjoined on me,
I send it over the Western Sea.

Supporting notes

It is not clear exactly which country the speaker in the poem is being urged to curse. Barrett Browning was a passionate supporter of Italian nationalism and its democratic movements, which were then being ruthlessly suppressed, and it is possible that the monarchy of Italy is her target; the reference to the 'Western Sea' also suggests the United States, at that stage a nation divided and on the verge of a tragic and brutal civil war over the issue of slavery. However, it is the indictment of Britain in stanzas five to eight that gives this poem its power.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882)

An American, Longfellow studied in Europe before becoming a professor at Harvard University. His long narrative poems (such as ‘The Song of Hiawatha’) were hugely popular both at home and abroad, and he became the most famous American poet of his time. He was widowed twice, with his work becoming increasingly melancholy and nostalgic in his old age.

Chaucer

An old man in a lodge within a park;

The chamber walls depicted all around

With portraitures^o of huntsman, hawk, and hound,

pictures

And the hurt deer. He listeneth to the lark,

5 Whose song comes with the sunshine through the dark

Of painted glass in leaden lattice^o bound;

bars or strips of lead

He listeneth and he laugheth at the sound,

Then writeth in a book like any clerk.^o

scholar

He is the poet of the dawn, who wrote

10 The Canterbury Tales, and his old age

Made beautiful with song; and as I read

I hear the crowing cock, I hear the note

Of lark and linnet,^o and from every page

type of bird

Rise odours of ploughed field or flowery mead.^o

meadow

Supporting notes

This is one of a series of sonnets* that Longfellow wrote celebrating the great writers (see [Chaucer's life and extracts from *The Canterbury Tales*](#).) Try to identify what aspects of Chaucer's writing Longfellow imitates to add flavour to his poem.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–1892)

Tennyson studied at Cambridge University, where he became close friends with Arthur Hallam, a brilliant young man whose early death was to profoundly affect Tennyson. His attempts to come to terms with this loss led to his *In Memoriam* poems, which established his fame. He became enormously popular during his lifetime, eventually holding the position of Poet Laureate for forty-two years. His public status was at odds with his melancholy nature; he delayed marriage to his fiancée for over a decade, fearing possible mental illness and experiencing religious doubts. Nevertheless, he became probably the most respected figure in Victorian literature, and was granted a title by Queen Victoria. He was particularly admired for his technically polished poetry, noteworthy for its mastery of sound (his poems must be read aloud) and often dreamlike, nostalgic quality.

Ulysses ⁸¹

It little profits that an idle king,
By this still hearth, among these barren crags,
Matched with an aged wife, I mete^o and dole^o
Unequal laws unto a savage race,

give out / distribute

5 That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me.

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink

Life to the lees.^o All times I have enjoyed

sediment of wine

Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those

That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when

10 Through scudding drifts the rainy Hyades ⁸²

Vexed the dim sea. I am become a name;

For always roaming with a hungry heart

Much have I seen and known – cities of men

And manners, climates, councils, governments,

15 Myself not least, but honoured of them all, –

And drunk delight of battle with my peers,

Far on the ringing plains of windy Troy. ⁸³

I am part of all that I have met;

Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough

20 Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,

To rust unburnished,^o not to shine in use!

unpolished

As tho' to breathe were life! Life piled on life

25 Were all too little, and of one to me

Little remains: but every hour is saved

From that eternal silence, something more,

A bringer of new things; and vile it were

For some three suns to store and hoard myself,

30 And this grey spirit yearning in desire

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,

Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

This is my son, mine own Telemachus,
To whom I leave the sceptre ⁸⁴ and the isle –
35 Well-loved of me, discerning to fulfil
This labour, by slow prudence to make mild
A rugged people, and through soft degrees
Subdue them to the useful and the good.
Most blameless is he, centred in the sphere
40 Of common duties, decent not to fail
In offices of tenderness, and pay
Meet^o adoration to my household gods,
When I am gone. He works his work, I mine.

fitting

There lies the port; the vessel puffs her sail;
45 There gloom the dark broad seas. My mariners,
Souls that have toiled, and wrought, and thought with me –
That ever with a frolic welcome took
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed
Free hearts, free foreheads – you and I are old;
50 Old age hath yet his honour and his toil.
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.
The lights begin to twinkle from the rocks;
55 The long day wanes; the slow moon climbs; the deep
Moans round with many voices. Come, my friends,
'Tis not too late to seek a newer world.
Push off, and sitting well in order smite
The sounding furrows; ⁸⁵ for my purpose holds
60 To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
Of all the western stars, until I die.
It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles, ⁸⁶
And see the great Achilles, ⁸⁷ whom we knew.
65 Though much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
70 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Supporting notes

The poem 'Ulysses' assumes some knowledge of the works of the classical Greek author Homer. It tells the tale of the Trojan War, the subject of many Greek dramas. This *Iliad* was sparked when the beautiful Helen left her husband, a Greek king, for Paris, the son of

the king of Troy. The two kingdoms then fought an epic war, in which the gods actively took part, and deeds of great heroism were done. Odysseus (Ulysses in the poem) was one of generals who fought bravely in this struggle. The tells of his exciting adventures and *Odyssey* explorations on the voyage home after the war.

In Memoriam A.H.H.

From

LIV

Oh yet we trust that somehow good
Will be the final goal of ill,
To pangs of nature, sins of will,
Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;

5 That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroy'd,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,^o
When God hath made the pile complete;

emptiness

That not a worm is cloven^o in vain;
10 That not a moth with vain desire
Is shrivell'd in a fruitless fire,
Or but subserves another's gain.

cut

Behold, we know not anything;
I can but trust that good shall fall
15 At last – far off – at last, to all,
And every winter change to spring.

So runs my dream: but what am I?
An infant crying in the night:
An infant crying for the light:
20 And with no language but a cry.

LV

The wish, that of the living whole
No life may fail beyond the grave,
Derives it not from what we have
The likest God within the soul?

5 Are God and Nature then at strife,
That Nature lends such evil dreams?
So careful of the type^o she seems,
So careless of the single life;

species

That I, considering everywhere
10 Her secret meaning in her deeds,
And finding that of fifty seeds,
She often brings but one to bear,

I falter where I firmly trod,
And falling with my weight of cares
15 Upon the great world's altar-stairs
That slope thro' darkness up to God,

I stretch lame hands of faith, and grope,
And gather dust and chaff, and call
To what I feel is Lord of all,
20 And faintly trust the larger hope.

LVI

'So careful of the type?' but no.
From scarpèd° cliff and quarried stone
She cries, 'A thousand types are gone:
I care for nothing, all shall go.

steep

5 'Thou makest thine appeal to me:
I bring to life, I bring to death:
The spirit does but mean the breath:
I know no more.' And he, shall he,

Man, her last work, who seem'd so fair,
10 Such splendid purpose in his eyes,
Who roll'd the psalm to wintry skies,
Who built him fanes° of fruitless prayer,

temples

Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law –
15 Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine,° shriek'd against his creed –

bloodshed

Who loved, who suffer'd countless ills,
Who battled for the True, the Just,
Be blown about the desert dust,
20 Or seal'd within the iron hills?

No more? A monster then, a dream,
A discord. Dragons of the prime,
That tare° each other in their slime,
Were mellow music match'd with him.

tear

25 O life as futile, then, as frail!
O for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil, behind the veil.

CVII

It is the day when he was born,
A bitter day that early sank
Behind a purple-frosty bank

Of vapour, leaving night forlorn.

5 The time admits not flowers or leaves
To deck the banquet. Fiercely flies
The blast of North and East, and ice
Makes daggers at the sharpen'd eaves,

And bristles all the brakes^o and thorns *thicket*
10 To yon hard crescent, as she hangs
Above the wood which grides^o and clangs *grinds*
Its leafless ribs and iron horns

Together, in the drifts that pass
To darken on the rolling brine
15 That breaks the coast. But fetch the wine,
Arrange the board and brim the glass;

Bring in great logs and let them lie,
To make a solid core of heat;
Be cheerful-minded, talk and treat
20 Of all things ev'n as he were by;

We keep the day. With festal^o cheer, *festive*
With books and music, surely we
Will drink to him, whate'er he be,
And sing the songs he loved to hear.

CXXX

Thy voice is on the rolling air;
I hear thee where the waters run;
Thou standest in the rising sun,
And in the setting thou art fair.

5 What art thou then? I cannot guess;
But tho' I seem in star and flower
To feel thee some diffusive power,
I do not therefore love thee less:

My love involves the love before;
10 My love is vaster passion now;
Tho' mix'd with God and Nature thou,
I seem to love thee more and more.

Far off thou art, but ever nigh;
I have thee still, and I rejoice;
15 I prosper, circled with thy voice;
I shall not lose thee tho' I die.

Supporting notes

These poems are taken from a series that Tennyson wrote in memory of his closest friend,

Arthur Henry Hallam, who died tragically young while on a trip to Europe. Tennyson's efforts to make sense of his loss coincided with the publication of Darwin's biological theories on evolution. These argued for a natural, rather than divine origin of the human species, which caused great alarm and scandal, before gaining some degree of acceptance.

Questions to consider

1. The original series of poems (over 130 of them) show a progression of emotions, which are reflected in this selection. What emotional shifts do you notice between the poems? What 'emotional journey' does the speaker make? You may find it helpful to consider what emotional stages usually follow a loss or bereavement. Can you identify any of these here?
2. The punctuation in all these poems is used simply but effectively to underscore the emotional progress of the speaker. How is this accomplished? Look at where the question marks, colons and dashes occur, and what effect they have; also check where sentences end.
3. In the third poem (LVI), the first stanza refers to cliffs and quarries, then popular sites for the new craze of fossil-collecting. How does this allusion to fossilised and extinct species work in conjunction with the rest of this poem?
4. Still referring to poem LVI, who or what does the 'She' in line 3 refer to? What conclusions can you draw about the impact of evolutionary theories on the Romantic view of Nature?
5. There is a distinct shift in the way that Nature is used as a vehicle for the poet's feelings in the last three poems. What is the difference between poem LVI and poem CVII in this respect? And what has happened by the time we reach poem CXXX, which is one of the last poems in the series? Does anything in this poem remind you of Wordsworth's 'Three Years She Grew'? What does this suggest about how Tennyson finally resolves his grief?
6. Although the poems express very different feelings and use contrasting language and imagery, the series as a whole has a unified and cohesive feel to it. What structural features do all the poems share?

Robert Browning (1812–1889)

Browning received an unusual education based on the contents of his father's huge library, and started to write poetry at an early age. On reading Elizabeth Barrett's poems, he began writing her admiring letters that led to their secret romance and engagement. Eventually they ran away together to be married. They lived happily in Italy until she died; after this, Browning returned to London and became a well-known figure on the English literary scene. His friends and colleagues sometimes considered his poetry eccentric; others admired it for its ability to catch the flavour and rhythm of everyday speech. He is best remembered for his dramatic monologues,* of which 'My Last Duchess' is an excellent example.

My Last Duchess

Ferrara

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà^o Pandolf's hands

friar, brother

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
5 Will't please you sit and look at her? I said

'Frà Pandolf' by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by

10 The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,^o

dared

How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot

15 Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, 'Her mantle^o laps
Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint

cloak

Half-flush that dies along her throat:' such stuff

20 Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

25 Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious^o fool

busy

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace – all and each

30 Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. She thanked men, – good! but thanked
Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame
35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark’ – and if she let
40 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
– E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without
45 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will ’t please you rise? We’ll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master’s known munificence^o
50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go
Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, ⁸⁸ though,
55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

generosity

Supporting notes

The speaker in this poem, the Duke of Ferrara, lived in the sixteenth century. His first wife died very young in mysterious circumstances. Browning here imagines a conversation that might have taken place during the arrangements for his second marriage, to the Count of Tyrol’s daughter. Frà Pandolf is an imaginary name for an artist (his title makes it clear that he is a monk or holy man). Claus of Innsbruck is also an invented name.

Questions to consider

1. One of the more interesting features about this dramatic monologue* is that there is a significant difference, or distance, between the poet and the first-person speaker in the poem. How do we know this, and why is this distance created?
2. Given that the only voice we hear is Ferrara’s, do you agree that we ‘hear’ much more than he is telling us? How does he unwittingly reveal himself?
3. What kind of character sketch would you make of Ferrara? You might feel that he is more than simply a tyrant. Is there an element of fear in his refusal or inability to communicate?
4. The form of the dramatic monologue makes for an immediate impact on the reader. Why

is this so? In what way are we invited to become 'part' of the poem?

Emily Brontë (1818–1848)

Born into the gifted but tragically doomed Brontë family, Emily, together with her siblings, wrote poetry and fantasy from an early age. Together with her sisters Charlotte and Anne, she published a collection of poems under a male pseudonym. These brought attention and interest, but Emily shrank from this. Both reclusive and fiercely independent, she worked briefly as a governess to support her brother and father, but became sick with longing for her native countryside and spent the rest of her short life at home. She died of tuberculosis brought on by her own self-neglect. She is best remembered for her extraordinary and shocking novel, *Wuthering Heights*.

No Coward Soul is Mine

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

5 O God within my breast,
Almighty, ever-present Deity!
Life – that in me has rest,
As I – undying Life – have power in thee!

Vain are the thousand creeds^o

beliefs, doctrines

10 That move men's hearts: unutterably vain;
Worthless as withered weeds
Or idlest froth amid the boundless main,^o

sea

To waken doubt in one
Holding so fast by thine infinity;

15 So surely anchored on
The steadfast rock of immortality.

With wide-embracing love
Thy spirit animates eternal years,
Pervades and broods above,

20 Changes, sustains, dissolves, creates and rears.

Though earth and man were gone,
And suns and universes ceased to be,
And thou were left alone,
Every existence would exist in thee.

25 There is not room for Death,
Nor atom that his might could render void:^o
Thou – thou art Being and Breath,
And what thou art may never be destroyed.

vacant

Walt Whitman (1819–1892)

Whitman broke new ground for American poetry, consciously identifying himself with American culture. He was born on the northeastern coast of the USA, and spent much of his life wandering from job to job, working as a printer, school-teacher, and journalist. During the American Civil War (the subject of a collection of his poems), he volunteered to nurse the wounded. His poetry was unusual (and considered shocking in his time) for its courageous acknowledgement of his homosexuality, as well as its fascination with the smaller details of daily life.

When I Heard at the Close of the Day ⁸⁹

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been receiv'd with plaudits in the capitol,
still it was not a happy night for me that follow'd,
And else when I carous'd, ⁹⁰ or when my plans were accomplish'd, still I was not happy,
But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health, refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe
breath of autumn,

When I saw the full moon in the west grow pale and disappear in the morning light,
5 When I wander'd alone over the beach, and undressing bathed, laughing with the cool waters, and
saw the sun rise,

And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way coming, O then I was happy,
O then each breath tasted sweeter, and all that day my food nourish'd me more, and the beautiful day
pass'd well,

And the next came with equal joy, and with the next at evening came my friend,
And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly continually up the shores,
10 I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me whispering to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast – and that night I was happy.

Matthew Arnold (1822–1888)

The son of a respected teacher, Arnold himself became an inspector of schools after graduating from Oxford University. His career gave him deep insight into the educational, social, and cultural problems of his age. His poetry is preoccupied with questions arising from these issues, including the loss of religious belief. However, he was best known in his time for his thoughtful prose, and became one of the most admired critics of his day. A happily married man, he was eventually made a professor of poetry at Oxford.

Dover Beach

The sea is calm to-night.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; ⁹¹ – on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

5 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd^o land,

whitened

Listen! you hear the grating roar

10 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,

At their return, up the high strand,

Begin, and cease, and then again begin,

With tremulous cadence slow, and bring

The eternal note of sadness in.

15 Sophocles ⁹² long ago

Heard it on the Aegean, ⁹³ and it brought

Into his mind the turbid^o ebb and flow

muddy

Of human misery; we

Find also in the sound a thought,

20 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle^o furled.

belt

But now I only hear

25 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,

Retreating, to the breath

Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles^o of the world.

pebble beaches

Ah, love, let us be true

30 To one another! for the world, which seems

To lie before us like a land of dreams,

So various, so beautiful, so new,

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
35 And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Supporting notes

Arnold wrote this poem while passing through Dover on honeymoon. Dover is a port on the southeast coast of England facing France. It is famous for its spectacular white chalk cliffs (their colour explains why Arnold describes them as 'glimmering' in this poem). These cliffs drop sharply to the beach, which is made up of pebbles that have been washed and rubbed by the sea. Waves breaking on these pebble or shingle beaches make a distinctive roaring sound that is much louder than sea on sand.

Anonymous (c.1850)

Translated by Perce Haslam

Kilaben Bay Song

Hail! Dawn is shining glory doing
The sun shining (blazing with warmth)
Night moving
Man stirring
5 Children restless
Women fire-wood thinking
Birds singing
Animals awakening (sleeping not)
Camp noise grows
10 Men bush towards moving
Women water gathering
Children they hungry, all shouting
Women water collected
Men spear fish, return
15 People all eating
Camp quiet again

Supporting notes

This is a traditional Australian aboriginal song or chant. You might like to compare it with Watson's '[The Rain that is Male](#)'. Both are attempts by modern translators to salvage some fragments of the lost or dying cultures of indigenous peoples subjected to genocide or threatened with extinction through assimilation. This refers to the process in which an indigenous culture is diluted by a foreign or 'outsider' culture (often a colonial, Western, industrialised, or urban one) until little or none of the original traditions, languages, or structures remain.

You can also find a similar poem, celebrating the everyday rituals that accompany the dawn of a new day, by the Zimbabwean poet [Joseph Kumbirai](#).

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886)

Dickinson was born and lived in the rural town of Amherst in the northeast of America. Well-educated, she wrote startlingly modern poetry from an early age. Although she initially tried to publish her work, her friends and literary connections were puzzled or shocked by her poems. As she grew older, she became increasingly reclusive, and eventually refused to meet people or leave her room, although she kept up close and often intimate correspondences with a number of close friends and scholars, including various women writers she admired. After her death, there was considerable argument about what should be done with her poems. They were eventually published in a heavily edited and censored form. The originals were only made available for publication in the 1950s; since then, Dickinson's distinctive voice has been much admired by critics. Her poetry has inspired several modern poets; see Adrienne Rich's 'I am in Danger — Sir —'.

I Taste a Liquor Never Brewed

I taste a liquor never brewed —
From Tankards scooped in Pearl —
Not all the Vats upon the Rhine ⁹⁴
Yield such an Alcohol!

5 Inebriate of Air — am I —
And Debauchee ⁹⁵ of Dew —
Reeling — thro endless summer days —
From inns of Molten Blue —
When 'Landlords' turn the drunken Bee
10 Out of the Foxglove's door —
When Butterflies — renounce their 'drams'° — *drinks, tots*
I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs° swing their snowy Hats — *angels*
And Saints — to windows run —
15 To see the little Tippler
Leaning against the — Sun —

The Bustle in a House

The Bustle in a House
The Morning after Death
Is solemnest of industries
Enacted upon Earth —
5 The Sweeping up the Heart
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity.

Much Madness is Divinest Sense

Much Madness is divinest Sense —
To a discerning Eye —
Much Sense — the starkest Madness —
'Tis the Majority
5 In this, as All, prevail —
Assent — and you are sane —
Demur^o — you're straightway dangerous —
And handled with a Chain —

disagree

Wild Nights – Wild Nights

Wild Nights — Wild Nights!
Were I with thee
Wild Nights should be
Our luxury!

5 Futile — the Winds —
To a Heart in port —
Done with the Compass —
Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden —
10 Ah, the Sea!
Might I but moor — Tonight —
In Thee!

Christina Rossetti (1830–1894)

Born into an artistic and intellectual family, Rossetti buried her passionate personality in religion, charity work, and the care of her family. She was the younger sister of the flamboyant artist and poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and their unspoken rivalry marked much of her life and work. She held an ambiguous position on the edges of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, an idealistic group of young artists and writers headed by her brother. They promoted a return to standards of beauty uncorrupted by bourgeois standards, and a nostalgia for the idealised world seen in medieval and ancient myths, and these principles are reflected in Rossetti's work. She had a clear sense of her poetic vocation, and refused marriage twice (citing religious reasons) in order to focus on her writing. She was much admired by her contemporaries for the subtlety of her work and the originality of her religious poetry. Gerard Manley Hopkins, as well as many other lesser poets, were influenced by her. Rossetti died of breast cancer.

Song

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:
5 Be the green grass above me
With showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember,
And if thou wilt, forget.

I shall not see the shadows,
10 I shall not feel the rain;
I shall not hear the nightingale
Sing on, as if in pain:
And dreaming through the twilight
That doth not rise nor set,
15 Haply I may remember
And haply may forget.

Questions to consider

This poem has been linked to 'The Unquiet Grave'. If you have not already done so, you might like to read the suggestions for comparison and discussion.

In an Artist's Studio

One face looks out from all his canvases,
One selfsame figure sits or walks or leans:
We found her hidden just behind those screens,
That mirror gave back all her loveliness.
5 A queen in opal or in ruby dress,
A nameless girl in freshest summer-greens,

A saint, an angel – every canvas means
The same one meaning, neither more nor less.
He feeds upon her face by day and night,

10 And she with true kind eyes looks back on him,
Fair as the moon and joyful as the light:

Not wan with waiting, not with sorrow dim;
Not as she is, but was when hope shone bright;
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.

Supporting notes

This poem refers to the relationship between the poet's brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and his fiancée, Elizabeth Siddal. At first, he courted her obsessively, and she modelled for many of his paintings and drawings. She lived with him while they were engaged, compromising her reputation – such a step would have been strictly frowned upon in Victorian society. Meanwhile he fell in love with another woman, and eventually only married Siddal (after nine years) because he believed she was dying. A year after their marriage, she committed suicide. Rossetti never publicly criticised her brother, but this poem stands as an indictment of his cruelty, as well as an unsentimental view of what it meant to be an artist's model. (She herself had posed for numerous pictures.)

Questions to consider

1. In what way does the speaker make clear that the woman in the pictures has been robbed of her own identity? Where exactly is she 'found'? (Look at the nouns in lines 3 and 4. Do you agree that these suggest two-dimensional images? What effect does this have?)
2. What stereotypes is the model turned into? (Read lines 5 to 7.)
3. What link is there between the paintings and the painter's view of his model? What does this suggest about their relationship? Do you think he actually 'sees' her? What does he see?
4. As can be seen from the notes above, this poem has a particular history. Can it possibly succeed without this context? What could its message be in a more general sense?

Thomas Hardy (1840–1928)

Hardy was born in Dorset, a beautiful rural part of southwestern England, which was to be the setting of most of his works. He initially studied as an architect and worked in London, but was so homesick that he returned to his roots to write novels. These were successful enough to allow him to become a full-time writer. He married, but the relationship was an unhappy one. Although he was admired by many, most critics regarded his novels as gloomy and immoral. Disillusioned by their criticisms, he turned to writing poetry. His eight volumes of poetry, which focus on the sufferings and ironies of life and love, brought him further recognition and praise.

In Time of ‘The Breaking of Nations’

Only a man harrowing^o clods *ploughing*
In a slow silent walk
With an old horse that stumbles and nods
Half asleep as they stalk.
5 Only thin smoke without flame
From the heaps of couch-grass;
Yet this will go onward the same
Though Dynasties pass.
Yonder a maid and her wight^o *man*
10 Come whispering by:
War’s annals^o will cloud into night *records*
Ere their story die.

Supporting notes

This poem was written during the First World War (1914–1918), sometimes called the Great War for its magnitude and impact on the social structure of Europe. The loss of life alone was staggering. See Yeats’s ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’, Owen’s poems, and Brooke’s ‘The Soldier’ for contrasting views of what it meant to fight in this war. This poem is a response to the growing feeling that things would never be the same again after the war.

Drummer Hodge

They throw in drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined – just as found:
His landmark is a kopje^o-crest *hill*
That breaks the veldt^o around; *grassy plain*
5 And foreign constellations west
Each night above his mound.
Young Hodge the Drummer never knew –
Fresh from his Wessex ⁹⁶ home –

The meaning of the broad Karoo,

10 The Bush, the dusty loam,^o

soil

And why uprose to nightly view

Strange stars amid the gloam.^o

gloom, dusk

Yet portion of that unknown plain

Will Hodge forever be;

15 His homely Northern breast and brain

Grow to some Southern tree,

And strange-eyed constellations reign

His stars eternally.

Supporting notes

This poem, written in 1902, refers to the Anglo-Boer War (now more correctly termed the South African War), fought after the establishment of the Orange Free State and the Transvaal as independent Boer (Afrikaner) republics. South Africa was at that stage a British colony, and although the Boers had moved ('trekked') beyond the reach of the established bounds of the colony, the discovery of gold in the Transvaal meant that Britain mounted two full-scale wars on South African territory to recover the 'republics'. After some initial defeats (mainly due to the guerrilla tactics of the heavily outnumbered Boers), the British crushed the rebels. In the process, they burnt down Boer farms and placed Afrikaner women and children in concentration camps, where thousands of them died. There was considerable international criticism of Britain's actions during this time.

Hardy (unlike Schreiner) expresses no strong views in this strangely peaceful poem, which was inspired by the death in the war of a young drummer from the poet's home town.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889)

Hopkins came from a cultured Anglican family and was an excellent student at Oxford University. Here he met the poet Robert Bridges (who eventually published much of his friend's work). Also while at Oxford, Hopkins was caught up in a new intellectual and theological movement towards the Catholic faith. He converted and decided to become a priest, burning much of his poetry as a sign of commitment. While training for the priesthood, he developed unique poetic concepts that combined his delight in the beauty of the natural world with spiritual insight. Encouraged by his religious superiors, he began writing again. After his ordination, he served in a number of industrial parishes, work he found exhausting and discouraging. He was then sent to teach in Ireland, where he became severely depressed and later died. His poetry was first published, and his distinctive genius recognised, only thirty years after his death.

No Worst, There is None

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, ⁹⁸ mother of us, where is your relief?

5 My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-
woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil ⁹⁹ wince and sing –
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-
ering! Let me be fell:° force ¹⁰⁰ I must be brief.'

savage, fierce

O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
10 Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance° deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind: all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

endurance

Supporting notes

This poem, one of a series known as the 'terrible' sonnets, was written during a period of what would today be recognised as severe clinical depression, or possibly even bipolar affective disorder, which Hopkins suffered towards the end of his life. This poem has already been linked to Herbert's 'The Flower', which also deals with spiritual and emotional crisis. You might like to look at the suggestions for comparison made there.

The Windhover: ¹⁰¹

To Christ our Lord

I caught this morning morning's minion,° king-
dom of daylight's dauphin, ¹⁰² dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling° wing
5 In his ecstasy! then, off, off forth on swing,

king's favourite

rippling

As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for a bird, – the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
10 Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier! 103

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion^o
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion.^o

furrow

bright red

Supporting notes

This sonnet* is a good introduction to the verbal complexity of Hopkins' poems. This poem is particularly dense: words, associations and images are crammed into a tight and demanding framework (in this case, the sonnet form, with only three rhyming sounds – only one rhyme is used for the first eight lines). This is why Hopkins' poems sometimes have a sense of 'straining at the seams'. The richness of his writing makes critical analysis of his poetry particularly rewarding. Interpreting his poetry is also an extremely personal process; if you and your classmates work through one of his poems individually, and then report your findings back to each other, you might be surprised at the different interpretations that emerge.

This poem is also often given as a good example of the practice of Hopkins' theory of 'inscape', in which the uniqueness of a natural object at a particular moment of beauty is captured, at the same time that the resulting spiritual insight is celebrated.

Olive Schreiner (1855–1920)

Olive Schreiner was born to missionary parents in what was then known as the Cape Colony, and worked as a governess teaching the children of local farmers. She travelled to Britain, where her novel *The Story of an African Farm* was published under a male pseudonym.* The success of her book gave her access to progressive circles, and she continued to write passionately on subjects such as women's rights, colonial imperialism, pacifism and racism throughout her life. She returned to South Africa to marry the politician Samuel Cronwright, and although she spent the duration of the First World War in England, she went back to South Africa to die. Unconventional and often confrontational, she never lacked courage in either her writing or her life.

The Cry of South Africa

Give back my dead!

They who by kop^o and fountain

hill

First saw the light upon my rocky breast!

Give back my dead,

5 The sons who played upon me

When childhood's dews still rested on their heads.

Give back my dead

Whom thou hast riven^o from me

torn

By arms of men loud called from earth's farthest bound

10 To wet my bosom with my children's blood!

Give back my dead,

The dead who grew up on me!

Supporting notes

This poem was written in 1900, during the South African War, formerly called the Anglo-Boer War. You will find it helpful to check the [supporting notes](#), where you will find another Boer War poem, written by Hardy. How do these two poems differ?

Rudyard Kipling (1865–1936)

Kipling's novels, poems, and short stories epitomise to many the British Empire at its height. Born in India, he began his writing career as a journalist in Lahore (capital of present-day Pakistan, then part of India) in the 1880s. His vast body of work includes often satirical* poems in rollicking rhythms that tell colourful tales of West meeting East. These made him instantly popular in his time. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, as nations around the globe began to count the cost of colonialism, there was a violent swing away from 'empire literature', and Kipling went rapidly from being one of the most widely read and admired writers in the world (and the first British writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature) to almost pariah status. In recent years, however, as post-colonial* criticism has become increasingly widespread, many are beginning to recognise that along with the patronising echoes of his time, his work contains many cynical glances at the hypocrisies of colonial rule, and real concern for the people and countries under British dominion.

If—

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
5 If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, not talk too wise:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
10 If you can think – and not make thought your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves^o to make a trap for fools,
15 Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,¹⁰⁴
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
20 And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew^o
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

25 If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,

dishonest people

muscle

If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
³⁰ With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939)

Ireland's foremost poet, Yeats was born into a gifted family. His father and brother were well-known painters, and he initially followed in their footsteps before deciding on a literary career. Together with Lady Gregory, a writer and cultural nationalist, he began a campaign to revive Irish literature and drama, and founded a national theatre (see [The Land to a Landlord](#) for another poem from this movement, sometimes called the 'Celtic Twilight'). Yeats was fascinated by traditional Irish legends, as well as the supernatural. He was also an ardent Irish nationalist at a time when the colonial domination of Ireland by Britain had led to guerrilla warfare by Irish rebels. His passion for a beautiful revolutionary, Maud Gonne, who rejected him, inspired much of his love poetry. He eventually married Georgie Hyde-Lees, who was to influence the mysticism of his later writing. The doomed nationalist uprising of Easter 1916 rekindled Yeats's idealistic hopes for a free Ireland, and in 1922 he was appointed to the Senate of the new Irish Free State. A year later he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. His poetry is significant for encompassing the shift from late Romanticism to the new Modernist* principles.

No Second Troy

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
5 Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
10 Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

Supporting notes

This poem, one of many that Yeats wrote about Maud Gonne, likens her to Helen of Troy, who was reputed to be the most beautiful woman in the world. According to the tales of the Greek writer Homer, Helen's abduction led to the Trojan War and the ultimate destruction of the city and civilisation of Troy. (For further details, see the notes to Tennyson's ['Ulysses'](#).) For a less romantic perspective on Helen of Troy, see H.D's ['Helen'](#).

The Second Coming

Turning and turning in the widening gyre^o
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
5 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

spiral

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

10 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of ¹⁰⁵

Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man, ¹⁰⁶

15 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

20 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem ¹⁰⁷ to be born?

Supporting notes

The title of this poem borrows from the Biblical reference to the second coming of Jesus. This, it was prophesied, would take place after a period of increasing violence and turbulence, and would mark the end of time. However, in this poem, the speaker imagines the coming of a frightening and barbaric mythological being, rather than a Christian deity. Written shortly after the First World War, this poem seems to hint at the inevitability of another devastating war arising out of the brutal settlement of the first.

Easter, 1916

I have met them at close of day

Coming with vivid faces

From counter or desk among grey

Eighteenth-century houses.

5 I have passed with a nod of the head

Or polite meaningless words,

Or have lingered awhile and said

Polite meaningless words,

And thought before I had done

10 Of a mocking tale or a gibe^o

joke, insult

To please a companion

Around the fire at the club,

Being certain that they and I

But lived where motley^o is worn:

multiple colours

15 All changed, changed utterly:

A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
20 Until her voice grew shrill.

What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?^o

This man had kept a school
25 And rode our wingèd horse; ¹⁰⁸
This other ¹⁰⁹ his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
30 So daring and sweet his thought.

This other man ¹¹⁰ I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
35 Yet I number him in the song;
He, too, has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
40 A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.

45 The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
50 Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes^o within it;
The long-legged moor-hens dive,
And hens to moor-cocks call;
55 Minute by minute they live:
The stone's in the midst of all.

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?

60 That is Heaven's part, our part

hounds

splashes

To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.

65 What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith ¹¹¹
For all that is done and said.

70 We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?

I write it out in a verse –
75 MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly ¹¹² and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
80 A terrible beauty is born.

Supporting notes

Easter 1916 was the date of an attempted coup by Irish nationalists struggling to overthrow English rule. Although the courage of those who participated was remarkable, if foolhardy, the uprising failed, and its leaders (including those named in this poem) were executed. The uprising did not have the full support of the Irish people, but they were nevertheless outraged by the executions, which served to draw together the nation against the English. Those who died were (and still are) regarded as patriotic martyrs, and the wearing of the colour green (referred to in line 78) became a symbol of resistance and remembrance.

This is not the only poem Yeats wrote about his friends involved in the struggle for liberation; you might like to look up 'On a Political Prisoner', which was inspired by Constance Markievicz (described in lines 17–23). Her death sentence for her role in the rebellion was reduced to life imprisonment. (There is a poem by her sister Eva Gore-Booth.)

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
5 My country is Kiltartan Cross, ¹¹³
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,

No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
¹⁰ Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
A lonely impulse of delight
Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
¹⁵ A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.

Supporting notes

This was written in memory of Major Robert Gregory (the son of Yeats's close friend and colleague, Lady Gregory), who was killed in action during the last year of the First World War. Does this poem sound like a traditional elegy?* In what ways is it unusual?

Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869–1935)

Robinson grew up in a small town in the northeastern part of the United States known as New England, and much of his writing involves nostalgic reflection on the changing ways of life in this rural community. He studied at Harvard University, and through the influence of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was impressed by his poetry, he was given a customs post. This gave him financial security and the opportunity to concentrate on his writing. His popularity as a poet grew slowly but steadily during his lifetime.

Richard Cory

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favoured, and imperially slim.

5 And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
'Good-morning', and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich – yes, richer than a king –
10 And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
15 And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Eva Gore-Booth (1870–1926)

Younger sister of the famous Irish activist and revolutionary, Countess Markievicz, Gore-Booth was a poet associated with the Celtic Twilight, the Irish literary revival led by Yeats and others. She was also a social worker, socialist, and feminist activist. She left Ireland to live in Britain with Esther Roper (known for her work in trying to secure the vote for women). Theirs was most probably a lesbian relationship.

The Land to a Landlord

You hug to your soul a handful of dust,
And you think the round world your sacred trust –
But the sun shines, and the wind blows,
And nobody cares and nobody knows.

5 O the bracken waves and the foxgloves flame,
And none of them ever has heard your name –
Near and dear is the curlew's cry,
You are merely a stranger passing by.

Sheer up through the shadows the mountain towers
10 And dreams wander free in this world of ours, –
Though you may turn the grass to gold,
The twilight has left you out in the cold.

Though you are king of the rose and the wheat,
Not for you, not for you is the bog-myrtle sweet,
15 Though you are lord of the long grass,
The hemlock bows not her head as you pass.

The poppies would flutter amongst the corn
Even if you had never been born,
With your will or without your will
20 The ragweed can wander over the hill.

Down there in the bog where the plovers call
You are but an outcast after all,
Over your head the sky gleams blue –
Not a cloud or star belongs to you.

Supporting notes

The Celtic Twilight was as much a nationalist as a cultural movement. It drew on the stories and traditions of the oppressed and marginalised Irish community (see [William Butler Yeats](#) for more details of this history). Although this poem is written in the romantic style associated with this literary movement, it is intensely political; the Irish had been tenants in their own land to the hated English for centuries, and few figures were resented as much as the arrogant absentee landlord. Gore-Booth (making use of an argument not dissimilar to Rossetti's in her poem '[Song](#)') underlines the ultimate powerlessness of the oppressor in

the face of the land's indifference. You might like to compare her line of reasoning with that used by the far more orthodox Samuel Johnson on a similar topic (see '[A Short Song of Congratulation](#)'). Taking a different view, this poem also presents a deliberately gendered* perspective of nature; see the [discussion](#) for further details on the 'masculine' and 'feminine' presentations of nature, as well as examples of poems that represent or counter these traditions.

Robert Frost (1874–1963)

Frost grew up in New England, the beautiful rural northeastern corner of the United States, which he was to become famous for describing in his poems. His education included two years at Harvard University, and he made a living teaching, farming, and doing odd jobs. Shortly before the First World War, he and his family spent three years in Britain, where his poems were published for the first time. He returned home to growing recognition and admiration of his work. He took up teaching again, and became one of the best-known modern American poets. Although he is generally admired as a wise observer of the rural scene, some scholars have suggested that a more troubled note lies beneath much of his work.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
5 To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
10 Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
15 I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
20 And that has made all the difference.

Mending Wall

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

5 The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,

To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
10 No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
15 We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'
20 We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
25 My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
30 'Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
35 Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
40 In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
45 He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

Supporting notes

Both Frost's poems seem to describe simple, everyday events. Do you agree that both could also stand as extended metaphors* for something else? Pick one poem (or study each one in succession), and work out what else the description of mending a wall, or choosing a road, could be about. On what different levels does each poem operate? Compare your interpretations with those of your studymates. How many different readings

emerge? Which do you find the most valid, and why?

William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)

Williams studied medicine, and while he was at university he became friends with the important and controversial poet Ezra Pound. After qualifying as a doctor, Williams returned to his home town in the United States. Here he married and spent the rest of his life, working as a paediatrician (a doctor specialising in children's illnesses). His experiences with working-class families influenced much of his writing. Part of a new generation of modern American poets who were moving towards more natural use of language, Williams' poems combine a conversational style with vivid observation of detail.

The Red Wheelbarrow

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

5 glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

This is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

5 and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
10 they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Questions to consider

You might enjoy comparing this poem to Pound's 'In a Station of the Metro'. Questions about both poems can be found on the following page.

Ezra Pound (1885–1972)

Pound was born in the American mid-west, and became friends with the poets William Carlos Williams and Hilda Doolittle at university. He was fired from his first teaching job, and left for Europe, where he joined other important figures who were establishing new trends in literary circles. Together with T. S. Eliot and the Irish writer James Joyce, he led the movement towards Modernism* in literature. During four years in Paris, he was part of a bohemian group of American literary exiles that included the writers Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein. Horrified by the aftermath of the First World War, he turned to fascism as the solution to Europe's troubles. During the Second World War, he was caught broadcasting right-wing propaganda. He was judged to be insane, and instead of standing trial for treason, he was sent to a mental institution. On his release, he returned to Italy, where he lived until his death.

In a Station of the Metro 114

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Questions to consider

You might find it helpful to compare this poem with another very short poem, Williams' 'This is Just to Say'. Here the similarity is not so much one of topic or style, but rather the ability of the poets to evoke a great deal with very few words.

The following questions might help you come to grips with these poems, as well as providing some guidelines for approaching very short poems.

1. What function does the title serve in both poems? How does this differ from (or enlarge on) the usual role of the title in a poem?
2. Both poems concentrate on a very immediate, or fleeting, image or experience. How does the brevity (shortness) of the poems underline this fleeting quality? Do they succeed in 'preserving the moment'?
3. Both poems have a distinctive shape. What does Williams' poem resemble? For whom is it written, and where do you think it might be found? The shape of Pound's poem, meanwhile, reflects the influence of very short Chinese and Japanese poems in which an image or emotion is described in a set number of words or syllables.
4. In poems this short, every word counts. In Williams' poem, where the words suggest ordinary household communication, it is the way the words are laid out on the page that is significant. What effect does their structuring have? In Pound's poem, however, each word (and each punctuation mark) is carefully chosen for effect. Try critically analysing this poem, considering each word. Does it evoke an overall emotion as well as an image?

The River-Merchant's Wife: a Letter

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,

You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.

5 And we went on living in the village of Chokan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.

I never laughed, being bashful.^o

shy

Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.

10 Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,

I desired my dust to be mingled with yours

Forever and forever and forever.

Why should I climb the look out?

15 At sixteen you departed,

You went into far Ku-to-yen, by the river of swirling eddies,

And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.

20 By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,

Too deep to clear them away!

The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.

The paired butterflies are already yellow with August

Over the grass in the West garden;

25 They hurt me. I grow older.

If you are coming through the narrows of the river Kiang,

Please let me know beforehand,

And I will come out to meet you

As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

Supporting notes

This is a free translation of a poem by Li Bai, also known as Li Po (c.701–762), a Chinese poet whose works were much admired by Pound. The place names in this poem all refer to various locations in eighth-century China. You might like to compare this poem to the English translations of works by Li Bai's contemporaries.

H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) (1886–1961)

Doolittle was born in the United States, and became friends with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams while studying. She joined Pound in Europe, and together they founded a new movement in modern poetry (called the ‘Imagist movement’) that focused on the significance of actual physical images. She married the poet Robert Adlington, and worked with him translating works in Greek and Latin and editing an important literary journal. She also wrote novels, as well as an account of her psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud, considered by many to be the founder of modern psychology. After her marriage ended, she moved to Switzerland.

Helen ¹¹⁵

All Greece hates

the still eyes in the white face,

the lustre^o as of olives ¹¹⁶

where she stands,

gloss, sheen

5 And the white hands.

All Greece reviles

the wan^o face when she smiles,

hating it deeper still

when it grows wan and white,

pale

10 remembering past enchantments

and past ills.

Greece sees unmoved,

God’s daughter, ¹¹⁷ born of love,

the beauty of cool feet

15 and slenderest knees,

could love indeed the maid,

only if she were laid,

white ash amid funereal cypresses. ¹¹⁸

Supporting notes

Here we find a completely different vision of Helen of Troy, and the Trojan War, to that found in the poems ‘Ulysses’ by Tennyson and ‘No Second Troy’ by Yeats. (You will find information on both Helen herself and the Trojan War in the contextual notes to these poems.) Tennyson and Yeats each glorify different aspects of the tragic saga; what exactly enthral each of them? What is H. D.’s response to the legend, and how does her poem contrast with theirs? How do you explain the differences? Do you think the gender of these poets might be a factor?

Rupert Brooke (1887–1915)

An attractive and popular figure, Brooke was educated at Cambridge University, where he was a leader in literary circles. His early poetry was much admired and he was awarded a fellowship for further study, but he suffered a breakdown soon afterwards (possibly because of the turmoil he experienced in coming to terms with his homosexuality). While recovering, he travelled to the United States, Canada, and the Pacific islands. He volunteered to serve in the Navy as soon as the First World War broke out, and the poetry he sent home established him as the most celebrated (if unrealistic) war poet of his times. In 1915 he was posted to the Mediterranean, where he died of blood-poisoning.

The Soldier

If I should die, think only this of me:

That there's some corner of a foreign field

That is for ever England. There shall be

In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;

5 A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,

Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,

A body of England's, breathing English air,

Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

And think, this heart, all evil shed away,

10 A pulse in the eternal mind, no less

Gives somewhere back the thoughts by England given;

Her sights and sounds; dreams happy as her day;

And laughter, learnt of friends; and gentleness,

In hearts at peace, under an English heaven.

Supporting notes

This poem is an interesting remnant of a particularly rose-coloured tradition of patriotism, which glorified fighting and dying for one's country (today the notion of dying for a cause is more likely to be idealised). These sentiments were unable to survive the gruesome realities of the First World War; although Europe had a history of bloody wars going back centuries, nothing like the horrors of modern trench warfare had ever been experienced before. This war was also probably the first in which both working-class and aristocratic soldiers suffered equally devastating losses and injuries. Brooke's poem was to be prophetic; his body lies buried on a small Greek island. See Hardy's 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', Yeats' 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' and Owen's 'Futility' and 'Dulce et Decorum est', as well as the notes on these poems, for a variety of reflections on the First World War.

Questions to consider

Read this poem carefully, and then turn to Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et decorum est', and read the supporting notes on both poems.

1. Both speakers describe a soldier's response to dying in action. Yet the poems differ in their use of language, imagery, tone, and conclusions drawn. Isolate these contrasting elements, establishing how these are communicated in each case. Your study group might like to divide into two groups, one to study each poem, before reporting back to each other.
2. What impact would each poem have had on the audience of the time?
3. Why was Brooke's poem so much more popular? Does this suggest any thoughts on the role that poetry might play in a time of crisis?
4. What seems to be the primary intention underlying each poem? Do you think that both are valid, especially in times of war?
5. Are both poems sincere? How can this be so? Do you agree that Brooke is perhaps a poet of the past, and Owen a poet of the present?

Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923)

Mansfield was born in New Zealand, but went to London to study. Her first marriage lasted only a few days, and she became involved with John Middleton Murry, an influential editor and literary figure, whom she later married. They shared a sometimes stormy friendship and various literary projects with the novelist D. H. Lawrence and his unconventional wife, Frieda. (Lawrence described their four-way relationship in his novel *Women in Love*.) Mansfield's writing was original and wide-ranging; she was best known for her short stories. She travelled regularly to France and Switzerland in the hopes of shaking off the tuberculosis that eventually killed her.

To God the Father

To the little, pitiful God I make my prayer,
The God with the long grey beard
And flowing robe fastened with a hempen^o girdle *rope*
Who sits nodding and muttering on the all-too-big throne of Heaven.
5 What a long, long time, dear God, since you set the stars in their places,
Girded^o the earth with the sea, and invented the day and night. *encircled*
And longer the time since you looked through the blue window of Heaven
To see your children at play in a garden . . .
Now we are all stronger than you and wiser and more arrogant,
10 In swift procession we pass you by.
'Who is that marionette^o nodding and muttering *puppet*
On the all-too-big throne of Heaven?
Come down from your place, Grey Beard,
We have had enough of your play-acting!'
15 It is centuries since I believed in you,
But to-day my need of you has come back.
I want no rose-coloured future,
No books of learning, no protestations and denials –
I am sick of this ugly scramble,
20 I am tired of being pulled about –
O God, I want to sit on your knees
On the all-too-big throne of Heaven,
And fall asleep with my hands tangled in your grey beard.

T. S. Eliot (1888–1965)

Eliot was born in the United States and studied at Harvard University and Oxford. His friend Ezra Pound encouraged him to settle in Britain, where he married Vivien Haigh-Wood. Theirs was a very troubled marriage, which ended in separation. Eliot worked in a bank for several years while gathering a reputation as an editor and critic. Meanwhile, his first collections of poetry were establishing him as the sophisticated new voice of a disillusioned age. He became a director at the publishing house Faber & Faber, and guided their publications of poetry along the new lines of Modernism,* a movement he and others such as Pound had established. By now he was one of the most influential literary figures in Britain. In later life, he accepted the doctrines of the Anglican Church, a step that marked a shift in his poetry from cynicism to mysticism. He also became increasingly traditional in his politics. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948.

Preludes

I

The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o'clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
5 And now a gusty shower wraps
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
10 On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.

II

The morning comes to consciousness
15 Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.
With the other masquerades^o
20 That time resumes,
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

pretences, play-acting

III

You tossed a blanket from the bed,
25 You lay upon your back, and waited;
You dozed, and watched the night revealing

The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.
30 And when all the world came back
And the light crept up between the shutters
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
35 Sitting along the bed's edge, where
You curled the paper from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
40 That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o'clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
44 And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
50 The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

Supporting notes

In his poems, Eliot's purpose is to evoke images and emotions by association, rather than description. This practice of using language rather like music – for emotional and aesthetic* effect rather than to communicate meaning – was set out by Eliot as a new creative philosophy, and was to become a hallmark of Modernist* poetry. In 'Preludes', he gives four different evocative cameos or scenes, rather than a story sequence or philosophical argument.

Journey of the Magi 119

'A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:

The ways deep and the weather sharp,
5 The very dead of winter.’
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,^o
Lying down in the melting snow.

stubborn, obstinate

There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
10 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.^o
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
15 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
20 That this was all folly.

sweet Oriental drink

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
25 And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
30 And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

120

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
35 This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
40 We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,^o
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

order, system

Supporting notes

Eliot wrote this poem, about a life-changing experience, in the same year he converted to the Anglican Church and finally took on British citizenship – both choices that meant

permanent changes in his life. The first five lines are adapted from a seventeenth-century sermon, and the second stanza is packed with allusions to the New Testament. The 'three trees' in line 24 refer to the three crosses described in the crucifixion story; the 'vine-leaves' and the 'lintel' in line 26 suggest the parables Jesus told in which he metaphorically described himself as a vine and a door; the 'dicing' in line 27 possibly alludes to the soldiers gambling for Jesus' clothes at the foot of the cross; the 'pieces of silver' in the same line refer to the thirty pieces of silver which Judas, one of Jesus' disciples, was paid as a reward for betraying his leader; and the 'wine-skins' in line 28 suggest another parable, which features the image of new wine in old wine-skins.

Claude McKay (1890–1948)

Born in Jamaica in the Caribbean, McKay moved to the United States as a young man. A skilled writer, he wrote both poetry and novels. His poems reflect his perceptions of life in Jamaica and New York, and his novels deal honestly with the experiences of black communities in the Caribbean, the United States, and Europe. He also produced a respected sociological work on life in Harlem (a black residential area in New York City).

If We Must Die

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.

5 If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained^o to honour us though dead!

forced

10 O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

Supporting notes

This poem was written as a response to race riots that took place in Harlem in 1919. Later, it was to become a poem of encouragement in times of war. In its use of the sonnet* form, it borrows directly from the poetry of previous ages. Do you agree that it sounds more like a nineteenth-century (or earlier) poem than a twentieth-century one? What features does it share with the sonnets by Wordsworth or Milton, for example? Why do you think the writer chose to use this form?

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950)

Millay was born in the United States and educated at Vassar College, a prestigious university for women. She soon established a reputation as a bold and witty poet, and was the leader of a new generation of writers who were sophisticated and daring, both in their writing and their lifestyles.

I, Being Born a Woman and Distressed

I, being born a woman and distressed
By all the needs and notions of my kind,
Am urged by your propinquity^o to find *closeness*
Your person fair and feel a certain zest^o *enthusiasm*
5 To bear your body's weight upon my breast:
So subtly is the fume^o of life designed, *essence*
To clarify the pulse and cloud the mind,
And leave me once again undone, possessed.
Think not for this, however, the poor treason
10 Of my stout^o blood against my staggering brain, *strong*
I shall remember you with love, or season
My scorn with pity, – let me make it plain:
I find this frenzy insufficient reason
For conversation when we meet again.

Questions to consider

1. At first glance, this poem looks like a formal sonnet.* However, we soon discover that it is wickedly funny and mocking in its intention. What basic point is the speaker trying to spell out, and to whom? Why is the use of the sonnet form here especially humorous?
2. If you agree that contrast forms the main ingredient of the humour, identify how this operates. What tone is used? And what kind of language? Given the subject of the poem, do you think this is appropriate, or deliberately inappropriate? How does the use of language and syntax* compare with the topic (or argument) of the poem?
3. How does the poet use the formal structure of the sonnet to emphasise her argument?
4. Traditionally, the sonnet was often used as a form of love poetry – see, for example, the sonnets of Sidney and Shakespeare. Do you agree that this sonnet, however, is almost an anti-love poem? In what ways does it subvert the tradition?
5. The sonnet form is sometimes used for subversive purposes; on the previous page, we see Claude McKay using this form for a far more serious, but still unusual purpose. There are other examples of sonnets being used to frame controversial or surprising views in this book; can you find them?

Archibald MacLeish (1892–1982)

MacLeish was educated at Yale University and Harvard Law School. He joined the circle of American artists in Paris in the 1920s, where he came under the influence of Ezra Pound. Another significant influence was T. S. Eliot. A notable poet and playwright, MacLeish became increasingly absorbed by left-wing politics. On his return to the United States, he held a series of important governmental positions, including Librarian of Congress and Assistant Secretary of State. He was later appointed to a professorship at Harvard.

Ars Poetica ¹²¹

A poem should be palpable^o and mute *tangible, real*
As a globed fruit,

Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,

⁵ Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement^o ledges where the moss has grown – *window*

A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.

*

A poem should be motionless in time
¹⁰ As the moon climbs,
Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,

Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind –

¹⁵ A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.

*

A poem should be equal to:
Not true.

For all the history of grief
²⁰ An empty doorway and a maple leaf.

For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea –

A poem should not mean
But be.

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918)

Owen came from a humble background and began writing poetry at an early age. Unable to afford university fees, he studied at a technical college, and did community work in an impoverished parish. Two years before the First World War broke out, he went to France to teach English. After the war began, he returned home to join the army. His first-hand experience of the horrific conditions and casualties involved in the fighting in Europe were to have a dramatic influence on his poetry. He was injured and sent to hospital in Scotland to recover. Here he met the poet Siegfried Sassoon, who encouraged his writing. He returned to battle and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery, only to be killed a week before the war ended. At first his brutally realistic and bitter war poems were ignored by the public; however, he slowly came to be recognised as one of the finest poets of the First World War.

Futility

Move him into the sun –
Gently its touch awoke him once,
At home, whispering of fields unsown.
Always it woke him, even in France,
5 Until this morning and this snow.
If anything might rouse him now
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds –
Woke, once, the clays of a cold star.
10 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,
Full-nerved – still warm – too hard to stir?
Was it for this the clay grew tall?
– O what made fatuous^o sunbeams toil
To break earth's sleep at all?

foolish

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
5 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines ¹²² dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling,
10 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime ¹²³ ...
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,

As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

15 In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,

20 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;

If you could hear at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

25 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est

Pro patria mori. 124

Supporting notes

One of the features of the First World War was the use of chemical weapons for the first time. The most notorious was 'mustard' gas, which corroded the lungs, causing a horrible death in which victims effectively drowned in their own blood. Soldiers used gas-masks (the 'helmets' in line 10) to protect themselves. This poem graphically describes the effects of such a gas attack.

You might like to compare these two poems by Owen with Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier'. See [suggestions for discussion](#).

Elizabeth Cloete

No information is available about Cloete, other than that she was a South African who wrote this poem in 1931.

The Spartan Woman

A spartan^o woman is Africa,
Under the sun's relentless rays she lies,
With stern fingers pointing steadily upwards,
Her broad breast bare to the sky,
5 She watches with an immovable face,
Those who seek to nestle on her heart,
But it is hard, and the heat of her breath is scorching.
Vainly they strive to rest in her treacherous arms.
They cling to the hem of her garments praying for life,
10 Yet not a quiver betrays her thought.
Yet how they love her!
Once having seen her, once having known her,
They see, they love, they know no other.
Their last cry is always to be buried on her breast.
15 None but the bravest, none but the best
Shall earn her favour,
From them she will withhold nothing.
And maybe there shall arise a mighty race,
That maybe shall move with iron tread,
20 Towards the hills of God.

tough, austere

Supporting notes

This poem has certain features in common with Olive Schreiner's 'The Cry of South Africa'. There are also other poems in this book that give Nature human and especially feminine qualities. You might like to find these (Wordsworth would be a good place to start) and compare them, especially if you are interested in the way that writing is gendered* (shaped by the socially constructed understandings of masculinity and femininity).

Mao Tse-tung (1893–1976)

Mao Tse-tung (also spelt Zedong) came from a peasant background, and was attracted to the political doctrine of communism as a young man. He helped to form the Chinese Communist Party, and remained its leader for fifty years. His followers fought a prolonged civil war for control of the country, eventually overcoming both the occupying Japanese forces and the Chinese Nationalists. The Chinese People's Republic, with Mao as its head, was established in 1949. Mao embarked on a programme of accelerated economic and industrial development that was to lead to extensive abuse of human rights. Two low points of his regime were the infamous Cultural Revolution (in which millions were killed, unfairly punished, or banished to remote areas) and the Chinese invasion and annexation of Tibet. Mao remained effectively in control of the country until his death in 1976, attaining almost mythical status among his followers. In China, his sayings and poems were so extensively distributed as to make him probably the most widely read poet of the twentieth century.

Lou Mountain Pass

West wind fierce,
immense sky, wild geese honking,
frosty morning moon.

February 1935

Frosty morning moon.

5 Horse hooves clanging,
bugles sobbing.

Tough pass,
long trail, like iron.

Yet with strong steps

10 we climbed that peak.

Climbed that peak:
green mountains like oceans,
setting sun like blood.

Supporting notes

During the civil war, Mao led his followers on the gruelling 'Long March', a 9 700 km trek across some of China's wildest terrain. It took over a year, and bonded those who survived into a close and determined military unit. Mao wrote this poem to celebrate a battle against the Nationalist forces during the Long March, the taking of a particularly daunting mountain pass. You might find it interesting to compare this poem with the early Chinese poems. What differences and similarities can you find?

E. E. Cummings (1894–1962)

The son of a clergyman, Cummings studied at Harvard University and joined a volunteer ambulance unit in France during the First World War. His first book, an account of his experiences in a French detention camp, established his reputation as a modern writer. He introduced striking visual and typographical innovations in his poetry, and his unconventional use of punctuation and lower-case letters has had a lasting impact on the style of modern poetry. His work ranges from sharp satire* to romantic and moving lyrics.*

anyone lived in a pretty how town

anyone lived in a pretty how town
(with up so floating many bells down)
spring summer autumn winter
he sang his didn't he danced his did.

5 Women and men(both little and small)
cared for anyone not at all
they sowed their isn't they reaped their same
sun moon stars rain

10 children guessed(but only a few
and down they forgot as up they grew
autumn winter spring summer)
that noone loved him more by more

when by now and tree by leaf
she laughed his joy she cried his grief
15 bird by snow and stir by still
anyone's any was all to her

someones married their everyones
laughed their cryings and did their dance
(sleep wake hope and then)they
20 said their nevers they slept their dream

stars rain sun moon
(and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember
with up so floating many bells down)

25 one day anyone died i guess
(and noone stooped to kiss his face)
busy folk buried them side by side
little by little and was by was

all by all and deep by deep
30 and more by more they dream their sleep
noone and anyone earth by april

wish by spirit and if by yes.

Women and men(both dong and ding)

summer autumn winter spring

reaped their sowing and went their came

sun moon stars rain

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956)

A German by nationality, Brecht was sympathetic to class and labour issues, and aligned himself with local communist groups. His radical and outspoken writings were banned by the Nazis, and after the establishment of Hitler's totalitarian regime in Germany during the 1930s, he emigrated to the United States. Here he worked translating and producing his plays. After the Second World War, he returned to East Berlin, where he founded a company of actors, the Berliner Ensemble, as a vehicle for his work and theories of acting. He married the actress Helene Weigel, and she continued to direct the company after his death. Today he is recognised as a leading modern German poet and playwright.

Questions from a Worker who Reads

Translated by Michael Hamburger

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?

In the books you will find the names of kings.

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?

And Babylon, many times demolished,

5 Who raised it up so many times? In what houses

Of gold-glittering Lima did the builders live?

Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished,

Did the masons go? Great Rome

Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them? Over whom

10 Did the Caesars triumph? Had Byzantium, much praised in song,

Only palaces for its inhabitants? Even in fabled Atlantis

The night the ocean engulfed it

The drowning still bawled^o for their slaves.

yelled, cried

The young Alexander conquered India.

15 Was he alone?

Caesar beat the Gauls.

Did he not have even a cook with him?

Philip of Spain wept when his armada

Went down. Was he the only one to weep?

20 Frederick the Second won the Seven Years' War. Who

Else won it?

Every page a victory.

Who cooked the feast for the victors?

Every ten years a great man.

25 Who paid the bill?

So many reports.

So many questions.

Brief explanations of the events referred to in this poem are given here. Thebes (lines 1–3) was the burial place of kings, and a temple site in ancient Egypt. Babylon (lines 4–5) was a great capital of the ancient Middle East; successive invaders destroyed and rebuilt it. Lima (line 6) is the capital of the South American country Peru; it was once the stronghold of the ancient and wealthy Inca civilisation. The Great Wall of China (line 7) was a long defensive barrier built to repel invaders (see also footnote 2). Rome (lines 8–10) was the centre of the Roman empire; its rulers were known as Caesars. Many of them ordered monuments or arches to be built to mark the conquest of other lands or peoples. Byzantium (lines 10–11) was the eastern capital of the Roman Empire, later named Constantinople. Today it is the capital of Turkey, and is called Istanbul. Atlantis (lines 11–13) was a mythical island civilisation that was supposedly engulfed by the sea. Alexander, also known as Alexander the Great (line 14), was a brilliant young general of the ancient world; he conquered lands stretching from Greece to India. The Gauls (line 16) were the inhabitants of France who were defeated by Julius Caesar, probably the greatest of the Roman rulers. Philip of Spain (line 18) was the king of Spain during the sixteenth century; he sent a fleet of ships known as the Armada to attack England, but was defeated. Frederick the Second (line 20) was an eighteenth-century German king, and a key figure in a major war in central Europe that lasted seven years.

Hart Crane (1899–1932)

Crane's short life was not an easy one. He did not finish high school, but his two volumes of poetry nevertheless marked him as a talented and powerful writer, with a bleak vision of life. His work resembles Walt Whitman's in its fascination with American experiences and values. An alcoholic, he had a succession of unhappy love affairs with both men and women. On a voyage home after a period of travel and study in Mexico, he committed suicide by jumping over the side of the ship.

My Grandmother's Love Letters

There are no stars to-night
But those of memory.
Yet how much room for memory there is
In the loose girdle^o of soft rain.

belt

5 There is even room enough
For the letters of my mother's mother,
Elizabeth,
That have been pressed so long
Into a corner of the roof
10 That they are brown and soft,
And liable to melt as snow.

Over the greatness of such space
Steps must be gentle.
It is all hung by an invisible white hair.
15 It trembles as birch limbs webbing the air.

And I ask myself:

'Are your fingers long enough to play
Old keys that are but echoes:
Is the silence strong enough
20 To carry back the music to its source
And back to you again
As though to her?'

Yet I would lead my grandmother by the hand
Through much of what she would not understand;
25 And so I stumble. And the rain continues on the roof
With such a sound of gently pitying laughter.

Malvinia Reynolds (1900–1978)

Reynolds was an American singer, guitarist, and song-writer who followed in the protest folk tradition established by musicians such as Woodie Guthrie and Pete Seeger. Their aim was to express political criticism in a way that was both powerful and accessible, in the form of ballads,* chants, and easily remembered songs. Reynolds' songs are often apparently simple and understated, but make telling points nevertheless.

What Have They Done to the Rain?

Just a little rain falling all around,
The grass lifts its head to the heavenly sound,
Just a little rain, just a little rain,
What have they done to the rain?

⁵ Just a little breeze out of the sky,
The leaves nod their heads as the breeze blows by,
Just a little breeze with some smoke in its eye,
What have they done to the rain?

Just a little boy standing in the rain,
¹⁰ The gentle rain that falls for years,
And the grass is gone, the boy disappears,
And rain keeps falling like helpless tears,
And what have they done to the rain?

Supporting notes

This song was written at the height of the Cold War between the United States and its allies, and what was then the communist Eastern bloc, headed by the USSR. It refers to the threat of radioactive 'fallout' (minute particles of deadly waste matter from either a nuclear bomb explosion or a leaking nuclear power station, that would be spread through the atmosphere by wind and rain). This fear stalked the northern hemisphere for decades after the Second World War (which ended when American pilots dropped nuclear bombs on two Japanese cities). There was tremendous concern about the sickness, death, and long-term poisoning that such fallout would cause for decades after an explosion or leak.

Roy Campbell (1901–1957)

Born in Natal, Campbell studied at Oxford University for a year and lived briefly in Britain, where he successfully published his first volume of poetry, establishing himself as an energetic and inventive writer. On his return to South Africa, he founded a satirical literary journal (*Voorslag*, which means ‘whiplash’) with the respected poet William Plomer. He left once again to wander through France and Spain before settling in Portugal. A prolific writer and translator, he regularly published poetry as well as two autobiographies. His personality was as colourful and flamboyant as his writing (his jobs included a brief stint as a bull-fighter), but his support of fascism earned him considerable criticism. However, he fought on the side of the British during the Second World War. He died in a car crash in Portugal.

The Zulu Girl

When in the sun the hot red acres smoulder,
Down where the sweating gang its labour plies,
A girl flings down her hoe, and from her shoulder
Unslings her child tormented by the flies.

5 She takes him to a ring of shadow pooled
By thorn-trees: purpled with the blood of ticks,
While her sharp nails, in slow caresses ruled,
Prowl through his hair with sharp electric clicks.

His sleepy mouth plugged by the heavy nipple,
10 Tugs like a puppy, grunting as he feeds:
Through his frail nerves her own deep languors ripple
Like a broad river sighing through its reeds.

Yet in that drowsy stream his flesh imbibes^o
An old unquenched unsmotherable heat –

15 The curbed ferocity of beaten tribes,
The sullen dignity of their defeat.

Her body looms above him like a hill
Within whose shade a village lies at rest,
Or the first cloud so terrible and still

20 That bears the coming harvest in its breast.

drinks

Questions to consider

1. This poem is particularly interesting because it combines a far-sighted warning with stereotypical (and even patronising) views of its topic. Do you agree, and if so, can you locate these elements?
2. Look very closely at the presentation of both the Zulu mother and her baby. What positive and negative attributes are suggested by the language used to describe them?
3. This poem conveys an atmosphere that is both tranquil and threatening. What words are used to sustain both moods? Look especially closely at the last stanza. What final

message is suggested?

4. In the presentation of the Zulu mother, we find a return to the Romantic tradition of likening the female body to natural phenomena. Wordsworth's 'Three Years She Grew' is a good example of this practice. How exactly does Campbell do this here, and what effect does it have?

Sterling Brown (1901–1989)

Brown was one of the first recognised African-American poets. He was educated at Williams College and Harvard University, and was a teacher before becoming professor of English at Howard University, a post he held for over 50 years. His writings focused on the struggles of black Americans of African descent (then known as Negroes) during the period between the two world wars. As well as poetry, he wrote critical works on the presentation and significance of blacks in American literature. His poems borrow from traditions of storytelling and songs. Together with Langston Hughes, he dispelled the sentimental and patronising myth of the happy, childlike rural Negro, instead giving powerful testimony to the sufferings and triumphs of African-Americans. Two of his most famous students include the Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison and Kwame Nkrumah, who led Ghana to independence.

Children's Children

When they hear

These songs, born of the travail^o of their sires,
Diamonds of song, deep buried beneath the weight
Of dark and heavy years;

labour, suffering

5 They laugh.

When they hear

Saccharine ¹²⁵ melodies of loving and its fevers,
Soft-flowing lies of love everlasting;
Conjuring divinity out of gross flesh itch;

10 They sigh

And look goggle-eyed
At one another.

They have forgotten, they have never known,
Long days beneath the torrid Dixie ¹²⁶ sun

15 In miasma'd^o riceswamps;

foul air

The chopping of dried grass, on the third go round
In strangling cotton; ¹²⁷

Wintry nights in mud-daubed makeshift huts,
With these songs, sole comfort.

20 They have forgotten
what had to be endured –

That they, babbling young ones,

With their paled faces, coppered lips,
And sleek hair cajoled^o to Caucasian ¹²⁸ straightness,

coaxed

25 Might drown the quiet voice of beauty
With sensuous stridency;

And might, on hearing these memoirs of their sires,
Giggle,
And nudge each other's satin clad

Supporting notes

This poem is addressed to the grandchildren of those black Americans who were slaves before being liberated after the American Civil War. The speaker argues that these young descendants of slaves have lost touch with their history and heritage of suffering.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967)

One of the first major African-American poets, Hughes was born in the American South, and travelled in Europe and Africa before returning home to study and write. A leader of the Harlem Renaissance (a flowering of talent and cultural creativity in Harlem, a black residential area of New York City), he became known as the ‘poet laureate of Harlem’. Together with Sterling Brown (see previous page), he was an influential figure in advancing ‘Negritude’, a cultural movement that promoted black achievement. He was an innovator of ‘jazz’ poetry, which was drawn from the speech and music of black Americans, and worked with musicians to perfect this genre.* A meticulous writer, he continually reworked his poems, while also writing novels, children’s books, and newspaper articles.

Mother to Son

Well, son, I’ll tell you.

Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

It’s had tacks in it,

And splinters,

5 And boards torn up,

And bare places with no carpet on the floor...

Bare.

But all the time

I’ve been a-climbin’ on,

10 And reachin’ landin’s

And turnin’ corners,

And sometimes goin’ in the dark

Where there ain’t been no light.

So, boy, don’t you turn back.

15 Don’t you set down on the steps

’Cause you’ll find it kinda hard.

Don’t you fall now...

For I’ve still goin’ honey,

I’ve still climbin’,

20 And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

Stevie Smith (1902–1971)

Smith, born Florence Margaret, was nicknamed after a racing jockey because she was so short. She lived in London throughout her life, and published three novels and two volumes of poetry before her eccentric style became popular. Her poetry, often illustrated with her own comic drawings, was playful and witty, even when handling darker themes. She worked as a radio broadcaster, and had a distinctive voice; many of her admirers remember her reading her poems aloud over the air. She wrote this famous poem shortly before making an unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide.

Not Waving but Drowning

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

⁵ Poor chap, he always loved larking^o
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

joking, teasing

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
¹⁰ (Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

W. H. Auden (1907–1973)

The son of a doctor, Auden went to Oxford University to study science. However, he became part of a group of creative young writers, and was inspired to change careers. After university he travelled widely, witnessing the civil wars in both China and Spain. A radical socialist as a young man, he was to become more conservative in later years. His poems were accepted for publication by T. S. Eliot, and he was recognised as a brilliant new contributor to modern poetry. A homosexual, he married Erika Mann, daughter of the famous writer Thomas Mann, so that she could flee persecution in Nazi Germany. In 1939, he left for the United States, where he eventually took up citizenship, a decision that cost him some popularity. Nevertheless, he was appointed Professor of poetry at Oxford, where he spent the rest of his life. His poetry is known for its range and ability to transform conventional forms.

Roman Wall Blues

Over the heather ¹²⁹ the wet wind blows
I've lice in my tunic and a cold in my nose.

The rain comes pattering out of the sky,
I'm a Wall soldier, I don't know why.

5 The mist creeps over the hard grey stone,
My girl's in Tungria; ¹³⁰ I sleep alone.

Aulus goes hanging around her place,
I don't like his manners, I don't like his face.

Piso's a Christian, he worships a fish; ¹³¹
10 There'd be no kissing if he had his wish.

She gave me a ring but I diced it away;
I want my girl and I want my pay.

When I'm a veteran with only one eye
I shall do nothing but look at the sky.

Supporting notes

In early times, Britain was one of the Roman Empire's occupied territories, and Roman soldiers were sent there to enforce the authority of the conqueror. However, the occupying militia had difficulty with fierce local tribes, which attacked from the north. Thus the Roman Wall (also known as Hadrian's Wall, named after the Emperor at the time) was built as a defensive structure across the northern part of Britain. Parts of it still stand.

Stop All the Clocks

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

5 Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,
Put crêpe ¹³² bows round the necks of the public doves,
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
10 My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought love would last for ever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;
15 Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

Supporting notes

This is actually the first of a pair of poems, more accurately titled 'Two Songs for Hedli Anderson'. It became widely known (and informally renamed 'Stop All the Clocks') after the worldwide distribution of the popular film, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, in the mid-1990s. In this film, it was read aloud by one of the characters, and this led to new interest in Auden's works by the general public. This is not only elegy* in its purest and most powerful form; it is also a particularly moving and poignant love poem. You may want to compare it with other elegies in this book. See those by Ben Jonson, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Jonker, Cope, Bryer and de Kok, and look at how the relationship of the speaker to the deceased (lover, friend, parent, fellow poet) shapes these works.

Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979)

Bishop was an American poet and short story writer whose influence has continued growing since her death. After a childhood marred by the loss of her parents, she studied at Vassar College, where she connected with important writers, thinkers, and activists. She travelled widely, and lived in Brazil with her lover, the architect Lota Soares, for many years. Although Bishop was not prolific, preferring to polish her poems, she won major national awards for her work, including the Pulitzer Prize, and was Poet Laureate of the United States for two years. She refused to categorise herself as a lesbian poet or even a woman poet, insisting that writers' personal lives should remain private.

One Art

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:
places, and names, and where it was you meant
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.

I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

– Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

Modikwe Dikobe (1913–?)

Modikwe Dikobe, the pen-name of Marks Rammitloa, was born in the Transvaal and raised in Sophiatown, a black township that was known for its cultural diversity and liveliness before it was rezoned as a ‘white’ residential area, and demolished by the apartheid government. He had limited access to schooling, and gained much of his education through correspondence. He held a variety of humble jobs, including selling newspapers. His first novel (*The Marabi Dance*), together with his poetry, identified him as a writer passionately concerned with black oppression under apartheid.

Khoikhoi-Son-Of-Man

I thought I was soul and skin

Pedigree muntu ¹³³

Until yesterday I heard the truth

Grandfather was a Khoisan. ¹³⁴

5 A slave of a trekboer

Fleeing from the Cape laws

Freeing slaves. ¹³⁵

At night

He was tied to an oxwagon wheel

10 Groaning

Day by day leading sixteen span^o

pairs of oxen

Fleeing from the Cape.

Night by night

Somewhere there was a cock-crow

15 A barking dog

A smell of damp fuel

Then he realised that beyond that ridge

Could be a village

Of people like him.

20 He unfastened himself,

Trotted out of the camp,

Vanished into the night.

At dawn he was at a village

Begging to be taken into the tribe

25 ‘A tribesman, hunter, chief’s servant and messenger.’

Swift as an antelope^o was he

buck

Outstripping runners

Chased by dogs.

‘Ka modimo’, ¹³⁶ they swore.

30 ‘He is a man of the cloud.

Ompone ke tswa kae?’ ¹³⁷

A legendary tale: where have you seen me?

‘I have seen you from the cloud.’

Khoikhoi-Son-of-Man.

³⁵ I knew since yesterday
that he was my grandfather
Khoikhoi-Son-of-Man.

Jack Cope (1913–1992)

Cope grew up in Natal, where he tried farming before turning to journalism as a career. He worked in London for several years before returning to South Africa to become a full-time writer. He wrote novels, short stories and poems, and edited the influential literary journal *Contrast*, as well as editing the works of a number of South African poets. One of his aims was to make South African writing accessible to a wider audience. He retired to Britain some time before his death.

The Flying Fish 138

(For Ingrid)

The level ocean lies immeasurably blind
swept through green deeps to glutinous^o weed.

sticky

But the flying fish, how they leap away
in water-flashes to the enamelled^o sun!

coated with glossy metal

5 They break along the foam-lipped chorus
of sea swells. Mysterious
the sounds they loosen, arrows
singing on the air and lost:
mysterious the glass-winged birds
10 of the long blind sea.

On the storm-swung streams they ride
over free oceans over the locked ice
the groans of midnight fires
and moons returning on the tide.

15 Light as great winged travellers
of the endless South
urgent as birth
from gloomed fishweed and the dead underwave
the flying fish sing to light.

Supporting notes

This poem is an elegy* for the Afrikaans poet Ingrid Jonker, who committed suicide by drowning while only in her early thirties. Cope had a turbulent affair with her in the early 1960s, and was devastated by her death. (See [notes](#) on Jonker herself and an example of her poetry.)

Questions to consider

After reading this poem, turn to Sally Bryer's '[Ingrid Jonker](#)'. Both poems are written to honour the same poet, and use similar metaphors. Yet they are also quite different.

1. What central images do both poets use, and why did they choose these images? (Jonker's method of suicide will give a clue.)

2. What are the chief differences in the way that the two poets approach their topics? Look, for example, at the use of pronouns in Bryer's poem, and the way the dead woman is physically conjured up. Apart from the subtitle, is Cope's poem specifically addressed to anyone? Does any human figure actually appear in it?
3. One of these poems, while written as an elegy, also functions as a straightforward lyrical poem. Which one is it? How then do we know that the writer has Jonker's life and death in mind?
4. Which poem do you prefer? Which is more personal? Which one do you think offers greater hope? (Remember that there are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers to these questions!)

Dylan Thomas (1914–1953)

Born in Wales, Thomas was the son of a teacher, and began writing as a teenager. Initially a journalist, he became increasingly successful as a broadcaster and poet. He was a careful writer who laboured at his poems, which became famous for their vivid natural imagery and intensely lyrical style. A colourful and tragic figure, he was an alcoholic, a fact that was unfortunately glamorised as part of his larger-than-life public image. His readings of his own poetry were extremely popular, and led to a series of lecture tours to the United States. On his fourth trip, he died of alcoholic poisoning in New York City, after a tremendous drinking binge.

In My Craft or Sullen Art

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
5 With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
10 But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift^o pages
15 Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
20 Nor heed my craft or art.

sea-spray

Questions to consider

1. How does the speaker see his 'art', according to the first stanza? What words suggest that the business of creating poetry is hard work?
2. Thomas was famous for 'transferring' words that describe a specific mood to ordinary nouns; see, for example, 'the moon rages' (line 3) and 'singing light' (line 6). What could these constructions mean? Is the speaker describing the moon and the light, or something else? Can you find other examples of this kind of pairing in this poem?
3. Closely examine the structure of the poem. Look at the words that begin each line; with one exception, how many syllables does each one have? What word or words are repeated? What effect is created as a result? Also look at the rhyme scheme. How many rhyme-end sounds are there in the whole poem, and how are these laid out? How

does the poet's careful use of rhyme underline the theme of the poem?

4. Why does the poet refer to his pages as 'spindrift' (line 14)? What does this suggest about the nature of poetry?
5. A central irony* is suggested throughout this poem. What is it? (See the last two lines.)

D. J. Opperman (1914–1985)

This South African poet is considered one of the foremost Afrikaans poets and literary scholars of the twentieth century. He taught at both Stellenbosch University and the University of Cape Town. He is perhaps best known as the editor of the standard and definitive late-twentieth century anthology of Afrikaans poetry, *Die Grootse Verseboek*.

Christmas Carol

Translated from the Afrikaans by Anthony Delius

Three outas^o from the High Karoo 139

men

saw the star, believed the angel true,

took knob-sticks, and three bundles with
and set forth along a jackal path,

5 following that bright and moving thing
that shone on shanty, sack and spring,

on zinc and sacking of District Six –
in a broken bottle a candle flicks

where salt fish hangs and donkeys jib,^o

halt

10 and lights them kneeling by the crib.

Biltong,^o sheep fat and eggs they've piled
humbly before God's small brown child.

spiced dried meat

With hymn and prayer for thanks, they tell
That a child will save *this* folk as well ...

15 And on her nest, throughout the whole affair
a bantam clucks with a suspicious stare.

Questions to consider

This translation from the Afrikaans recasts the story of the birth of Jesus, setting it in a slum part of District Six, a racially mixed residential area in Cape Town that was bulldozed in the 1960s under apartheid legislation (see Essop Patel's 'In the Shadow of Signal Hill' for further notes on District Six). The 'three wise men' ('outas' is a slang Afrikaans term that loosely translates as 'guys' or 'chaps') are obviously humble men (possibly shepherds, in keeping with the biblical story) who bring as their gifts food traditionally eaten in simple rural communities. The implication is also that both they and the baby they visit are Coloured – the contested term used in South Africa to describe people of mixed-race descent. (Given that this poem was written several decades ago, it is clear that not just a religious, but a political point is being made.) You will find it interesting to compare this poem with others about the same subject, including Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' and the poem by Wright. You will also find helpful notes and suggestions for discussion.

Anthony Delius (1916–1989)

Born in Cape Town, Delius was educated at Rhodes University. He was a respected journalist (at one stage he was the leader writer for the liberal newspaper *The Cape Times*), as well as a poet, satirist, and travel writer. Later he moved to London, where he worked in broadcasting. His poetry and fiction won him a number of prizes.

Deaf-and-Dumb School

On the black tarmac playground dark
Nuns, a white statue of the Virgin ¹⁴⁰ watch
Bare feet of the muted children jerk
And scuffle over endless silence. Such

5 Is their element. Though I have heard
Them flute like evening swallows in the sky
The sounds were sad, irrelevant, absurd
And could not pierce the silences of play,
Nor break the glass that frames their world.

10 A soundless quality of painting grips
A small boy leaning from a bench enthralled
In thoughts that dance on other finger-tips.

One with the cry and stiffness of a crane
Dances before a dumb-struck clientele,
15 Beyond, some cheerless footballers bemoan
A speechless player's bungled goal.

And all around communication glimmers
From hand to eye, and each attentive face
Turns to a dream of mimicry and mummers,^o
20 Like songless planets signalling through space.

Sound there is, but silence underlies
The fire-flies of gesture. One cannot catch
Exactly what the muffled outcry says,
Or what it is the nuns and children watch.

25 Silence like a window shows the room
Of minds that make their signs and mouth their cries,
But what leans out to touch you from the dream
Only the white statue and the darkness realise.

play-actors

Questions to consider

This poem presents an unusually sensitive attempt to observe and enter the world of hearing-impaired and mute children. Today, however, we would not use the term 'deaf-and-dumb' to describe people with these particular physical challenges. Although the use of

politically correct language can sometimes verge on the ridiculous, or come across as patronising, it is worth noting that in the case of those with physical and mental illnesses or impairments, advocacy groups have made some very interesting and assertive recommendations about the language they prefer to use to describe themselves.

The whole issue of language sensitivity is a topic that you and your classmates might like to investigate more closely. Several poems in this anthology that were written during earlier historical periods contain language that today would be considered offensive or inappropriate: look at Modikwe Dikobe's poem, for example. Also look at how Gcina Mhlophe uses the word 'tsotsi', for instance. Can you find any other examples? What does this suggest about language and its relation to society?

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000)

Brooks grew up in Chicago in the United States. Her distinctive poetic voice earned her a place as one of the first major black American women poets. She was appointed 'Poet Laureate' of Illinois, the American state in which she lived, and enjoyed mentoring younger writers. She received fifty-one honorary degrees, as well as numerous fellowships and awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, probably the USA's most prestigious literary award.

We Real Cool

The Pool Players.

Seven at the Golden Shovel. 141

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

⁵ Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

Guy Butler (1918–2001)

Butler had a happy childhood on a farm in the Eastern Cape, an experience described in the first volume of his well-known autobiography. During the Second World War he served in North Africa and Italy; afterwards, he studied at Oxford. Eventually he became Professor of English at Rhodes University, Grahamstown. A respected South African poet and educator, he was always fascinated by the tension between the influence of Europe and the experience of Africa that he saw in the works of many of his contemporaries.

Near Hout Bay

Stopping the car, our childhood friends, now hosts,
suggested we stroll to the fabulous view.
Blinding sun, and heat beating up from a path
gritty with pinkish granite crystals,
5 curtains of pines permitting
expected glimpses of throbbing cerulean^o sky
and steep striated^o rockface plunging
through broken mirrors, torn lace, beautiful lawns of sea.

*blue
grooved*

There had been much talk in the car, far less on the climb:
10 talk which, try as we would to make it heal or hide,
only exposed the gaps, unbandaged sentence by sentence
the gashes and wounds of time, great spaces and falls
between us all. Each thread of phrase drifted from lips
like a spider's web from a cave in a thousand-foot cliff,
15 out, out into distance, finding nothing to cling to –
the next land Buenos Aires. ¹⁴²

We gave up the effort. They tried a bit longer,
stopped in mid-sentence as we all stopped moving
in the space and the heat
20 before the sufficiently epic view.

Silence took charge, a blessed burial of words.
Each forgot his failure, longing, boredom, fury
in that subsidence of even a pretence at speech.
We stood a long time, still, just listening:
25 ten thousand sun-struck cicadas ¹⁴³ ecstatically screaming;
near and far hundreds of doves in relays
imperturbably repeating themselves to each other;
pine wood sighing into the wind from a thousand shimmering needles;
wind already burdened with the grumbling,
30 perpetual, unpitied,
crumbling of the surf.

Returning, the talk returned

but attempted nothing whatever.

What can be healed or hidden?

³⁵ We accepted separation

as the ear those ignorant sounds

that filled that primitive silence

with sadness and with praise:

cicadas; doves; wind; surf.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti (1919–)

The American poet Ferlinghetti was one of the first representatives of the ‘Beat Generation’, a style of poetry and song-writing that sprang up in the 1950s as part of the American ‘counter-culture’ movement. The object was to escape from conventional middle-class values, and to write poetry that reflected mysticism, youth culture, radical political and social stances, and which had an improvised or informal style. He co-founded the famous San Francisco bookshop, City Lights, which also branched out into publishing, providing a platform for radical and innovative new voices.

Constantly Risking Absurdity

Constantly risking absurdity
and death
whenever he performs
above the heads
5 of his audience

the poet like an acrobat
climbs on rhyme
to a high wire of his own making
and balancing on eyebeams
10 above a sea of faces

paces his way
to the other side of day
performing entrechats^o
and sleight-of-foot tricks
15 and other high theatrics
and all without mistaking
any thing
for what it may not be

balletic leaps

For he’s the super realist
20 who must perforce perceive
taut truth
before the taking of each stance or step
in his supposed advance
toward that still higher perch
25 where Beauty stands and waits
with gravity
to start her death-defying leap

And he
a little charleychaplin man
30 who may or may not catch
her fair eternal form
spreadeagled in the empty air
of existence.

Es'kia (Ezekiel) Mphahlele (1919–2008)

Mphahlele was born in the Transvaal. He became literary editor of *Drum*, the influential magazine of black culture in the 1950s. His writing was banned in South Africa, and he had no choice but to spend twenty years in exile, first living in Nigeria, and then teaching in France and the USA. His impressive literary achievements, both as a novelist and a poet, gained him international recognition and numerous awards. On his return to South Africa in the 1980s, he was at first placed under a banning order, but was nevertheless granted the post of Professor of African Literature at the University of the Witwatersrand. His philosophies continue to be honoured by the Es'kia Institute, founded to support local efforts in the arts and literature.

A Poem

What is there that we can do or say
will sustain them
in those islands
where the sun was made for janitors?

5 What is there that we can say or do
will tear the years
from out the hands
of those who man the island galleys,
will bring them home and dry and mend them
10 bring them back
to celebrate
with us the song and dance and toil of living?

What is it that we must do or say
for children scattered
15 far from home
by hawks let loose to stay the judgement day?

The weeds run riot where our house is fallen
ourselves we roam
the wilderness.

20 'Go tell them there across the seas go tell him,'
so they say, 'his mother's dead six years,
he dare not come
he dare not write
the stars themselves have eyes and ears these days.'

25 You who fell before the cannon or
the sabred^o tooth
or lie on hallowed
ground: oh tell us what to say or do.

So many routes have led to exile since

sword-like

³⁰ your day our Elders
we've been here
and back in many cycles oh so many:

no terrain different drummers borrowed
dreams, and there

³⁵ behind us now
the hounds have diamond fangs and paws of steel.

No time for dirge^o or burial without corpses:
teach us, Elders,
how to wait

mourning song

⁴⁰ and feel the centre, tame the time like masters,
sing the blues

so pain will bleed and let the islands in,
for exile is a ghetto^o of the mind.

slum, enclosed area

Supporting notes

Written when apartheid was at its height, this poem refers to the fate of imprisonment or exile that faced most political activists. The first three stanzas refer to Robben Island, a small island just off the coast of Cape Town, for years a notorious maximum-security prison for those convicted of political offences. It is now a museum and world heritage site. The remainder of this poem refers to the experience of political exile; you might like to read these lines in conjunction with [Arthur Nortje](#) and [Stephen Watson's](#) poems on the same topic, both titled 'In Exile'.

David Wright (1920–1994)

Deaf from childhood, Wright left South Africa for Britain as a teenager, and was educated first at a school for the hearing-impaired and then at Oxford University. He pursued a distinguished career as a writer and academic, which included writing poetry and literary criticism, and translating Old and Middle English. He repeatedly visited South Africa, and maintained a strong interest in South African literature.

From On the Margin

An anniversary approaches: ¹⁴⁴ of the birth of god

In a stable, son of a virgin and a carpenter,

But really issued from loins of omnipotent^o glory:

all-powerful

A babe, ejected from the thighs, greased in mucus and blood,

⁵ Weeping with its first breath, suffering the cold air, high king

Of the galaxies, and powerless as a fieldmouse.

Over him breathe the oxen; shepherds who have seen a star

Honour the obscure event; and, they say, three travelling

Magi, ¹⁴⁵ or charlatans.^o This is the messenger of hope;

imposters, cheats

¹⁰ The military have been instructed to deal with him.

A wholesale killing, their invariable strategy,

While abolishing a generation, fails of effect.

We are asked to believe all this (it's only to start with).

What a jumble of the impossible and casual,

¹⁵ Of commonplace mixed with violence; ordinary muddle;

The props and characters scruffy; at best unheroic.

Yet accordant with the disposition of things holy

As we understand them; whose epiphanies^o are banal,^o

*revelations /
commonplace, boring*

²⁰ Not very aesthetic; gnomic, ¹⁴⁶ unremarkable;

And very much like what we have to put up with daily.

Supporting notes

This poem presents a version of the story of the birth of Jesus as told in the New Testament. This event took place in a stable, and shepherds were among those who came to give praise. Wise men from the East (almost certainly astrologers) were alerted to a significant event by the appearance of a guiding star, and followed it to the stable, where they presented the baby with gifts. The ruler of the territory meanwhile heard of the birth of a powerful new king, and ordered the occupying Roman forces to murder all boys under the age of two years. The baby Jesus, however, escaped the massacre. (These are the events referred to in the third stanza.)

Questions to consider

You might find it interesting to compare this poem to Eliot's '[Journey of the Magi](#)', a very

different work on the same topic.

1. What element do the poems share? Both contain notes of practical realism, even cynicism; can you identify these? Why do the respective speakers introduce these details?
2. What are the chief differences in tone between the two poems? It will help if you identify who is speaking in each poem. Which is the more detached voice?
3. How does the poet's own voice emerge or operate in the Eliot poem? Judging from these poems, what perspectives would you say their authors have on the religious events they describe?
4. Towards the end of each poem, there is a shift in tone that results in a rather surprising conclusion. What is the final message of each poem, and how do these conclusions differ?
5. You might now like to read Opperman's South African treatment of this subject and apply the above questions to this far more context-specific and political poem.

Tatamkulu Afrika (1921–2002)

A reclusive figure with a fascinating life history, Afrika wrote under the above pseudonym to maintain his privacy. A passionate convert to Islam, he found a home in the Cape Muslim community after spending much of his life wandering around the world. Although he wrote fiction from an early age, including novels, he began writing and publishing poetry only in the late 1980s, and was recognised late in his life as one of South Africa's leading poetic voices. His poetry is marked by a compassionate and acute observation of the shabbier side of urban life.

The Handshake

(For Nelson Mandela)

The day before,
I saw the low sun fell
my shadow inwards from the door.
Longer than the floor,
5 head, shoulders, kinked
up onto the opposite wall,
it could have been yours,
you suddenly such
a very tall man,
10 and I knew
I dared not sing your praises though
I am a spinner of words that readily strings
baubles^o of glass and sounding brass,
and have a way
15 with the most of men.
So there were no pattings of drums,
clashings of calabash,¹⁴⁷
rattlings of teeth or shells,
as you stood, garlanded, in the great hall.
20 But I thought you smiled a little
at the ordinariness of my poems:
or did you mock
the shaking of my hands?
I could not tell.
25 The light, bright
as an interrogation's, beat
down from the far,
imperial roof and I could have touched
you, had I stretched
30 an arm, but we were trapped,
insectile, in the shared
yet isolating amber¹⁴⁸ of the air,

trinkets, cheap decorations

the white quiff of your hair
stilled as a flame

35 in a stopped cinema reel,
lean, aware
guards about you, poised,
patient, stepped

with you from a TV frame,
40 and I could not tell.

Kingliness clung
to you, less

in classic Roman folds ¹⁴⁹
than a tribal blanket's fall:

45 yet you were no tribal man,
skin's almost olive stayed
midway, your wide, encompassing smile
neither chief's nor tsar's. ¹⁵⁰

Only your immobility,

50 slow tongue, quiet tap
of your papers on the podium,
showed you knew

you were the icon, ¹⁵¹ must
take us with you in a dream

55 less cliché than a hunger of the soul.

At the end, you turned,
took my hand,
tricked me into thinking we were alone,
thanked me with the grave

60 courtesy of the old.

But I hardly heard:

as old ears opened now
to only the language of the eyes.

A little shy,

65 yours met mine,

like any other old man's, shared
the loneliness of the long road.

I did not have to ask you why
you sometimes walk

70 the silent places in the last of night,
remembering your dear dead,
refurbishing your dream.

We could have been friends:

but you have so many hands to shake,

75 how will you remember mine,

holding to yours like a drowning man's?

And though your feet stayed flesh,

you are the truer icon for that,
must fill so wide a space you would never hear
me bonga-ing ¹⁵² in my skins in the wind.

Supporting notes

This poem describes a meeting with Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. Born three years before Afrika, Mandela became the leader of the African National Congress, which organised and maintained opposition to apartheid for decades. Mandela was tried for 'treason' and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1964. He was sent to the maximum-security prison for political offenders on Robben Island, where he continued to serve as a symbol of courage and moral resistance. He was released early in 1990, and stepped back into his role as leader of the ANC. He was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1993, and after South Africa's 1994 elections, he became the country's first democratically elected President. He stepped down from the Presidency in 1999, but remains possibly South Africa's best-known and most loved public figure.

Although this speaker in this poem claims that his is not a formal praise poem* in the traditional sense, this piece nevertheless acts both as a praise poem and a moving remembrance of a moment of personal contact.

Philip Larkin (1922–1985)

Born in Britain and educated at Oxford University, Larkin spent most of his life as a university librarian in the north of England, deliberately avoiding the literary scene of London. His writing is remarkable for its transformation of ordinary topics and practical language into thought-provoking poetry. A great fan of jazz music, he was a columnist on the subject for the newspaper *The Daily Telegraph*.

Talking in Bed

Talking in bed ought to be easiest,
Lying together there goes back so far,
An emblem^o of two people being honest.

sign, symbol

Yet more and more time passes silently.
5 Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest
Builds and disperses clouds about the sky,

And dark towns heap up on the horizon.
None of this cares for us. Nothing shows why
At this unique distance from isolation

10 It becomes still more difficult to find
Words at once true and kind,
Or not untrue and not unkind.

Agostinho Neto (1922–1979)

An Angolan nationalist who fought for the liberation of his country, Neto was also a poet who was deeply concerned with the issues facing colonial and post-colonial Africa. During Portuguese rule over Angola, he was repeatedly imprisoned for revolutionary activities. After independence in 1975, he held the position of President until his death. He is regarded one of Angola's foremost literary figures.

The Grieved Lands

The grieved lands of Africa
in the tearful woes of ancient and modern slave
in the degrading sweat of impure dance
of other seas
5 grieved

The grieved lands of Africa
in the infamous sensation of the stunning perfume of the
flower
crushed in the forest
10 by the wickedness of iron and fire
the grieved lands

The grieved lands of Africa
in the dream soon undone in jinglings of gaolers' keys
and in the stifled laughter and victorious voice of laments
15 and in the unconscious brilliance of hidden sensations
of the grieved lands of Africa

Alive
in themselves and with us alive

They bubble up in dreams
20 decked with dances by baobabs ¹⁵³ over balances
by the antelope^o
in the perpetual alliance of everything that lives

buck

They shout out the sound of life
shout it
25 even the corpses thrown up by the Atlantic
in putrid^o offering of incoherence and death
and in the clearness of rivers.

rotten

They live
the grieved lands of Africa
30 in the harmonious sound of consciences
contained in the honest blood of men
in the strong desire of men
in the sincerity of men

in the pure and simple rightness of the stars' existence

35

They live

the grieved lands of Africa

because we are living

and are imperishable particles

of the grieved lands of Africa.

Joseph Kumbirai (1922–1986)

Kumbirai is considered one of the finest Shona-language poets Zimbabwe has produced. Some of his works have been translated into English, by both himself and others. Born on a mission station, he became a Catholic priest and teacher. He also lectured in African languages at the University of Zimbabwe.

Dawn

Cock-crow and early-rise!
Venus, the morning star, appears
a first light, growing.

Translated from the Shona by Douglas Livingstone

The sky is a blood-orange;
5 the first zestful breeze delights the heart
but shrivels up the morning star.

The roosters' voices fade
while the light gets brighter;
the elephants of dawn have finished washing.

10 The first dew steams
along with smoking hearths;
birds awaken, chirruping.

Brilliantly, pristine,
the great sun appears
15 like a large and glittering forehead.

Children warm their backs,
shouting: The sun,
the sun is King!

Their little polished heads
20 shimmer and glitter
like leaves turning from the west.

As the sun sets, so we set;
as the sun rises, so we rise:
the sun, the sun is King!

Supporting notes

This poem draws on the African tradition of praise poetry,* in which an important person or phenomenon is described and celebrated in glowing and deliberately exaggerated terms. Repetition and natural imagery are typically used. This poem may remind you of the traditional Aboriginal chant, in which the new day is described in almost ritual terms.

Denise Levertov (1923–1997)

Levertov was born in Britain to a Russian-Jewish family. Her father converted to Christianity and became a priest, but remained determined to draw the two religions together. During the 1930s, the Levertov home was a refuge for Jews escaping from Nazi Germany. Levertov was educated privately at home; during the Second World War she worked as a nurse, and afterwards married an American soldier, also a writer. She returned with him to the United States, and remained there, teaching at various universities and writing and editing poetry. She was a noted anti-war activist during the period of the American war in Vietnam. Her work is significant for its exploration of religious themes and close observation of daily human events.

What Were They Like?

- (1) Did the people of Viet Nam
use lanterns of stone?
- (2) Did they hold ceremonies to
reverence the opening of buds?
- (3) Were they inclined to quiet laughter?
- (4) Did they use bone and ivory,
jade ¹⁵⁴ and silver, for ornament?
- (5) Had they an epic poem?
- (6) Did they distinguish between speech and singing?

- (1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone.
It is not remembered whether in gardens
stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
- (2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom,
but after the children were killed
there were no more buds.
- (3) Sir, laughter is bitter to the burned mouth.>
- (4) A dream ago, perhaps. Ornament is for joy.
All the bones were charred.
- (5) It is not remembered. Remember,
most were peasants; their life
was in rice and bamboo.
When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
When bombs smashed those mirrors
there was time only to scream.
- (6) There is an echo yet
of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.

This poem deals with the shattering effect of war on the Vietnamese people. During the 1960s and 70s, the USA sent conscripted troops to Vietnam to fight against guerrilla forces that were striving to unite North and South Vietnam under socialist rule. This intervention in what amounted to a civil war was enormously costly (especially in terms of lives lost), caused great suffering to the Vietnamese people, and was eventually ineffective. Many Americans protested bitterly against their country's involvement in a foreign nation's struggle.

Antonio Jacinto (1924–1991)

This Angolan poet and short-story writer, like Neto, combined literary and cultural work with revolutionary activities against Portuguese colonial rule of his land. He spent many years in prison, but when independence came in 1975, he was appointed Minister of Culture and Education.

Letter from a Contract Worker

I wanted to write you a letter
my love,
a letter that would tell
of this desire
5 to see you
of this fear
of losing you
of this more than benevolence that I feel
of this indefinable ill that pursues me
10 of this yearning to which I live in total surrender ...

I wanted to write you a letter
my love,
a letter of intimate secrets,
a letter of memories of you,
15 of you
of your lips red as henna°
of your hair black as mud
of your eyes sweet as honey
of your breasts hard as wild orange
20 of your lynx° gait
and of your caresses
such that I can find no better here ...

reddish dye

wild cat

I wanted to write you a letter
my love,
25 that would recall the days in our haunts
our nights lost in the long grass
that would recall the shade falling on us from the plum
trees
the moon filtering through the endless palm trees
30 that would recall the madness
of our passion
and the bitterness
of our separation ...

I wanted to write you a letter
35 my love,

that you would not read without sighing
that you would hide from papa Bombo
that you would withhold from mama Kieza
that you would reread without the coldness
40 of forgetting
a letter to which in all Kilombo
no other would stand comparison ...

I wanted to write you a letter
my love

45 a letter that would be brought to you by the passing wind
a letter that the cashews and coffee trees
the hyenas and buffaloes
the alligators and grayling^o
could understand

50 so that if the wind should lose it on the way
the beasts and plants
with pity for our sharp suffering
from song to song
lament to lament

55 gabble to gabble
would bring you pure and hot
the burning words
the sorrowful words of the letter
I wanted to write to you my love ...

60 I wanted to write you a letter ...

But oh my love, I cannot understand
why it is, why it is, why it is, my dear
that you cannot read
and I – Oh the hopelessness! – cannot write!

fish

Maya Angelou (1928–)

Angelou was born and brought up in the southern United States, and the flavour of her black working-class roots marks her writing. She was sexually abused as a child by a family friend, an experience which left her mute (unable to speak) for years. A civil rights activist and one of the first black American writers to identify with feminist concerns, she is best known for her autobiographical books. She read one of her poems at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, and remains a popular speaker and teacher.

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

5 Does my sassiness^o upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.

cheeky wit

10 Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.

15 Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries.

20 Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own back yard.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

25 Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?

30 Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise

I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

³⁵ Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear

I rise

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,

⁴⁰ I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise

I rise

I rise.

Helen Segal (1929–1988)

Born and educated in Johannesburg, Segal worked as a typist and teacher. Her poetry is characterised by short, irregular lines.

The Sea is All Male

The sea is all male
that is why some women
walk in it
till they drown in ecstasy.

5 No earthly man
could hold them
handle
rule them;
the secret depths
10 salt-song
reckless order of the sea
tosses aside imagination
because it is.

They seek heroic consummation;
15 brains and bones
blood and brawn
have baffled.

On the floor of the sea
ploughing the heavy waters
20 they strain to the limit
beyond their limit
crash, are crushed,
jet to surface for a breath;
have found a land-locked lover
25 foaming blind words
in deafened ears;
whirled in cruel embrace
that peaks their world-wise shell
breaking brittle bonds
30 they are.

On the surface
Spent and placid
weedy hair
combing waves

Adrienne Rich (1929–2012)

One of America's leading feminist poets and critics, Rich belonged to a generation that first married and had children, then moved on to more politically radical and women-centred lifestyles. While teaching at university, she became involved in protesting against the American war in Vietnam. In the 1970s, she was awarded a major prize for literature, which she personally rejected, but claimed on behalf of the black lesbian poet Audre Lorde and 'in the name of all women'. Her sometimes angry, sometimes tender poetry explored new ways of using language to tell women's stories.

'I am in Danger — Sir —'

'Half-cracked' ° to Higginson, living,
afterward famous in garbled versions,
your hoard of dazzling scraps a battlefield,
now your old snood°

half-mad

hairnet

5 mothballed at Harvard
and you in your variorum monument
equivocal° to the end —
who are you?

having double meaning

Gardening the day-lily,
10 wiping the wine-glass stems,
your thought pulsed on behind
a forehead battered paper-thin,

you, woman, masculine
in single-mindedness,
15 for whom the word was more
than a symptom —

a condition of being.
Till the air buzzing with spoiled language
sang in your ears

20 of Perjury°

lies told under oath

and in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment,
chose to have it out at last
on your own premises.

Supporting notes

This poem refers to the nineteenth-century American poet Emily Dickinson. (For details of Dickinson's life and a selection of her poems.) Higginson (line 1) was a friend with literary contacts to whom Dickinson wrote for advice on her poems. His response was not encouraging, and she gave up trying to publish her work. Harvard University holds much Dickinson memorabilia (lines 4–5); the 'variorum monument' (line 6) refers to the full

publication of Dickinson's poems (which finally took place during the 1950s), together with editorial comments. The last stanza refers to Dickinson's decision to withdraw from human contact and society during the last years of her life.

You might enjoy placing Rich's poem against those of Dickinson, to see how Rich borrows from the earlier poet. What obvious feature of Rich's poem immediately suggests Dickinson's poetry? How else does Rich suggest her debt to Dickinson?

Ted Hughes (1930–1998)

Much of Hughes's poetry reflected his encounters with nature while growing up in rural Yorkshire (in the north-east of England). He focuses not only on the beauty but on the violence of the natural world, a distinctive and sometimes brutal approach. While studying at Cambridge, he met the gifted young poet Sylvia Plath. They married in 1956, and had two children, but the marriage was not a success. Also an author of children's books and plays, Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate in 1984, a position he held until his death. He is considered one of the finest poets of his generation.

The Thought-Fox

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.

5 Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
10 A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
15 Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
20 Coming about its own business

Till, with sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

Questions to consider

1. Identify the central metaphor* on which this poem is based, and trace its development. (The title will help you.) Why do you think the speaker chooses a fox returning to its lair to symbolise the dawning of an idea?
2. What does this metaphor suggest about the creative process, as viewed by this speaker? According to this poem, how does he experience composing or writing?

3. Although the fox in this poem is a symbolic or metaphorical one, it is described in vividly realistic terms. How does the close observation of the animal and its movements in stanzas three to six correspond with the coming of inspiration? In the last stanza, what role does the poet/speaker play?

Tractor

The tractor stands frozen – an agony
To think of. All night
Snow packed its open entrails. Now a head-pincering gale,
A spill of molten ice, smoking snow,
5 Pours into its steel.
At white heat of numbness it stands
In the aimed hosing of ground-level fieriness.

It defies flesh and won't start.
Hands are like wounds already
10 Inside armour gloves, and feet are unbelievable
As if the toe-nails were all just torn off.

I stare at it in hatred. Beyond it
The copse^o hisses – capitulates miserably
In the fleeing, failing light. Starlings,
15 A dirtier sleetier snow, blow smokily, unendingly, over
Towards plantations Eastward.
All the time the tractor is sinking
Through the degrees, deepening
Into its hell of ice.

20 The starting lever
Cracks its action, like a snapping knuckle.
The battery is alive – but like a lamb
Trying to nudge its solid-frozen mother –
While the seat claims my buttock-bones, bites
25 With the space-cold of earth, which it has joined
In one solid lump.

I squirt commercial sure-fire
Down the black throat – it just coughs.
It ridicules me – a trap of iron stupidity
30 I've stepped into. I drive the battery
As if I were hammering and hammering
The frozen arrangement to pieces with a hammer
And it jabbars laughing pain-crying mockingly
Into happy life.

35 And stands
Shuddering itself full of heat, seeming to enlarge slowly

clump of trees

Like a demon demonstrating
A more-than-usually-complete materialisation –
Suddenly it jerks from its solidarity

40 With the concrete, and lurches towards a stanchion 155
Bursting with superhuman well-being and abandon
Shouting Where Where?

Worse iron is waiting. Power-lift kneels
Levers awake imprisoned deadweight,
45 Shackle-pins bedded in cast-iron cow-shit.
The blind and vibrating condemned obedience
Of iron to the cruelty of iron,
Wheels screeched out of their night-locks –

Fingers

50 Among the tormented
Tonnage and burning of iron

Eyes

Weeping in the wind of chloroform 156

And the tractor, streaming with sweat,
55 Raging and trembling and rejoicing.

Essop Patel (1930–2007)

Patel was a Johannesburg attorney who became a judge of the High Court. His first volume of poetry established him as a compelling and committed political poet. Together with Tim Couzens he edited *The Return of the Amasi Bird: Black South African Poetry*, an anthology which first exposed to a wide audience the wealth of black poetry in South Africa. He also edited the writings of the -era journalist, *Drum* Nat Nakasa, who killed himself while in exile.

In the Shadow of Signal Hill

in the howling wind
by the murky waters
of the sea
children of colour
5 gather shells
and hold them to their ears
and listen to the lamentations of slaves
in the dungeon of death

in the howling wind
10 by the murky waters
of the sea
sons of langa
gather at the ruins of district six
and sharpen the spears of the night
15 and the heroes from the island urge
go towards the fiery dawn ...

Supporting notes

Signal Hill is a strikingly shaped hill or small peak overlooking the harbour of Cape Town. It has been used as a lookout post since the early days of the Cape colony. From it, the viewer can see Robben Island (during the apartheid years, a notorious prison for those convicted of political crimes: see also the notes to Mphahlele's '[A Poem](#)'), the bare scar where the suburb of District Six stood before its occupants were evicted and its buildings demolished under the Group Areas Act (apartheid legislation which restricted racial groups to certain residential areas) – see also the notes to Opperman's '[A Christmas Carol](#)'; and Langa, a black township on the fringes of Cape Town.

Sylvia Plath (1932–1963)

Plath was born in the north-eastern USA. Her father, a German immigrant and biology professor, died after a long and traumatic illness when she was eight, an experience she constantly referred to in her later writing. She met the poet Ted Hughes while on a scholarship to Cambridge, married him and had two children. However, their marriage broke down. Plath had a history of clinical depression, and shortly after the publication of her first novel, she committed suicide. Although some of her poetry is extremely gloomy, it is always strikingly original, and capable of great tenderness and compassion.

You're

Clownlike, happiest on your hands,
Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled,
Gilled like a fish. A common-sense
Thumbs-down on the dodo's ¹⁵⁷ mode.

5 Wrapped up in yourself like a spool,
Trawling your dark as owls do.
Mute as a turnip from the Fourth
of July ¹⁵⁸ to All Fools' Day, ¹⁵⁹
O high-riser, my little loaf.

10 Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia.
Bent-backed Atlas, ¹⁶⁰ our travelled prawn.
Snug as a bud and at home
Like a sprat^o in a pickle jug.
15 A creel^o of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate, with your own face on.

*small fish
fishing basket*

Pheasant ¹⁶¹

You said you would kill it this morning.
Do not kill it. It startles me still,
The jut of that odd, dark head, pacing
Through the uncut grass on the elm's hill.

5 It is something to own a pheasant,
Or just to be visited at all.

I am not mystical: it isn't
As if I thought it had a spirit.
It is simply in its element.

10 That gives it a kingliness, a right.
The print of its big foot last winter

The tail-track, on the snow in our court –

The wonder of it, in that pallor
Through crosshatch of sparrow and starling.

¹⁵ Is it its rareness, then? It is rare.

But a dozen would be worth having,
A hundred, on that hill – green and red,
Crossing and recrossing: a fine thing!

It is such a good shape, so vivid.

²⁰ It's a little cornucopia. ¹⁶²

It unclaps, brown as a leaf, and loud,

Settles in the elm, and is easy.

It was sunning in the narcissi. ¹⁶³

I trespass stupidly. Let be, let be.

Douglas Livingstone (1932–1996)

Livingstone was born in Malaysia, and came to southern Africa as a boy, living in both Zambia and Zimbabwe before settling in South Africa. He trained as a marine bacteriologist, and was in charge of research into sea pollution at the Centre for Scientific and Industrial Research in Durban until his death. His award-winning poetry vividly describes the characters, environment, and wildlife of southern Africa, and is often witty and satirical.* He was also a critic and the author of several radio plays.

The Sleep of Lions

*O, Mare Atlanticum,
Mare Arabicum et Indicum,
Oceanus Orientalis,
Oceanus Aethiopicus*

5 save me
 from civilization
 my pastory
 from further violation.

Leave me my magics
10 and tribes;
to the quagga, dodo,
the sleep of my lions.

Rust me barbed fences.
Patrol what remains.
15 Accept bricks, hunting rifles
and realists, telephones
and diesels
to your antiseptic main.^o

sea

Grant me a day of
20 moon-rites and rain-dances;
when rhinoceros
root in trained hibiscus borders;
when hippo flatten, with a smile,
deck-chairs at the beach resorts.

25 Accord me a time
of stick-insect gods, and impala
no longer crushed by concrete;
when love poems like this
can again be written in beads.

Questions to consider

If you work together with your classmates, you should be able to piece together the

contextual information needed to appreciate this poem.

1. Who is speaking in this poem, and to whom? How do we know this? The first four lines are written in Latin, and the word 'Mare' means 'Sea'. Can you now work out what the other Latin words mean? Why do you think this ancient language is being used here?
2. What do you think the word 'pastory' (line 7) means? (The poet has made it up – you will not find it in a dictionary.)
3. The quagga (a partly striped zebra) and the dodo (a large flightless bird) are both extinct. Why do you think they are mentioned here?
4. The 'stick-insect' god of line 26 refers to the original Khoisan belief that the praying-mantis was sacred. Why is this particular tradition invoked?
5. Rhinoceros, hippo and impala are all wild animals indigenous to Africa. Hibiscus is a cultivated and imported flowering shrub. What does this information add to your interpretation of the last two stanzas?

Sipho Sepamla (1932–2007)

Born in the Transvaal, Sepamla trained as a teacher and worked in Johannesburg as a personnel officer. He encouraged and trained black writers throughout his life, and served as the director of the Federated Union of Black Arts (FUBA). Together with Serote and Mtshali, he was one of the giants of the black poetry movement of the 1970s, sometimes called ‘the new black poetry’ or ‘Soweto poetry’. This described the lives of black South Africans with uncompromising realism, and was deeply critical of apartheid. Sepamla’s poetry is notable for the way it blends English with township dialects and vernacular languages.

The Loneliness Beyond

Like raindrops pattering
They come singly and in pairs
Then as a torrent the rush of feet
Shuffles onto platforms
5 Dragging the last strains of energy.

I’ve seen hearts palpitating
Behind a single maskless face
Tired from the hurrying of the city
Spirits maimed by commands.

10 I’ve heard the clicks of tongues
Laughter rising above the grouse^o of mouths *grumbling*
That never rest
From grinding complaints.

Like sheep herded into a kraal^o *enclosure*
15 They crowd numbered coaches
Hopeful of a safe landing.

I’ve watched the multitudes rub shoulders
And I’ve wondered what they do
With the loneliness beyond;

20 I’ve seen throngs of people
Disappear into little holes of resting
And I’ve pondered what might be happening
With the loneliness beyond.

Michael Gilkes (1933–)

Gilkes was born in Guyana in the West Indies. He studied in Britain, and is much in demand in the United States as a gifted teacher of creative writing and Caribbean literature. However, he also has a base in St Lucia, where he is active in educational reform. He is also one of the most prominent figures in Caribbean film and theatre, and has written several award-winning plays.

From Prospero's Island

Miranda

There on the beach
all copper and cornsilk hair,
the eyes a blur of blue
she might have been the girl
5 on the brochure
of this green, paradisal island.
But mind, her mind has mountains
where deep forests grow,
liana^o-hung:
10 another Eden where, as yet,
no bird has sung.

rope-like creeper

It calls to her in dreams
She cannot go there yet.
There's too much needing
15 to be done
there, on the beach.
Each day, sand to be swept,
firewood to fetch:
The island's not the paradise
20 it seems.

Lately,
there have been storms
and hammering seas,
and she must run
25 to comfort Caliban 164
when he screams.

Supporting notes

This deceptively simple poem makes use of intertextuality* to make a number of interesting points about colonialism, gender, and more specifically, the clichés used to market the Caribbean as a tourist 'paradise'. It draws on a number of 'classic' Western texts, including Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (there is also possibly a masked reference to his sonnet 'My

Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun') and Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'No Worst, There is None'. Post-colonial* writings often draw on Western culture for purposes of reinvention, questioning, and sometimes mockery. Why do you think these particular cross-references are used here?

Ingrid Jonker (1933–1965)

One of South Africa's leading young Afrikaans poets, Jonker was born in the Cape and spent her short life in Cape Town. She was outspoken in her condemnation of apartheid, and her writing was also unusual in its intimate portrayal of often painful emotions. Deeply disheartened by her private and political circumstances, she committed suicide by walking into the sea and drowning. Local scholars and poets continue to translate and be inspired by her poems.

The Child Who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga

The child is not dead
the child lifts his fists against his mother
who shouts Afrika! shouts the breath
of freedom and the veld^o
5 in the locations of the cordoned^o heart

*grasslands
fenced-in*

The child lifts his fists against his father
in the march of the generations
who shout Afrika! shout the breath
of righteousness and blood
10 in the streets of his embattled pride

The child is not dead
not at Langa nor at Nyanga
not at Orlando nor at Sharpeville
nor at the police station at Philippi
15 where he lies with a bullet through his brain.

The child is the dark shadow of the soldiers
on guard with rifles saracens¹⁶⁵ and batons
the child is present at all assemblies and law-givings
the child peers though the windows of houses and into the hearts of mothers
20 this child who just wanted to play in the sun at Nyanga is everywhere
the child grown to a man treks through all Africa
the child grown into a giant journeys through the whole world

Without a pass

Supporting notes

This poem was written in response to the notorious killings at Sharpeville in 1960. Police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of blacks who were protesting against the degrading pass laws that restricted their movements and freedom. Riots and further deaths followed throughout the country, including the various townships and places listed in this poem.

Former President Nelson Mandela chose this poem to introduce his first parliamentary address after the first non-racial and democratic elections in South Africa in 1994.

Audre Lorde (1934–1993)

Lorde was an outspoken black American poet who fearlessly used her writing to proclaim her identity as a feminist and a lesbian. She was active in the black power movements of the late 1960s, and taught at various universities in the United States. In the last years of her life she retired to the Caribbean, where she died after a long and courageous battle against cancer.

Coal

I
is the total black, being spoken
from the earth's inside.
There are many kinds of open
5 how a diamond comes into a knot of flame
how sound comes into a word, coloured
by who pays what for speaking.
Some words are open like a diamond
on glass windows
10 singing out within the passing crash of sun
Then there are words like stapled wagers
in a perforated book – buy and sign and tear apart –
and come whatever wills all chances
the stub remains
15 an ill-pulled tooth with a ragged edge.
Some words live in my throat
breeding like adders. Others know sun
seeking like gypsies over my tongue
to explode through my lips
20 like young sparrows bursting from shell.
Some words
bedevil me.
Love is a word, another kind of open.
As the diamond comes into a knot of flame
25 I am Black because I come from the earth's inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light.

Kofi Awoonor (1935–)

Awoonor was educated in his home country (Ghana), London, and the United States. He was imprisoned during the 1970s, an experience that turned him into a political activist. Considered Ghana's leading poet, he has held a number of prestigious academic and diplomatic posts (including that of ambassador to the United Nations), and has edited various literary journals. His works include plays, critical works, a history of Ghana, and two novels. His poetry draws from African oral traditions.

The Weaver Bird

The weaver bird built in our house
And laid its eggs on our only tree
We did not want to send it away
We watched the building of the nest
5 And supervised the egg-laying.
And the weaver returned in the guise of the owner
Preaching salvation to us that owned the house
They say it came from the west
Where the storms at sea had felled the gulls
10 And the fishers dried their nets by lantern light
Its sermon is the divination of ourselves
And our new horizons limit at its nest
But we cannot join the prayers and answers of the communicants. 166
We look for new homes every day,
15 For new altars we strive to rebuild
The old shrines defiled by the weaver's excrement.

Supporting notes

This poem is a metaphorical lament on the impact of Western missionaries on African traditional culture. As such, it is an example of the growing body of post-colonial* writing that reflects or analyses the impact of colonialism and empire-building by mostly European countries on what we would now call developing countries. A number of the poems in this anthology deal explicitly or implicitly with these issues; see Neto's 'The Grieved Lands', Livingstone's 'The Sleep of Lions' and Gilkes's 'Miranda'. Can you find any others?

Don Mattera (1935–)

Mattera grew up in Sophiatown, and now lives in Johannesburg. His colourful past has included spells as a footballer and gang leader. He founded a union for black journalists, and was banned for his part in the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s. (Serote's poem 'For Don M. – Banned' was written for Mattera during this period.) Mattera is best known for his poetry, but has also written short stories, plays, and an autobiography. He has received both literary and human rights awards, and has been awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Remember

Remember to call at my grave
When freedom finally
Walks the land
So that I may rise
5 To tread familiar paths
To see broken chains
Fallen prejudice
Forgotten injury
Pardoned pains.

10 And when my eyes have filled their sight
Do not run away for fright
If I crumble to dust again

It will only be the bliss
Of a long-awaited dream

15 That bids me rest
When freedom finally walks the land ...

Supporting notes

This poem was written during the years of apartheid, and the speaker envisages freedom in South Africa only in the distant future, long after his death. Although Mattera's prophecy of freedom was fulfilled in his own lifetime, he dedicates this poem to the many who died before it came.

Keorapetse William Kgositsile (1938–)

Poet, academic, and political activist, Kgositsile was born in Johannesburg, where he currently lives. In 1961, by which time he was a vocal member of the soon-to-be-banned African National Congress, he left South Africa. He spent the next twenty-nine years in exile in the United States and Tanzania, where he taught literature and creative writing. He was one of the first poets to bridge and blend African and African-American poetic and rhetorical traditions; his close study of black American poetry led to a passion for jazz, which is interwoven into the subject and rhythms of his writing. The recipient of many awards, he was made South Africa's National Poet Laureate in 2006.

Montage: Bouctou ¹⁶⁷ Lives

Even nature at her best
In singing her mesmerising beauty
With the permanent rainbow
That is the wonder of Mosioatunya ¹⁶⁸
5 Says nothing of the woman of Mali

My Mali sisters are a rainbow
Even the deaf and dumb
Would aspire to sing

Here Keats would have found voice
10 And song instead of the finality
Of deadness
He dubs beauty and love
Though we do not see human gesture
Nor life in his Grecian urn

15 My sisters of Mali could
Teach any rainbow
The impartial beauty
Of nature through a rainbow
Of centuries of memory and mutations

20 Look at the flow of that ebony elegance
Walking that walk
Striding through your heart
Turning Bamako ¹⁶⁹ into a dream

And that blue-eyed ivory contrast over there
25 That strut is a vector on the graph
Linking Africa to where
And all of that all in
Between bespeaks where

Which woman have you not met here
30 In Mali I have seen my mother

My daughter I have seen
My grandmother and her very own too
My wife friends comrades
All the women I love and hurt
35 All the women without whom
I am not even here
All the women without whom
Neither you nor I
Could claim an identity
40 Which all that lives has

I wish I had enough
Art of eloquence and grace to sing
The woman of Mali

Supporting notes

'Bra Willie', as Kgositsile is affectionately known, borrows from and pays tribute to artists who have inspired him. These include great jazz musicians such as John Coltrane and poets (both American and South African) such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Wally Mongane Serote. The title of one of his best-known poetry collections, a compilation taken from his previous works, *This Way I Salute You*, is an obvious tip of the hat to the first line of Serote's great poem 'City Johannesburg'. While drawing from the jazz and poetic traditions he came to love while in exile in the United States, Kgositsile also borrows and reinterprets the African tradition of the praise poem* in his writing. The poem above is an obvious example.

Questions to consider

1. How do we know this is a praise poem? What aspects of the traditional praise poem does the poet use? (Note how the poem moves from praising a specific set of women to more general praise, for instance, as well as the way family relationships are invoked. Also look at the last stanza or verse – what does the speaker reveal about himself?)
2. This poem is very interesting in terms of the gender attitudes it reveals. Do you agree with the speaker's attitudes to women? Do you think he is being sentimental? Or is he being honest?
3. We already know that Kgositsile draws on different poetic and artistic traditions in his work, to debate them or honour them. Why do you think the speaker here refers to Keats's famous poem 'Ode to a Grecian Urn'? (There are poems by Keats.) Look up this poem on the Internet or in a library. Is Kgositsile perhaps challenging Western notions of art and beauty? Also look at the way race and beauty are presented in this poem. Is there anything that reminds of you Shakespeare's 'My Mistress' Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun'?
4. The poem follows a straightforward layout except for the fourth stanza. Why do you think the shape of the lines on the page change here?

Geoffrey Haresnape (1939–)

Born in Natal, Haresnape spent most of his career in the English Department at the University of Cape Town. His critical works include a collection of pioneering writings and a study of the novels of the South African writer Pauline Smith. He has always maintained a keen interest in South African poetry, and took over from Jack Cope as the editor of the literary magazine *Contrast*. He has published several prize-winning collections of poems and a novel.

In and Around the Yacht Basin – Simon's Town ¹⁷⁰

Beyond
the rigging ¹⁷¹ tangle
are

rhizomes^o
of Club Mykonos ¹⁷²
apartments

Cape
Dutch ¹⁷³ gable
fungi

floral
filigrees ¹⁷⁴
of English iron.

The
scrubby hills
protest

that Europe's garden
wasn't always
planted here.

* * *

old cling strings giant
tyres like of
necklacing
mussels the pier.

* * *

Masts I
(red hard-
yell- ly
ow dare
blue) to
are breathe
pick- when

rootstalks

up lift-
 stick ing
 criss- each
 crossed im-
 or press-
 slant -ion:
 ed one
 when slip
 the would
 o- jar
 cean the
 breathes whole.

* * *

A brash South Easter 175

barges in
 upon the game,
 displacing
 all.

Questions to consider

1. This poem is a delightful experiment in form and shape. Why has the writer laid out the words on the page this way? How do the differing patterns contribute to meaning?
2. Read the second section carefully; you will need to do some reorganising to make sense out of the word order. Why does the poet arrange the words like this? Can you visualise a 'picture' of the scene? Do you know of any other poems that present a visual image? (You might like to use a library or the Internet to track down George Herbert's poem 'Easter Wings'.)
3. In much of the poem, the writer seems to play with words and patterns simply to create different moods and pictures; yet there does seem to be a more serious point. Can you identify this?

Seamus Heaney (1939–)

Born into a Catholic family in rural Northern Ireland, Heaney studied and later lectured at Queen's University in Belfast. He is almost certainly Ireland's greatest living poet, as well as a playwright and translator. His work is deeply rooted in the history of his country, including the tragic violence of modern-day Northern Ireland. He has held professorships in Poetry at Oxford and Harvard. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, partly in recognition for the compassion with which he regards his divided and troubled country. He now lives in Dublin.

Follower

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

5 An expert. He would set the wing
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the headrig,^o with a single pluck

harness

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
10 And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hob-nailed ¹⁷⁶ wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
15 Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
20 In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away.

Margaret Atwood (1939–)

Atwood is a Canadian novelist, poet and essayist, as well as a feminist and activist who supports the Green Party of Canada. She is best known for her challenging novels, which include works that she calls ‘social science fiction’, and has won both the Booker Prize and the Arthur C. Clarke Award. She has also published fifteen collections of poetry, many reinterpreting myths and fairytales.

Nothing

Nothing like love to put blood
back in the language,
the difference between the beach and its
discrete^o rocks & shards, a hard
5 cuneiform, ¹⁷⁷ and the tender cursive ¹⁷⁸
of waves; bone & liquid fishegg, desert
& saltmarsh, a green push
out of death. The vowels plump
again like lips or soaked fingers, and the fingers
10 themselves move around these
softening pebbles as around skin. The sky’s
not vacant and over there but close
against your eyes, molten, so near
you can taste it. It tastes of
15 salt. What touches
you is what you touch.

separate

Wopko Jensma (1939–?)

Raised in South Africa, Jensma was of Dutch descent. At the height of the apartheid regime, he insisted on being reclassified as black (at the time, every citizen was obliged to be racially identified and ‘classified’). An artist as well as a poet, his collections of poetry feature his own woodcuts. His unorthodox and angry poetry, distinctive for its lack of punctuation, has always been identified with black protest poetry, and his second volume of poems was banned. Repeatedly admitted to psychiatric hospitals for what appeared to be schizophrenia, he disappeared in 1993.

From Not Him

he forbids us to dance
he always leads the church service
he has a stable job
he is always on time for work
5 he never gets drunk
he has respect for most people
everybody respects him
we love our daddy
but sometimes I notice
10 when a kwela ¹⁷⁹ blasts from the radio
he wiggles his toes

Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali (1940–)

Mtshali was born in the Free State but moved to Johannesburg, where the publication of his first volume of poetry, *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, was hugely successful. Probably the first collection of poems to describe daily life in black townships under apartheid, it sold more copies than any other book of poetry in South Africa at the time. It has recently been reissued with a Zulu translation. Mtshali, who studied in the United States and taught in Soweto, was one of the first exponents of the ‘new black poetry’ of the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s. His work was banned for several years.

Men in Chains

The train stopped
at a country station.

Through sleep curtained eyes
I peered through the frosty window,
5 and saw six men:

men shorn
of all human honour
like sheep after shearing,
bleating at the blistering wind,
10 ‘Go away! Cold wind! Go away!
Can’t you see we are naked?’

They hobbled into the train
on bare feet,
wrists handcuffed,
15 ankles manacled^o
with steel rings like cattle at the abbatoirs
shying away from the trapdoor.

One man with a head
shaven clean as a potato
20 whispered to the rising sun,
a red eye wiped by a tattered
handkerchief of clouds,
‘Oh! Dear Sun!

Won’t you warm my heart
25 with hope?’

The train went on its way to nowhere.

chained

Questions to consider

1. A close examination of this poem will be useful in identifying different kinds of imagery. Remember that similes* are usually indicated by the use of the words ‘as’ and ‘like’, whereas metaphors* are more directly stated. What similes and metaphors can you identify here?

2. We find two central similes that are used to describe the men in chains. What do they have in common? Why does the speaker use this kind of imagery? Is his intention to patronise or degrade the prisoners, or is he using these images for a different reason? What is the accumulative impact?
3. How does the speaker describe the sun in the third stanza? (Think of the qualities we normally associate with the sun; does the imagery here seem surprising?) How does this add to the overall tone of the poem?
4. What effect does the last line have?

Arthur Nortje (1942–1970)

Nortje studied at the University of the Western Cape, and worked as a teacher before winning a scholarship to Oxford University. He then taught in Canada before returning to Oxford. It would seem from his poetry, which reflects an extreme sense of personal and cultural dislocation, that he regarded his time overseas as a period of exile. He died tragically young as a result of a drug overdose.

In Exile

Open skies flare wide enough
to make me vaguely anxious.

Nimbus^o wisps

storm-cloud

trace patterns of the past.

5 Wind sweeps between the towers
through tunnels, old and new.

My heart is

hollowed with the boots passing through.

Garments gather and play about

10 my limbs: they tremble to a return
gust. Leaves and transient^o

passing

streetscape conjure up that southern

blue sky and wind-beautiful

day, creating paradise.

15 Otherwise:

the soul decays in exile.

But wrong pigment has no scope,

so clot the blue channel of memory.

On a sand slope

20 I build a picture of the sea.

The grains that slide away

are wind-breathed, are stirred by finger.

Benign, a cloud

obscures the sun, this hunger.

Questions to consider

You might find it interesting to compare and contrast this poem with Stephen Watson's [poem](#) of the same title. What features do they have in common, and what differences can you find?

Eva Bezwoda (1942–1976)

Bezwoda grew up in South Africa and studied at Natal University. Together with the poet Lionel Abrahams and her husband Robert Royston, she began a publishing venture with the aim of introducing the works of black poets to the public. Bezwoda was a psychologist, and her poetry reflects her concern for inner suffering. She died in London, probably as a result of suicide, after a long period of depressive illness.

A Woman's Hands

A woman's hands always hold something:

A handbag, a vase, a child, a ring, an idea.

My hands are tired of holding

They simply want to fold themselves.

5 On a crowded bus, I watched a nun's empty hands

Till I reminded myself that she clutched God.

My hands are tired of holding.

I'd gladly let them go, and watch a pair of hands

Run ownerless through the world,

10 Scattering cooking pots and flowers and rings.

Jeni Couzyn (1942–)

Couzyn was born in Johannesburg and has lived in London since the mid-1960s. She was a founder member of the Poet's Conference and the Poet's Union, and has taught at the University of Victoria in Canada. Her poetry includes chants and spells for women.

The Red Hen's Last Will and Testament to The Last Cock on Earth

Mr Cockatoo I'm through.

You

can take your splendid

reasoning and quick

5 precision and elegant

vision somewhere

else.

You can take your

fine red comb and fast

10 feathered sex and high

concepts somewhere

else.

Your race can take its

good influence and careful

15 words and strong wings and

bright eyes some other

place.

You may be the

last manifestation but

20 you're not worth it.

Now

that there's artificial

insemination ¹⁸⁰ since the

evolution of the cock

25 as a different species

you may as well wither

too.

Hens need something

else. You make us feel

30 abandoned. You make us

feel like a place cocks

Pop into. We stay in the

place alone.

We await your

35 visitation. You pop in and

pop out. When we wake up

in the morning it is
silent.

All the hens in the
⁴⁰ farmyard feel exactly as
I do about you. We have
decided to quit.

You all
can take off on your
⁴⁵ massive Coxes High Powered
Jet Propelled
wings.

We hens will stay here
laying our eggs in the
⁵⁰ warm straw, dreaming of
foxes.

Michael Ondaatje (1943–)

Ondaatje was born in Sri Lanka and now lives in Canada. An extremely accomplished poet and novelist, he has also written a moving memoir of his childhood in Sri Lanka, *Running in the Family*. He became widely known when his novel *The English Patient* first won the prestigious Booker Prize, and was then made into a major film, which won nine Oscars, including one for Best Film.

The Cinnamon Peeler

If I were a cinnamon peeler
I would ride your bed
and leave the yellow bark dust
on your pillow.

5 Your breasts and shoulders would reek
you could never walk through markets
without the profession of my fingers
floating over you. The blind would
stumble certain of whom they approached
10 though you might bathe
under rain gutters, monsoon.

Here on the upper thigh
at this smooth pasture
neighbour to your hair
15 or the crease
that cuts your back. This ankle.
You will be known among strangers
as the cinnamon peeler's wife.

I could hardly glance at you
20 before marriage
never touch you
– your keen nosed mother, your rough brothers.

I buried my hands
in saffron, ¹⁸¹ disguised them
25 over smoking tar,
helped the honey gatherers ...

When we swam once
I touched you in water
and our bodies remained free,
30 you could hold me and be blind of smell.
You climbed the bank and said

 this is how you touch other women
the grass cutter's wife, the lime burner's daughter.

And you searched your arms

35 for the missing perfume

and knew

what good is it

to be the lime burner's daughter

left with no trace

40 as if not spoken to in the act of love

as if wounded without the pleasure of a scar.

You touched

your belly to my hands

in the dry air and said

45 I am the cinnamon

peeler's wife. Smell me.

Supporting notes

Cinnamon is a very fragrant spice, with a distinctive sweet smell. It is used in baking and some Asian cooking. It grows and is harvested in tropical countries such as Sri Lanka.

Sindiwe Magona (1943–)

Magona was born in a rural Eastern Cape village. She has written plays, children's books and novels, and is best known for her memoirs describing her life during and after apartheid – from teacher to abandoned mother and domestic worker, to employee of the United Nations in New York, to AIDS activist back in South Africa. She has been awarded many honours, both at home and abroad, for her work promoting isiXhosa, literacy and women's rights, and continues to work as a powerful motivational speaker and activist.

Poem to a Brother

Language fails me

In our mother tongue, I'd ask

Ngowesingaphi ke lo?

Die hoeveelste een is die? ¹⁸² I'd ask

5 in Afrikaans.

But in English

I'm plain tongue-tied

Trying to fashion a simple

Question that would elicit

10 The numeral, the number and order,

Telling me of your profane fecundity.^o

fertility

But, ma'an, I can't be

Bothered any more

Don't tell me, do not introduce me

15 To one more brat that has

Sprung from your unbridled loins.

I wince each time you

Open your buck-toothed mouth

Announce: Sisi, this is

20 My daughter/son! Beats me

How you keep track of

All these children's names when

You hardly see them

Never feed them

25 Seldom soothe their cares away.

Father, you call yourself!

Reckless sperm-spewer, I believe

A more apt epithet^o

For such brainless breeders;

30 Men who spit seed with the

Reckless abandon of dogs

Pissing against unnamed street

name

Poles or on random tufts of grass
Out on the unfeeling, unthinking veldt.^o

grasslands

Wally Mongane Serote (1944–)

Serote was born in Sophiatown, and went to school in the townships of Alexandra and Soweto. His political activism led to a period of detention (imprisonment without trial), and after studying art at Columbia University in the United States, he lived in exile in Botswana. His return to his homeland as the apartheid regime began to unravel marked the beginning of a period in which a number of exiled South African artists and musicians came home. He served as a Member of Parliament after the 1994 elections, and chaired the parliamentary committee for Arts and Culture. He is now in charge of Freedom Park, a national heritage site in the city of Pretoria. A novelist as well as a poet, he has won a number of noteworthy awards, and remains one of the most significant poets to have emerged from the politically radical 'new black poetry' movement of the 1970s.

Alexandra ¹⁸³

Were it possible to say,
Mother, I have seen more beautiful mothers,
A most loving mother,
And tell her there I will go,
5 Alexandra, I would have long gone from you.

But we have only one mother, none can replace,
Just as we have no choice to be born,
We can't choose mothers;
We fall out of them like we fall out of life to death.

10 And Alexandra,
My beginning was knotted to you,
Just like you knot my destiny.
You throb in my inside silences
You are silent in my heart-beat that's loud to me.

15 Alexandra often I've cried.
When I was thirsty my tongue tasted dust,
Dust burdening your nipples.
I cry Alexandra when I am thirsty,
Your breasts ooze the dirty waters of your dongas, ¹⁸⁴

20 Waters diluted with the blood of my brothers, your children,
Who once chose dongas for death-beds.
Do you love me Alexandra, or what are you doing to me?

You frighten me, Mama,
You wear expressions like you would be nasty to me,
25 You frighten me, Mama,
When I lie on your breast to rest, something tells me,
You are bloody cruel.
Alexandra, hell
What have you done to me?

30 I have seen people but I feel like I'm not one,
Alexandra what are you doing to me?
I feel I have sunk to such meekness!
I lie flat while others walk on me to far places.
I have gone from you, many times,
35 I come back.
Alexandra, I love you;
I know
When all these worlds became funny to me,
I silently waded back to you
40 And amid the rubble I lay,
Simple and black.

City Johannesburg ¹⁸⁵

This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
5 Jo'burg City.
My hand like a starved snake tears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,
Jo'burg City.
10 My stomach also devours coppers and papers
Don't you know?
Jo'burg City, I salute you;
When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
I leave behind me, my love,
15 My comic houses and people, my dongas ¹⁸⁶ and my ever whirling dust,
My death,
That's so related to me as a wink to the eye.
Jo'burg City
I travel on your black and white and robotted roads
20 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
Jo'burg City
That is the time when I come to you,
When your neon ¹⁸⁷ flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
25 That is the time when I leave you,
When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness
On your cement trees.
And as I go back, to my love,
My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,

³⁰ Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,
I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
And everything about you says it,
That, that is all you need of me.

³⁵ Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
Listen when I tell you,
There is no fun, nothing, in it.
When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,
Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
⁴⁰ Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.

Questions to consider

The above two poems by Serote have already been compared with Blake's 'London'. You might like work through the [questions](#) set out there.

For Don M. — Banned

it is a dry white season
dark leaves don't last, their brief lives dry out
and with a broken heart they dive down gently headed for the earth,
not even bleeding.

⁵ it is a dry white season brother,
only the trees know the pain as they still stand erect
dry like steel, their branches dry like wire,
indeed, it is a dry white season
but seasons come to pass.

Supporting notes

Under the apartheid government, a banning order meant exile to a remote rural location, restrictions on movement, no contact with colleagues or fellow activists, and an embargo on any speeches, publication, or political activity. Serote wrote this brief but powerful poem for Don Mattera, a friend and fellow poet who was banned during the 1970s. (Further information on [Mattera](#), and a sample of his poetry.)

Questions to consider

1. This short poem is deceptively simple. Much of the language and imagery operates on two different levels. Work through the poem identifying these 'double' words and images. Do you agree that the poem is a mini-allegory*? If so, what 'lesson' does it teach?
2. What tone or mood is conveyed by this poem? Look closely at how this is evoked or suggested.
3. The first line is repeated three times in the poem, and slightly altered each time. What

effect do these small changes have on the tone and development of the poem?

4. This poem also speaks to two very different audiences. It carries a very personal message of comfort for Don Mattera; but who else does it address?

Kumalau Tawali (1947–2006)

Tawali was born on a tiny Pacific island off the coast of Papua New Guinea, and graduated from the University of Papua New Guinea. A poet, dramatist and short-story writer, he won the National Literature Competition in his twenties, and his works have been regularly published in Pacific and Australian journals. In the 1970s, he worked for the campaign for Moral Rearmament in Europe. In later years, he worked actively as a pastor.

The Old Woman's Message

Stick these words in your hair
And take them to Polin and Manuai
my sons:
the ripe fruit falls and returns
5 to the trunk – its mother.
But my sons, forgetful of me,
are like fruit borne by birds.
I see the sons of other women
returning. What is in their minds?
10 Let them keep the price of their labour
but their eyes are mine.
I have little breath left
to wait for them.
I am returning to childhood.
15 My stomach goes to my back
my hands are like broom sticks,
my legs can fit in the sand crab's hole.
I am dry like a carved image
only my head is God's.
20 Already I sway like a dry falling leaf
I see with my hands –
oh tell Polin and Manuai to hurry
and come to my death feast.

Questions to consider

The tendency for young people to leave rural communities for cities in order to pursue jobs and education has become increasingly marked in the last several decades. One result is that throughout the globe, rural, isolated, and impoverished areas tend to be disproportionately populated by children and the elderly. Pleas by older folk for their children to return home are common. This is one example of such a request; Charles Mungoshi's '[A Letter to a Son](#)' is another. What do these poems have in common? What might be some of the social and cultural consequences of the movement of young and able-bodied people to urban areas, especially in developing countries?

Sally Bryer (1947–)

Bryer is the daughter of professional and artistic parents, and was brought up and educated in Johannesburg. She went on to study art in Italy. She published her first collection of poems in 1973. She now lives in Canada.

Ingrid Jonker

(Afrikaans poet, drowned herself aged 33)

You walked straight into the water
like a hungry bird, your curly head
intent as a heron. ¹⁸⁸

You walked into the waves
like Persephone ¹⁸⁹ herself,
5 your eyes dried seeds, your body a husk of light.

Your punishment was finding yourself
in a foreign element. You spoke
through interpreters. Your lips and fingers

¹⁰ betrayed you, turned away
from the darkness behind your eyes,
tried to sell themselves.

Your child dies, and lives on.

Your screams become seasonal.

¹⁵ We travel in packs. Hunting and hunted
we carry nets and each of us captures
a relic of pain, stark as bone.

Those of us who never saw a likeness
learn to tell the seasons of madness

²⁰ from the sea. In every fragment of glass and shell
I pass, your dark eyes encounter me.

Charles Mungoshi (1947–)

Mungoshi is part of a generation of Zimbabwean writers who consciously sought to express their sense of identity and nationalism during their country's struggle for liberation during the 1970s. He has worked as an editor, publisher, academic and actor. Internationally recognised as a writer (in both English and Shona), his work includes novels, short stories and children's books, as well as poems.

A Letter to a Son

Now the pumpkin is ripe.

We are only a few days from
the year's first mealie cob.

The cows are giving us lots of milk.

5 Taken in the round it isn't a bad year at all –
if it weren't for your father.

Your father's back is back again
and all the work has fallen on my shoulders.

Your little brothers and sisters are doing

10 fine at the day-school. Only Rindai
is becoming a problem. You will remember

we wrote you – did you get our letter? –

you didn't answer – you see, since your
father's back started we haven't been able

15 to raise enough to send your sister Rindai
to secondary school. She spends most of the time

crying by the well. It's mainly because of her
that I am writing this letter.

I had thought you would be with us last Christmas

20 then I thought maybe you were too busy

and you would make it at Easter –

it was then your father nearly left us, son.

Then I thought I would come to you some time
before the cold season settled in – you know how

25 I simply hate that time of year –

but then your father went down again

and this time worse than any other time before.

We were beginning to think he would never see
another sowing season. I asked your sister Rindai

30 to write you but your father would have none of it
– you know how stubborn he can get when

he has to lie in bed all day or gets

one of those queer notions of his that
everybody is deserting him!

35 Now, Tambu, don't think I am asking for money –

although we had to borrow a little from

those who have it to get your father to hospital
and you know how he hates having to borrow!
That is all I wanted to tell you.

40

I do hope that you will be with us this July.
It's so long ago since we last heard from you –
I hope this letter finds you still at the old address.
It is the only address we know.

YOUR MOTHER

Questions to consider

From an entirely different corner of the globe, Kumalau Tawali has written a very similar poem, 'The Old Woman's Message'. You might enjoy comparing the two pieces.

Shabbir Banoobhai (1949–)

Banoobhai lives in Cape Town. He has worked as a teacher and an actuary, and has published numerous collections of poetry and spiritual meditations, as well as a novel, *Heretic*. His poems are striking for their lyrical simplicity and expression of political, personal, and spiritual passion. He is a devoted husband and father.

when the first slave was brought to the cape

when the first slave was brought to the cape
he looked at the awesome mountain
which roots us to an eternal beauty
hundreds of years later, and affirmed

5 i am as free and as tall as this mountain
this mountain is more chained than i am
i will climb to the top one day
and call the adhaan before dawn

my voice will carry across the seas
10 to my loved ones in a land
i may never see again
and they will know that i

and the treasures i carry within me
are safe and always will be
15 for as long as beauty
and this mountain survive

Supporting notes

When the Dutch first occupied the Cape in the seventeenth century, they brought Muslim slaves from Indonesia (as well as from elsewhere) to work the land. However, this poem gives the traumatic topic of slavery a very different treatment to that seen in Cowper's 'The Negro's Complaint' and Nichol's 'Taint'. Here the natural beauty of the Cape (the famous landmark of Table Mountain in particular), as well as the religious faith that binds the slave to the community from which he has been wrenched, both offer a measure of comfort and hope. The 'adhaan' (morning prayer) referred to in line 8 suggests the resilience of the human spirit in even the most alien and inhumane circumstances.

Jeremy Cronin (1949–)

Cronin was a philosophy student at the University of Cape Town when he was charged under the Terrorism Act during the apartheid regime. He spent the next seven years as a political prisoner. On his release, he returned to Cape Town and published a collection of poems about his prison experiences, which attracted immediate recognition. A stalwart member of the South African Communist Party, he is currently the Deputy Minister of Public Works. He continues to write and publish poetry.

Faraway city, there

Faraway city, there
with salt in its stones,
under its windswept doek,^o

head-scarf

There in our Cape Town where
5 they're smashing down homes
of the hungry, labouring people
– will you wait for me, my love?

In that most beautiful,
desolate city of my heart
10 where if staying on were passive
life wouldn't be what it is.

Not least for those rebuilding
yet again their demolished homes
with bits of plastic, port jackson^o saplings,
15 anything to hand – unshakeably

species of tree

Defiant, frightened, broken,
and unbreakable are the people of our city.

– Will you wait for me, my love?

Supporting notes

While Cronin was in prison, his wife, Anne Marie, died unexpectedly. This is one of the poems he wrote as a response; it is partly a love poem, partly an elegy,* and partly a political statement.

Mzi Mahola (1949–)

Mahola was born and educated in the Eastern Cape, and was the South African Amateur bantamweight boxing champion in his youth. He worked for the Port Elizabeth Museum on educational projects. He now runs a spaza shop in the township of Zwide, where he has also set up poetry workshops at the local library. His second collection of poems won the Olive Schreiner prize. His writing is particularly concerned with the tensions between the rural and urban spheres, and the past and the present.

I'm a Man

We spent the night drumming and dancing
Singing songs of courage.

Was it not the last
We would be together?

5 When the ripening period comes
We catapult
Into the waiting world
Like the seed of dry pods.

The crunching frost
10 Under my unshod feet
The biting breeze
Of that winter's dawn
Skinning my naked body
Menacing sticks and threatening words

15 Before I was forced
To break the icy stream
Was it a sort of vendetta?
Numb in body and soul
I cursed through chattering teeth

20 Like a caged beast
And defied the cutman's stiletto
That left a crimson ring
Round my shrunken stick of manhood
Where the stigma was

25 And I declared the divine words
Of the ultimate stage
'I'm a man!'

Supporting notes

This poem describes some aspects of a traditional initiation rite found in many southern African cultures, in which youths are taken apart, subjected to certain physical rigours, taught their duties as men, and finally circumcised. The 'cutman' (line 21) was usually someone senior and respected in the community, such as a *sangoma* (healer or seer) or especially revered elder. The practice has come under scrutiny in recent years after

botched circumcisions have in some cases led to HIV-transmission, infection, and even death.

John Agard (1949–)

Agard was born in Guyana in the West Indies, and emigrated to the UK in 1977 with his partner, Grace Nichols. He is one of the most respected and admired Caribbean poets, and is in great demand as a performer of his own poems. He gives the Catholic liturgy and the cricket commentaries he listened to as a boy as influences that led to his love of language. He is known for his fascination with the rhythms of Caribbean speech and the oral quality of poetry. He works as a freelance poet and writer, and has served as the BBC's (British Broadcasting Corporation) poet-in-residence. He has written numerous books for children and was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for poetry in 2012.

Poetry Jump-Up 190

Tell me if ah seeing right
take a look down de street

Words dancin
words dancin
5 till dey sweat
words like fishes
jumpin out a net
words wild and free
joining de poetry revelry
10 words back to back
words belly to belly

Come on everybody
come and join de poetry band
dis is poetry carnival
15 dis is poetry bacchanal 191
when inspiration call
take yu pen in yu hand
if you dont have a pen
take yu pencil in yu hand
20 if you dont have a pencil
what the hell
so long de feeling start to swell
just shout de poem out

Words jumpin off de page
25 tell me if Ah seeing right
words like birds
jumpin out a cage
take a look down de street
words shakin dey waist
30 words shakin dey bum
words wit black skin

words wit white skin
words wit brown skin
word wit no skin at all
35 words huggin up words
an saying I want to be a poem today
rhyme or no rhyme
I is a poem today
I mean to have a good time

40 Words feelin hot hot hot
big words feelin hot hot hot
lil words feelin hot hot hot
even sad words cant help
tappin dey toe
45 to de riddum of de poetry band

Dis is poetry carnival
dis is poetry bacchanal
so come on everybody
join de celebration
50 all yu need is plenty perspiration
an a little inspiration
plenty perspiration
an a little inspiration

Supporting notes

Like Siers's poem, this is written in a particular dialect or variation of English (you might enjoy comparing the two poems). Here the influence is predominantly Caribbean or West Indian. The spelling is largely phonetic, so it is especially important to read this poem aloud. Other poets in this anthology who play with words, or create sound effects, so that their poems must be heard or read aloud to be understood and enjoyed, are Lesego Rampolokeng, Isabella Motadinyane, and Cathy Park Hong.

Grace Nichols (1950–)

A poet and novelist, Nichols was born in Guyana, and moved to Britain in her twenties. She came to public attention when her book of poems dealing with slavery, *I Is a Long Memored Woman*, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1983 (the poem below is from this collection). By turns energetic, funny, and angry, her work is perhaps best appreciated when performed orally, and public recitals by her and her partner [John Agard](#) have heightened the popularity of both poets.

Taint

But I was stolen by men
the colour of my own skin
borne away by men whose heels
had become hoofs
5 whose hands had turned talons
bearing me down
to the trail
of darkness

But I was traded by men
10 the colour of my own skin
traded like a fowl like a goat
like a sack of kernels I was
traded
 for beads for pans
15 for trinkets?

No it isn't easy to forget
What we refuse to remember

Daily I rinse the taint
of treachery from my mouth

Questions to consider

The issue of slavery remains as current as ever, whether we are dealing with the difficulties of coming to terms with its history, or facing the appalling reality that it remains far from eradicated. The trafficking of women and children in particular is now a major global industry, and has become a hideous modern version of the slave trade, one that often preys on those who are economically desperate. You might find it useful to turn to [William Cowper](#) for a perspective from a different era. The notes and questions there will help you to compare the two poems.

Ingrid de Kok (1951–)

De Kok was born and educated in South Africa. She has spent part of her life living and studying in Canada, and sometimes grapples in her writing with the difficulties of shifting between the two cultures. She is a Fellow of the University of Cape Town, where she is also an Associate Professor in Extra-Mural Studies. She is a respected commentator on South African literature and culture, and co-ordinates programmes designed to promote reading. Her poems have earned her recognition both at home and abroad.

Small Passing

For a woman whose baby died stillborn, and who was told by a man to stop mourning, 'because the trials and horrors suffered daily by black women in this country are more significant than the loss of one white child'.

1

In this country you may not
suffer the death of your stillborn,
remember the last push into shadow and silence,
the useless wires and cords on your stomach,
5 the nurse's face, the walls, the afterbirth in a basin.

Do not touch your breasts
still full of purpose.

Do not circle the house,
pack, unpack the small clothes.

10 Do not lie awake at night hearing
the doctor say 'It was just as well'
and 'You can have another.'

In this country you may not
mourn small passings.

15 See: the newspaper boy in the rain
will sleep tonight in a doorway.

The woman in the busline
may next month be on a train
to a place not her own.

20 The baby in the backyard now
will be sent to a tired aunt,
grow chubby, then lean,
return a stranger.

Mandela's daughter tried to find her father
25 through the glass. She thought they'd let her touch him.

192

And this woman's hands are so heavy when she dusts
the photographs of other children
they fall to the floor and break.

30 Clumsy woman, she moves so slowly
as if in a funeral rite.

On the pavements the nannies meet.
These are legal gatherings.
They talk about everything, about home,
while the children play among them,
35 their skins like litmus, ¹⁹³ their bonnets clean.

2

Small wrist in the grave.
Baby no one carried live
between houses, among trees.
Child shot running,
40 stones in his pocket,
boy's swollen stomach
full of hungry air.
Girls carrying babies
not much smaller than themselves.
45 Erosion. Soil washed down to the sea.

3

I think these mothers dream
headstones of the unborn.
Their mourning rises like a wall
no vine will cling to.
50 They will not tell you your suffering is white.
They will not say it is just as well.
They will not compete for the ashes of infants.
I think they may say to you:
Come with us to the place of mothers.
55 We will stroke your flat empty belly,
let you weep with us in the dark,
and arm you with one of our babies
to carry home on your back.

Questions to consider

This poem has already been compared with Jonson's 'On My First Son' and 'On My First Daughter'. You might like to turn to the suggestions for discussion and comparison.

Dambudzo Marechera (1952–1987)

Marechera was born in Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), where he spent a troubled childhood. After being expelled from the University of Rhodesia during political unrest, he left for Britain, where he continued along a path of rebellion and self-destruction dogged by alcohol abuse, getting expelled from Oxford's New College as well. His radical reimagining of African literature in postmodernist* terms has made him an important figure in African literature. He returned to Zimbabwe in 1982, during the filming of his award-winning novel, *The House of Hunger*, and lived there until his death five years later of an AIDS-related illness. His work continues to influence other southern African poets, including Lesego Rampolokeng.

A Shred of Identity

Will this moon scrap itself off my poems!
This twilight zone stretching between English school
And my cockroach voice?

To the ant perched on a grain of sand
5 My giant Artistic dilemma is scarcely visible
Only clearly seen when I raise my foot.

The bee on his sweet sticky errand, seeing me,
Shoots off at a tangent^o humming his scorn.

angle

The early swallow from his searing flight
10 Scarcely casts instantaneous glance at my pains.

The dustman shrugs, hurls his concrete burden
Into factory hand adjusts the zip on his overalls
And without a care awaits his Call – factory's siren.

The milkman cycles his round; the soldier
15 Kisses his girl hurries to carry out orders.

They all seem to know their own selves
While I like a madman continue to decipher
The print on a shred of blank paper
The print that is to become the poem behind this poem.

Questions to consider

Marechera constantly battled with the question of where he belonged. While his poetry often refers to Africa, he also uses intertextuality* – allusions to other important works of literature – to thread Western influences through his writing. Although the references are very subtle, it could be argued that this poem is a nod to Dylan Thomas's 'In My Craft Or Sullen Art' – read that poem and see what you think. The phrase 'grain of sand' clearly borrows from William Blake's poem 'Auguries of Innocence', which opens with the line 'To see a world in a grain of sand'. (More on Blake, also a radical visionary who was considered a rebel, if not downright insane, in his times.) There is also a hint at the end of

Ted Hughes's poem 'The Thought-Fox' – do you agree?

Rushdy Siers (1952–)

Siers was born in District Six in Cape Town, an area from which his family was evicted under apartheid legislation. He has a history of activism in political and cultural circles, and has worked at the Centre for Development Studies at the University of the Western Cape. His writing includes poetry, short stories, and plays.

Sets of Two and their Silence

Today children our lesson will be about sets ...

Kanalla ¹⁹⁴ *cheacher nie vandagie*

Please teacher not today.

Does every body know what a set is?

Yaa, a snytjie brood en a snytjie brood maak a sanwich.

Yes, a slice of bread and a slice of bread make a sandwich

5 Good, please pay attention and don't look so sleepy!

Ek slaap tot ek dai klokkie hoor – kostyd!

I'm sleeping until I hear the bell – time to eat!

Many things and any number of things can make a set ...

Ek wonne wat gan op 'ie brood wies?

I wonder what will be on the bread?

For example, a tea set and a cutlery set ...

10 *Nou moet jy nogal van kosgoed praat.*

Now must you talk about food utensils.

Can anyone give me an example of a set? quickly ...

Set and ready to go, as ek dai klokkie hoor.

Set and ready to go, when I hear that bell.

Class what is wrong?

Niks verkeet 'ie net honger.

Nothing's wrong, just hungry

15 Can nobody give me an example of a set?

Cheacher lat ek net slaap tot netnou.

Teacher let me sleep for a while.

Children you must pay attention!

Ya a snytjie brood en a snytjie brood maak a sanwich.

Yes a slice of bread and a slice of bread make a sandwich.

And why this silence?

20 *Jy's fokken doef as jy nie my maag kan hoor nie!*

You're fucking deaf if you can't hear my stomach!

Supporting notes

This poem combines conventional use of the English language with use of one of the dialects found within the Cape Muslim community. This particular dialect combines Afrikaans and English, and flavours both with distinctive borrowings from the local community. Notice how flat and tame the English translation on the right-hand side of the page seems when compared with the original. What does this suggest about the value of dialect? For more examples of poems written in dialect, or which mix English with other languages, see John Agard's '[Poetry Jump-Up](#)' and Isabella Motadinyane's '[Touting Taxi](#)'.

Stephen Watson (1954–2011)

Watson spent most of his life, apart from brief periods in Britain and Australia, in Cape Town. Until his death from cancer, he lectured in the English Department at the University of Cape Town, where he ran the respected Creative Writing Masters programme. He authored several volumes of poetry (including a translation of /Xam legends), as well as two noteworthy collections of critical essays. His work is recognised for its sensitivity and accuracy in conveying a sense of place.

The Rain That is Male

The rain that is male is an angry rain.
It brings with it lightning loud like our fear.
It brings water storming, making smoke out of dust.

And we, we beat our navels with our rigid fists.

5 We, we press a hand, flat to the navel.

We snap our fingers at the angry, male rain.

And we stand outside in the force of the water,
we stand out in the open, close to its thunder,
we snap our fingers and chant while it falls:

10 'Rain, be gone quickly! Fall but be gone!

Rain, turn away! Turn back from this place!

Rain, take your anger, be gone from our place!'

For we want the other, the rain that is female,
the one that falls softly, soaking into the ground,

15 the one we can welcome, feeding the plains –

So bushes sprout green, springbok^o come galloping.

indigenous buck

Supporting notes

This poem is drawn from the records of a nineteenth-century linguist from the Cape and his sister-in-law, who together transcribed legends passed on to them by members of an almost extinct tribe of indigenous people, the /Xam. They have since been completely eradicated or assimilated, and their language has died out. Watson's poem is thus a translation of a translation, and is an example of the attempts some modern writers and anthropologists have made to recover the cultures of indigenous peoples who have been exterminated. (See also '[Kilaben Bay Song](#)').)

In Exile

for Douglas Reid Skinner

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul

– Simone Weil

Waiting for a tram, his gaze incurious, vague, as jaded
as the fog long rising off the Main, as the cold gone brown,
polluted in whatever sky there is, in what's left of day,
even now, years later, years after he had to leave, to flee,
5 dusk comes like a coma, his stare still hangs, abandoned,
as useless as his hands. The cobbled streets stretch away,
numb and bloodless as shin-bones. The stunted light lies
still and dead, diluted, never mellowing. In the early dark,
cold with lights, under the factory sky of Frankfurt am Main,
10 the waters of the river, muffled, frigid in this German wind,
the misted hulks of barges, hold no echo, are faceless still,
the flagstones, leaden, fouled, are nothing but tombstones.

195

Again, the ash-trees turn to charcoal before his eyes.
He hears the echoes that damp footsteps hollow out on stone,
15 he looks upon the dead wood, the wooden faces, at buildings
that have blurred, are vague, indefinite as some threat,
and still can't hear, can't see – he can't feel a thing.
Nine years later, nothing, hardly anything has changed:
even now, as that torpor in the evening cold takes hold,
20 as something wads his hands, and fogs his eyes, both ears,
he's still standing there – the tram has left without him –
he's straining, is like a man possessed, going blind
for what he still sees, for what he can remember seeing.

And it's always one place only, always that same place
25 where a road swings high, climbing around a mountain-side.
It's the highway of his childhood, of many years before
that he's travelling now in memory, once more looking out
at hills, far-off, linear, naked, miles north across a bay.
Again, there's sunlight in blonde grass, there's that scent
30 of pine in dust, a heat that carries him still further back
to those folded slopes, unfolding, peppery with rough scrub,
to that very bend where the road swings left to right
and through the slanted pine-trunks, from its final crest,
backed by a mountain-wall, opening out along an oval bay,
35 an entire city lies revealed, frozen in silence, far below –
Cape Town stands there, suddenly, revealed for what it is:
a city of the southern hemisphere, more full of sky than streets.

Even now, years later, when at night the longing comes
nothing matters any more – not his memory of the people,
40 the vile, pretentious rich, corrupted poor, those politics
that beggar all description, that all but beggared him –
nothing matters now but his desire, but this mad longing
to know that there is still a place, that it still exists,
that you can come on that same road round Devil's Peak

196

45 and there will be, as there was before, almost any evening,
that softness in the summer dark, the same warmth rising,
breathing from an earth long out of reach of its sunset.

All the rest's irrelevant; nothing matters now, or ever,
but to know that he can come, return to that road's crest

50 when the harbour's lighting up, the lights are shining
thinly through the pine-tops, in wind that's amber-toned,
and there will be the same view, clear across the city:

from the trees thinned out against the mass of Signal Hill,
against that day's after-glow, down to a mountainy skyline
55 going far down the south peninsula, where the early stars –
the first he ever saw – will be out along the mountains.

He has to know there is a place – if only just one place –
where the water is not flat with cold, the silted colour
of cement; where the stones are not just made of stone

60 but are full of stories, memories. There has to be
that place where with a hand upon a stone you can touch
the time that went before, the years that will outlast you.
There has to be a place. He's tired of watching, waiting,
while years pass quickly, blankly, become ever more unreal.

65 Tonight he's tired of talking, smiling, and knowing he's not
really talking, not smiling – it's just his lips, his teeth.

These rush-hour people passing by, all with somewhere to go
the buses that come shuddering past, these trams squealing
to a halt, that always jolt him back to this same street –
70 here, he can't find peace – the calm – to rest his nerves.

And shivers ... That tram of his left almost an hour ago.
It's left him in a nearly ended year, with one more view
of leaves, long dead already, drowning in a wayside gutter.

He's still standing there, still transfixed as night falls,
75 as that other, loved city fades away, floats ten years off,
and he comes back to these dead things, to the dead years,
to a smell of air pollution freezing, falling below zero.

He's still lost in it, in his estranging gape, one of many,
a man without a wife, a child, arms wrapped round himself,
80 a man who has been left behind. And now he's growing smaller
is no larger than his pipe's glow as the river fog moves in,
flows over the embankment, blanking out what he once saw,
blotting out a figure, thin and frosted, dwindling quickly,
an exile, solo, incognito, in transit through another night.

Questions to consider

You might want to turn back to Arthur Nortje's poem, also titled 'In Exile' and compare it with Watson's piece.

Karen Press (1956–)

Born in Cape Town, Karen Press has worked on alternative education and publishing projects for much of her adult life. A freelance writer and editor, she has written non-fiction, poetry, a film script, and numerous school textbooks. She is particularly admired for her simple yet subtle poems, which have been published locally and abroad, and translated into French, Italian, Turkish, and Tamil.

Hope for Refugees

you can go back
you can go back
run backwards
call back the cattle
5 unstitch the hems
pull the photos out of the fire

you can go back
you can go back
pull down your dress
10 button your shirt
wipe off the blood
scrub off the blood

you can go back
you can go back
15 wash the walls
fix the door
remember the step down in the dark
avoid the dark

you can go back
20 you can go back
dig up the box in the front garden
dig up the box in the yard
dig up the box in your heart
dig up the box in the child's heart

25 you can go back
you can go back
lay out the skeletons in their beds
hang out the years to air
plant seeds, keep watch at the well
30 tear up your nightmares, your footprints
lock the door
work hard
give thanks to god

Supporting notes

In the wake of the 1994 elections, the new democracy of South Africa became attractive to many living in less economically and politically stable countries. This was a period in which civil wars and genocides convulsed the African continent and elsewhere; also, international drug, poaching, and trafficking cartels targeted South Africa as a new market to be exploited. For all these reasons, South Africa experienced an influx of both refugees and undocumented migrants (the term used to describe those here without official permission).

This in turn led to a growing xenophobia* and hardening of attitudes towards foreigners on the part of many citizens, who saw the newcomers as a threat to jobs and security. These attitudes turned deadly during the shameful outbreaks of xenophobic violence that raged through the country during May 2008, and which still flare up from time to time. Foreigners, even those here legally, are sometimes discriminated against and persecuted, sometimes by those supposed to uphold the law.

Well before the 2008 xenophobic attacks, the Department of Home Affairs sometimes resorted to 'apartheid-style' dirty tricks in their efforts to deport asylum-seekers, even though South Africa had signed the Geneva Convention endorsing the rights of refugees. Their stance reflects a growing international tendency to make it much harder for refugees to seek asylum. This poem refers critically to a policy that is gaining ground in the developed world – that refugees should be repatriated (returned home) whenever possible.

Sujata Bhatt (1956–)

Bhatt was born in India, and spent much of her childhood there before her family moved to the United States. She is an internationally respected and award-winning poet. Although she writes in English, Gujarati is her mother tongue, and her poetry reflects the images and forms of this language as well. She has also translated Gujarati poetry into English. Her work explores issues of racism and interactions between the three major cultures (Indian, European, and North American) in which she has lived. She now lives in Germany with her husband and daughter.

A Different History

1

Great Pan ¹⁹⁸ is not dead;
he simply emigrated
to India.

Here the gods roam freely,
5 disguised as snakes and monkeys;

every tree is sacred
and it is a sin
to be rude to a book.

It is a sin to shove a book aside

10 with your foot,
a sin to slam books down
hard on a table,
a sin to toss one carelessly
across a room

15 You must learn how to turn the pages gently
without disturbing Sarasvati, ¹⁹⁹
without offending the tree
from whose wood the paper was made.

2

Which language
20 has not been the oppressor's tongue?

Which language
truly meant to murder someone?

And how does it happen
that after the torture,

25 after the soul has been cropped
with a long scythe swooping out
of the conqueror's face –
the unborn grandchildren
grow to love that strange language.

Makhosazana Xaba (1957–)

Xaba is a poet, activist, and academic. She was born in Natal, and trained as a nurse. She went into exile in 1986 and served as a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, then fighting apartheid. On her return to South Africa in 1990, she worked as a women's health advocate. She has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of the Witwatersrand, where she is currently a Fellow, and has published two collections of poetry and one of short stories, *Running*. Her writing demonstrates her passionate commitment to African feminism, and is fearless in exploring issues of sexuality and identity.

These Hands

These hands know putrid^o pus from oozing wounds.

rotten

They know the musty feel of varying forms of faecal formations.

They know the warmth of blood gushing from gaping bodily spaces.

They know of mucous, sliding out of orifices.

⁵ These hands remember the metallic feel of numerous guns, when the telling click was heard.
They recall the rumbling palm embrace over grenades, ready for the release of mortal destruction.
These hands will never forget the prickling touch of barbed wire on border fences.
These hands can still feel the roughness of unknown tree leaves that served as toilet paper
in bushes far away.

¹⁰ These hands have felt pulsating hearts over extended abdomens,
they know the depth of vaginas, the opening mouths of wombs,
they know the grasp of minute, minute-old clenched fists.
These hands have squeezed life's juice from painful pounding breasts.
These hands have made love, producing vibrations from receiving lovers.

¹⁵ These hands have pressed buttons, knobs and switches,
they have turned screws and wound clocks, steered wheels and dug holes,
held instruments, implements and ligaments,
moulded monuments, created crafts, healed hearts.

These hands now caress the keyboard, fondle pens that massage papers,
²⁰ weaning fear, weaving words,
wishing with every fingerprint, that this relationship will last forever.

Chris van Wyk (1957–)

Van Wyk was born in Johannesburg, where he currently lives. He has worked for various South African publishers and is now a freelance writer, editor, and consultant. His work includes children's literature, poems, short stories, a novel, and two acclaimed and popular memoirs, and is often extremely humorous. His poetry combines elements of the personal and the political in fresh and often moving ways.

Memory

Derek is dangling on the kitchen chair
while I'm shuffling about in a flutter of flour.
Mummy is making vetkoek ²⁰⁰ on the primus. ²⁰¹

Derek is too small to peer over the table,
5 that's why Mummy has perched him on the chair.
His dummy twitters so he's a bird.

I'm not that small; I was four in July.
I'm tall enough to see what's going on;
I'm a giraffe and the blotches of shadow
10 on the ceiling and the walls
from the flames of the primus and candle
are the patches on my back.

Daddy's coming home soon
from the factory where they're turning him into
15 a cupboard that creaks,
but the vetkoek are sizzling and growing
like bloated gold coins,
we're rich!

This is the first vivid memory of childhood.
20 Why have I never written it all down before?
Maybe because the pan falls with a clatter
and the oil swims towards the twittering bird.
Mummy flattens her forearm on the table
stopping the seething flood.

25 As she does so she pleads with the bird to fly away,
but quietly so as not to ruffle his feathers.
But my brother clambers off the chair
as if he has all the time in the world.
Sensing danger, the twittering gives way to a wail
30 and the giraffe's patches flare on the restive walls.

Ma gives a savage scream that echoes across the decades
and cauterises^o my childhood like a long scar.

Gcina Mhlophe (1958–)

One of South Africa's most innovative and talented actresses and directors, Mhlophe also writes plays and poetry. Born in Natal, she was first a domestic worker before turning to journalism and writing. However, it was as a storyteller (an art she learned from her grandmother) that she began to make her mark, both at home and abroad. She has worked to advance the art of storytelling, especially by women, and tours to bring her performances to as many levels of society as possible. She is dedicated to various literacy efforts, and supports libraries and theatre initiatives for young people.

Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

When they call your jobless son

a Tsotsi ²⁰²

5 Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

When they call

Your husband at the age of 60

10 a boy

Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

When they rape your daughter

15 in detention and call her

a whore

Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

20 When they call your white sister

a madam

Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

25 When they call your white brother

a Baas

Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

30 When they call a trade unionist

a terrorist

Say No

Say No, Black Woman

Say No

When they give you a back seat

in the liberation wagon

Say No

Yes Black Woman

a Big NO

Supporting notes

This poem was written during the 1980s, when the struggle to end apartheid was particularly bitter. Its concerns nevertheless remain extremely topical. Do you feel that black women have been able to share in the gains of democracy?

Beverly Rycroft (1959–)

Rycroft was born in the Eastern Cape and studied at the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand. She worked as a teacher before turning to writing and journalism full-time. In 1997 she was diagnosed with stage-three breast cancer. The poems in her debut collection, *Missing*, for which she won the Ingrid Jonker Prize, chart her experiences of illness, facing death, and the hope of recovery. She lives in Cape Town with her family.

Room Thirteen

i married a gambling man.

Lucky for some
he says as i
thread my body through
5 the green gown
in room thirteen.

No jewellery the nurses ordered so
i hand him
my wedding ring. eleven years married
10 i'm wheeled away to

wake up again in room thirteen
broad bandage across my chest.

He's still there. slides the ring back
on. tells me

15 it's not the hand you get dealt
it's the way you play it.

Epiphanye Mukasano (1961–)

Mukasano is a Rwandan teacher and writer. She fled her country in 1994, and currently lives in Cape Town with her family. She has published a collection of poems, *Kilimanjaro on my lap*, which reflects on her experiences as a refugee. She has also contributed to collections of poetry and non-fiction, and has published a story for children.

Pigeons and Their Songs

sagateke gugu

sagateke gugu ...

pigeons ring the bells of nostalgia
with their ubiquitous tunes

5 you have not moved an inch
yet you have travelled miles

on their backs you land in a country
where mountains kiss the sky
where bamboo leaves echo the songs
10 of rumbling brooks in the moonlight

there under the roof of a banana leaf
while your flawless eyes watch over bean flowers
you listen to the green pitter-patter
wrapped in a perfume of wet dust

15 there the air smells of fresh brotherhood
a net of laughter covers your bed
mosquitoes sing the night through
loneliness is long forgotten

sagateke gugu

20 *sagateke gugu ...*

Supporting notes

This poem provides another perspective on the experience of living in exile or as a refugee, although it is one of straightforward longing, rather than the more complex emotions we see in Nortje and Watson's poems, both titled 'In Exile'. See also Press's 'Hope for Refugees' for an interesting reflection on the status of refugees in South Africa.

Rethabile Masilo (1961–)

Masilo was born in Lesotho, and went into exile with his family in 1980, living in several countries before settling in France in 1987. He is a self-employed language teacher, who co-edits a literary journal, *Canopic Jar*. He has been published in a wide range of poetry journals, and remains deeply engaged with his native land and issues that affect southern Africa. He lives in Paris with his wife and two sons, and enjoys cooking and soccer.

The Brown-veined White 203

Many butterflies in Ladybrand today,
as many as snowflakes in a blizzard,
they bend the grass under them
with gasps from their wings: nature
5 just showing us how a storm might start.
They dance upon red colonial roofs
along the way. Trees, born in the years
of blood-letting, have their arms bent up
in defeat. We slip onto a black road
10 toward Bloemfontein, grocery on the back-seat –
this road, this thin strip of road, is the tape
that measures distress. I push the car harder
up the hillside into our mountains and head
toward Maseru, the other side of the river, where surely
15 the same butterflies had earlier begun their flight
that morning: and a few filter still among willows
that border the river, like the last falling fluffs
of a pillow fight, the smell of summer in the air.
Cicadas come out from their trenches: December!
20 We watch those last white butterflies disappear
north-east toward Ladybrand, fluttering,
and then continue home to be with our own family.

Supporting notes

The speaker in the poem is referring to a very specific stretch of road, which climbs steeply up from the small Free State town of Ladybrand to the turn-off to nearby Maseru, the capital of the small land-locked and mountainous country of Lesotho a few miles away, before continuing on towards Bloemfontein. This landscape has had a turbulent history, with the indigenous Basotho people driven back by settlers beyond the Caledon River, which became the border referred to in line 17. Locations nearby saw some fierce battles in the Anglo-Boer or South African War (see [Drummer Hodge](#) and [The Cry of South Africa](#)).

It's interesting that this almost cinematic poem, which vividly describes the scenery of a particular location, was written by a poet who has spent much of his adult life in exile.

Finuala Dowling (1962–)

Dowling, an award-winning poet and novelist, was born in Cape Town. She is a graduate of the University of Cape Town, and lectured at the University of South Africa for eight years. She has published three collections of poetry and three novels, as well as comic skits and plays. Her debut poetry collection won the Ingrid Jonker Prize, and her second the Sanlam Prize for Poetry. She is the seventh of eight children born to radio broadcasters; she claims that her writing comes from her childhood sense of having something to say, but no chance to get a word in! She lives in Kalk Bay with her daughter.

To the doctor who treated the raped baby and who felt such despair

I just wanted to say on behalf of us all
that on the night in question
there was a light on in the hall
for a nervous little sleeper
5 and when the bleeding baby was admitted to your care
Faraway a Karoo ²⁰⁴ shepherd crooned a ramkietjie ²⁰⁵ lullaby
in the veld^o
and while you stanchd ²⁰⁶
there was space on a mother-warmed sheet
10 for a night walker
and when you administered an infant-sized opiate^o
there were luxuriant dark nipples
for fist-clenching babes
and when you called for more blood
15 a bleary-eyed uncle got up to make a feed
and while you cleaned
a grandpa's thin legs walked up and down for a colicky crier
and when finally you stood exhausted at the end of her cot
and asked, 'Where is God?',
20 a father sat watch.
And for the rest of us, we all slept in trust
that you would do what you did,
that you could do what you did.
We slept in trust that you lived.

grasslands

painkilling drug

Supporting notes

South Africa has the worst known figures for rape for a country not at war. In addition, it has appallingly high rates of child and even baby rape. This poem was written in response to the savage rape of a little girl known as Baby Tshepang, whose plight attracted the attention of the nation. The reasons for the tendency of South African men to rape not only women and children, but very small babies, are complex. In a country with a history of intimate and systematic violence, and in which gender 'equality' is legally guaranteed, but with little or no critique of patriarchy,* women are subject to exceptionally high levels of

violence, most often at the hands of men they know. It is not unusual for angry ex-partners to target women's children for violence and even rape as a form of punishment, or 'teaching women their place'. In this case, the rapist was an ex-boyfriend of the baby's mother, herself legally a child at the time. Both mother and baby were found by the courts to be children in need of care.

Although the standard response to these crimes is outrage and anger, Dowling takes a different and unusual approach in this poem, which manages to be both horrific and gentle: how does she offer the doctor (and also the reader) comfort?

Isabella Motadinyane (1963–2003)

This poet and actress was born in Soweto, and was a dynamic performance poet. She was a founding member of the Botsotso Jesters (the name comes from a poem she wrote), a poetry performance group and publishing collective that positioned itself in an urban, post-1994 South Africa. Motadinyane (she took the name of the grandmother who raised her) was known for her musical voice (she both sang and spoke her poems) and her knack for mixing languages. She died on her fortieth birthday.

Touting Taxi

Touting taxi

topsy turvey

pep talk

from Zola ²⁰⁷

5 to Jozi

music background

loud and loud

pep talk

trace toilet tissue

10 tracks van bo

ke bona dibono

ka se bone

beng ba tsona

taxi

15 topsy turvey

pep talk

constant thuggery

criss cross

cross pollination

20 christianity charged

shot cit corner

magomosha style

corner

Market and Nugget ²⁰⁸

25 taxi topsy turvey

pep talk

drinking Beefeaters ²⁰⁹

eyes of melting bazookas

meaty juice

30 ba harela jwala

eke ba kgaohile maoto

kwala molomo lovey

ke mametse

touting taxi topsy turvey

35 pep talk

I see buttocks

I do not see

their owners

flashy tycoon

They drink booze

as if they didn't have legs

shut your mouth lovey

I'm listening

Supporting notes

This 'spoken word' poem imitates the sounds and speech one might hear on a typical taxi ride from Soweto into the city of Johannesburg, with its mix of English, local slang, and urban Sotho. You might enjoy comparing this poem to Rushdy Siers's 'Sets of Two and Their Silence', which also mixes languages to create a rich and lively dialect, as does the poem by John Agard. The repetition and rhythms of this poem (it must be read out loud to be appreciated) also show the influence of rap or hip-hop poetry,* of which some examples in this anthology are the poems by Lesego Rampolokeng and Lebo Mashile.

Lesego Rampolokeng (1965–)

Rampolokeng was born in 1965 in Soweto. He studied law at the University of the North. He came to prominence as a poet in the politically turbulent 1980s, and his poetry is often savagely critical of establishment rules and norms. He has been compared to the late Dambudzo Marechera because of his often confrontational writing. Considered South Africa's leading rap poet,* he has produced several poetry collections and recordings.

History

revolution or evolution
the game is still the same
reconciliation negotiation
it won't take the bait
5 it's too late for hate
when fate is your only mate
wipe the slate
you can't dictate history's date
BLACK on the attack
10 won't turn back
or slack
it's GREEN
going on mean
marching on the obscene
15 as in ho chi minh ²¹⁰
if you know what I mean
marching on bold
it's GOLD unsold
the story untold
20 whose history turns time cold
when the murder mystery begins to unfold
it won't lace up the truth with arsenic ²¹¹
& claim to be platonic
& defecate when it denigrates
25 or swiss bank emigrate
accounting for the cost
cost of lives to buy glasnost ²¹²
for the taxation of a nation
in the tradition of predation
30 between the breed of need
& the creed of greed
who mythify the truth
to mystify the path
we have to tread for bread to feed our seed

35 it goes on forever
it's sung by lips and tongues untied
for being strong not wrong
its rung is not cowdung
from civilisation to annexation
40 with the intonation of damnation
from pit to hill from hell to heaven
perverted minds inverting triple seven 213
ah yell to tell how the L for LOVE fell

the bible on your table
45 & the manure in your stable
all misery no nursery rhymes
all files and all piles
of money to spend
with no fun in the sun but the gloat
50 of a trench coat
balance me without respite
& i'll give you insight
into both left and right
so you can fly your kite
55 in history's daylight

Supporting notes

This 'spoken word' poem (it must be read or performed aloud) is a good example of many of the technical features of rap poetry: internal and end rhymes, a regular, insistent rhythm that isn't interrupted by punctuation (the performer decides if and when to pause), the use of modern slang and strong language, the location of the poem in the present tense. The sound of the words used is as important as their meaning. Other local poems in this tradition are Isabella Motadinyane's 'Touting Taxi' and Lebo Mashile's 'Walk sister walk' – John Agard's 'Poetry Jump-Up' is another example, drawn from the poet's Caribbean heritage.

The footnotes refer to events of twentieth-century history, and the poet also refers to the colours of the African National Congress ('BLACK', 'GREEN' and 'GOLD') in the body of the poem. These words carry other meanings as well – why do you think they are used?

Phillippa Yaa de Villiers (1966–)

De Villiers is an award-winning writer, performer, and editor. She wrote for television for ten years before publishing her first collection of poetry. In 2010, she published her second collection, *The Everyday Wife*. Her poetry is widely published in journals and anthologies, and has been described as having a clear-eyed honesty, perceptiveness, and playfulness. Although not strictly a rap poet, she is influenced by the ‘spoken word’ movement and is a lively performer of her own work. She lives in Johannesburg with her son.

Stolen Rivers

For Chiwoniso Maraire ²¹⁴

We Africans came to Berlin to sing
and recite poetry. We had an agenda:

remembering our anthems of loss,

galloping, consuming,

5 the pillage,^o the cries

destruction, looting

like forest fires, like haunted children,

how can we, how can we even

begin to redress?

Enraged, we wanted revenge

10 And then, Chiwoniso, you stepped on the stage and

you opened your mouth and

every stolen river of platinum and gold

poured out of your mouth in song;

your voice etched us out of the night

15 and doubled the light in each of us.

You restored all the treasure-houses

from Benin to Zimbabwe, Mapungubwe to Cairo; ²¹⁵

Africa moved its golden bones,

shook off its heavy chains

20 and danced again.

That night I thought

if only

love could purchase bread,

Africans would not be hungry.

Supporting notes

Here de Villiers adds to the debate on post-colonial* issues we also see raised by Neto’s ‘The Grieved Lands’, Livingstone’s ‘The Sleep of Lions’ and Gilkes’s ‘Miranda’. What fresh perspectives does she bring to the history of Africa’s colonisation?

Rustum Kozain (1966–)

Kozain, a writer, editor, and award-winning poet, was born and raised in Paarl, Western Cape. He studied English Literature at the University of Cape Town. He spent ten months on a Fulbright Scholarship in the USA, then returned to UCT, where he lectured in the Department of English until 2004. He won both the prestigious Ingrid Jonker Prize and the Olive Schreiner Prize for his debut collection, *This Carting Life*. He published his second collection, *Groundwork*, in 2012. He lives in Cape Town.

The Adoration of Cats

Here I am running from it all again
all trouble heaping up in my house
in my head the debts incurred,
the regrets that nag and bicker
5 like a country's citizens
not the one, nor the other, that one neither ...

and come to sit Karla's cats,
in a house clean and quiet
like a small, dark chapel.

10 Feed the fish, the cats,
clean out their litter,
then collapse on my back

half on the bed, feet on the floor.
And in a minute the two young cats,
15 Isaac and Leo, join me.
Black Leo in the crook of my arm,
Isaac, white with black spots,
sniffing at me, at my face,

purring voluntarily in my ear.
20 Then he licks at my hair,
at my free hand held above my head,
falls down next to my face,
starts to groom himself,
then again me

25 and I have to give myself over
to the adoration of cats,
these once abandoned cats who know
something about the care of the self
while outside the sprinklers
30 drizzle softly in the garden.

Mxolisi Nyezwa (1967–)

This poet was born in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, where he still lives. He is one of the most brilliant and startling poets on the South African scene, and has won the Thomas Pringle Award for his work. His intensely lyrical poetry is complex, yet rewarding.

quiet place

and it seems that i live in a quiet place
at the end of time
with a blowing universe behind me.

i remain aware of the long-suffering of things
5 i remain aware with a simple truth
of how the planet eventually crumbles.

to me there is always the spaza shop ²¹⁶ at the end of the street,
the vague colour of the moon
and of the southern sky.

sea

the sea is so heavy inside us
and i won't sleep tonight.
i have buckets of memory in a jar
that i keep for days and nights like these.

Gabeba Baderoon (1969–)

Born in Port Elizabeth, Baderoon is a poet and academic. She graduated with a PhD from the University of Cape Town, and currently teaches Women's Studies and African and African-American Studies at Pennsylvania State University. Her poetry has won numerous international and local awards, and she has held writing residencies in Italy and Norway. Known for her moving readings of her work, she has performed at many prestigious international literary festivals.

War Triptych: Silence, Glory, Love

I. Accounting

The mother asked to stay.
She looked at her silent child.

I was waiting for you.

The quiet of the girl's face was a different quiet
5 Her hands lay untouched by death.

The washer of bodies cut
away her long black dress.

Blue prayer beads fell
to the floor in a slow accounting.

10 The washer of bodies began to sing
a prayer to mothers and daughters.

The mother said,
who will wait for me.

(written after a newspaper article on the aftermath of the bombings on a holy day in Najaf, Iraq)

II. Father Receives News His Son Died in the Intifada 217

When he heard the news, Mr Karim became silent.

15 He did not look at the cameras,
nor at the people who brought their grief.
He felt a hand slip from his hand,
a small unclasping,
and for that he refused the solace of glory.

III. Always For The First Time

20 We tell our stories of war like stories
of love, innocent as eggs.

But we will meet memory again
at the wall around our city,
always for the first time.

Supporting notes

This poem, illustrated by artwork by the gifted Cape Town photographer Berni Searle, is included in the *Women for Children* portfolio, a collection of works in support of children's rights produced by the Art for Humanity project, which works with the visual arts to promote human rights. Why do you think the poem was chosen for inclusion in a project like this?

Michelle McGrane (1974–)

McGrane was born in Zimbabwe and spent her childhood in Malawi. She moved to South Africa when she was fourteen, and lives in Johannesburg. Her poetry has appeared in local and international literary journals. She has published three collections of poetry and runs a respected poetry blog, Peony Moon. She is the poetry editor of the online South African literary site, LitNet (www.litnet.co.za).

The Suitable Girl

The suitable girl is not temperamental,
does not throw tantrums, have rages
in public places,
or swear.

⁵ She does not take drugs or
stay out late, she is the daughter
of family friends.

She does not phone you drunk
in the middle of the night or ignore
¹⁰ your calls, she does not
make you happy.

Cathy Park Hong (1976–)

Hong is a Korean-American poet who lives in New York City. Her parents were immigrants, so she grew up speaking Korean, and began making up languages as a child. She has published three volumes of poetry – the first two have won major American prizes – and teaches at Sarah Lawrence College. She has attracted attention for breaking new poetic ground, as her poetry moves backwards and forwards in time, and sometimes falls into the genre of speculative fiction,* sometimes defined as ‘fantasy or science fiction that could possibly happen’.

Ballad in O

O Boomtown’s got lots of sordor:^o
odd horrors of throwdowns,
bold cowboys lock horns,
forlorn hobos plot to rob

filth, sordidness

5 pots of gold, loco mobs
drool for blood, howl or hoot
for cottonwood blooms, throng
to hood crooks to strong wood posts.

10 So don’t confront hotbloods,
don’t show off, go to blows or rows,
don’t sob for gold lost to trollops,^o
don’t drown sorrows on shots of grog.^o

*promiscuous women, prostitutes
alcohol, often home-brewed*

Work morn to moon.
Know how to comb bottom pools,
15 spot dots of gold to spoon pots of gold.
Vow to do good.

Supporting notes

In keeping with Hong’s delight at playing with language, this poem comes from a series in which she experiments with using the same vowel (the letter ‘o’ in this case) in every word. To add to the challenge, she chooses the popular cowboy Western genre, at the time of the gold rush in the late nineteenth-century in America, as her setting. This was an era in which ‘boomtowns’ sprang up to service the needs of prospectors and other migrants.

Lebo Mashile (1979–)

Poet, performer, and actress, Mashile was born to her exiled South African parents in the United States. The family returned to their home country when she was sixteen. While she was studying law and international relations at the University of the Witwatersrand, she began to write. She first achieved recognition for her hip-hop inspired poetry at the Urban Voices Spoken Word and Music Festival in 2002, and has since published two collections, *A Ribbon of Rhythm* (2005), and *Flying Above the Sky* (2008). In 2006, she won the Pan African Book Prize and was awarded the prestigious Noma Award. Her work tackles gender issues and sexuality, among other issues. She lives in Johannesburg with her partner and son.

Walk sister walk

Walk sister walk

Until the emblem^o of purpose is sewn
To a beauty that shines just for you

Teach daughter teach

When you are tired,

When you are hungry,

When you are scared,

When you are not seen,

When the truth slips through your fingers,

Like the skin of a snake

Play mother play

To forget the weight of the waters that carried us

Listen lover listen

To mountains that speak without moving

Green as the life inside you

Sun soaked as the one who lies beside you

A feast of miracles awaits those who know

you by name

Woman

Glossary

Aesthetic Describes philosophies or opinions concerned with beauty, particularly those qualities of beauty that give pleasure and inspiration, or which are associated with ‘good taste’.

Allegory Symbolic tale, often with a moral message, in which figures and objects described in the story represent qualities such as evil, truth, and so on. In some spiritual allegories, the characters symbolise religious figures or doctrines. Other allegories create fantasy characters that represent actual historical figures and events.

Ballad Narrative poem (i.e., it tells a story) that deals with folk-lore or legend, often containing supernatural elements and featuring dialogue. Originally meant to be sung, ballads have a regular rhythm, usually with repeating lines or a chorus.

Classical In literary studies, this usually describes the philosophy, art and literature of the ancient Greeks and Romans, which were considered foundational for much Western art and literature. They were rediscovered during the Renaissance in Europe, where they inspired both imitations and new art forms.

Comedy (as in drama) Not necessarily humorous; however, there is always a happy resolution in which misunderstandings and conflicts are cleared up, and the potential for evil and harm is avoided. This happy ending usually involves the uniting of one or more pairs of lovers and their marriage.

Devotional Describes poems or other literary works that praise God or other religious figures.

Dramatic monologue Poem or speech where only one voice (and viewpoint) is heard, but in which the author’s own (often very different) opinion is implied.

Elegy Commemoration of someone who has died; poem or other form of writing that expresses grief and mourning and finally moves towards some kind of resolution or comfort.

Epic Narrative or story that tells of unusual adventures, travel, or feats of bravery and war experienced or performed by a hero or group of adventurers.

Gender The socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity. While sex is biologically determined, gender is learned through social conditioning. This term has entered modern understanding through feminist theory. ‘Gendered’ refers to the way we project masculine or feminine traits onto entities that have no biological sex, such as nature. See also patriarchy.

Genre Identifiable type or form of literature: for example, novel, drama, poetry. Within poetry itself, different genres can be found, such as epic, lyric, and so forth.

Intertextuality The use of deliberate references to, or borrowings from, other works of literature in a piece of writing.

Irony It is difficult to provide a concrete definition of irony, as it relies on tone to succeed. It is primarily a form of criticism or mockery in which the very opposite meaning or message to what is written or spoken is communicated. It is sometimes misunderstood when readers take the words at face value. It is often used to create a ‘double’ sense of communication, in which a distance is deliberately created between a character’s perspective and that of the author. See, for example, Chaucer’s ‘The Pardoner’s Prologue’, or Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’. An example of a poem that uses irony as a form of social criticism is Karen Press’s ‘Hope for Refugees’.

Lyric Expressive and gentle poem or song praising a specific object or scene, or describing a mood or emotion; often concerned with beauty or love.

Metaphor An image in which an object or figure is described as or likened to something else as an implicit form of comparison, which is not meant to be understood literally; for example, ‘the sun was a gold coin on the horizon’. The usual purpose of a metaphor is descriptive or persuasive – the author is

trying to describe something in vivid and striking terms, or to create a visual image. See [here](#) for more.

Metaphysical School of poetry associated with the seventeenth-century writers Donne, Herbert, Marvell, and others. Particularly known for its clever wit and inventive and unusual ideas and images, it features comparisons known as ‘conceits’, which are striking or original rather than accurate.

Metre The rhythmic shape of a line of poetry, identified by the number of stressed (or emphasised) syllables, similar to the beat found in music.

Mock-heroic Often used for satiric or humorous purposes, this involves describing a trivial or ordinary subject or event in an inappropriately grand and lofty style.

Modernism Movement in literature and art which sprang up at the beginning of the twentieth century. It swept away many of the ‘rules’ of art and culture, and set out to create inner realities and visions, experimenting with new forms of representation in the process. Modernist poetry relied increasingly on association rather than explanation, with words being used for their evocative and emotional qualities, rather than as means of communication and explanation. See [here](#) for more.

Narrative Form of writing that tells a story with a distinct plot; the focus is on events, not description or reflection.

Paraphrase To sum up or rephrase someone else’s idea or story in your own words. If you are paraphrasing poetry, this involves retelling the story, message or image of the poem in prose. See [here](#) for more.

Pastoral Literature or poetry that provides an often artificial and utopian view of rural or outdoors life. It involves a very stylised representation of nature, and draws on imagery of spring or summer. The object is to create an atmosphere of idyllic beauty rather than realism.

Patriarchy Any social, political, cultural, religious or economic system that insists that men and women have different roles to play in society, and that women should be subordinate to men. See also [gender](#).

Polemic Piece written with an explicit (and often strongly worded) political or ideological message.

Post-colonialism Theories and philosophies, shaped by the history of colonial settlement and imperialism, that look at the cultural impact and legacy of colonialism, and analyse the complex power relations that persist. See [here](#) for more.

Postmodernism This late-twentieth century school of thought came after Modernism, and was shaped by post-structuralism. It acknowledges that no effort to engage with or critique culture or art can ever be truly ‘objective’, as everyone is continually constructing their own reality, which is in turn shaped by their cultural, political, racial, and national location. This means that there is no universal model or theory that can be used to analyse or explain all cultural, artistic, and literary efforts. Postmodern art, literature and criticism draws from a variety of contradictory sources and ideas, and embraces uncertainty. See [here](#) for more.

Praise poetry In Southern Africa, this refers to the indigenous oral forms of poetry that praised kings and chiefs, often performed by someone with special oratory or verbal power and skill. In its modern form, praise poetry is any long poem that describes and honours an important person. See, for example, Tatamkulu Afrika’s ‘[The Handshake \(for Nelson Mandela\)](#)’.

Puns Play on word that has two or more meanings – often used for humorous effect. Sometimes the same word has a double meaning (the word ‘tear’ can refer to moisture from the eye, but also the act of violently dividing something). In other cases the word can sound very similar to another word, as in this joke: ‘A vulture tries to board a plane, carrying two dead meerkats. The steward says, “Sorry, sir, only one carrion allowed.”’

Rap or hip-hop poetry A form of **spoken word** poetry ([see below](#)) that follows a regular, insistent rhythm, that features rhyme, including internal and end rhymes, is not punctuated (the performer controls the pace

and decides when to pause), and is usually in the present tense. The language is forceful, and often includes local slang, dialects and swearing. The sound of the words is as important as their meaning. See, for example, Lesego Rampolokeng's '[History](#)'.

Romance (as in drama) Possesses characteristics of both tragedy and comedy; suffering and loss force deluded or weak characters to recognise their faults. At this point, magical elements transform or reverse tragic events (those believed to be dead are restored, spells are broken, lost children are found, and so on). The ending usually involves marriage, symbolising the restoration of family and society.

Satire Writing that mocks or criticises something by means of exaggeration or exposure. The difference between satire and **irony** (see above) is that irony says the opposite of what is intended to be understood, whereas satire describes its object accurately, but unflatteringly, by highlighting its flaws. The effect is often humorous. (See also [mock-heroic](#) above.)

Secular (see **spiritual**) Broadly, this means anything that is not religious or sacred. As a literary term, it is used (especially with reference to medieval and Renaissance poetry) to describe works that are not religious in tone or topic, and deal with non-spiritual matters.

Simile Imagery (similar to **metaphor**) that takes the form of an explicit comparison by using the words 'as' or 'like'; for example, 'She runs like the wind, but he is as slow as a tortoise'. See [here](#) for more.

Sonnet Carefully crafted 14-line poem, with a strict rhyme scheme and metre. The lines are either divided into three sets of four lines each, plus a rhyming couplet, or into an eight-line section (the octave, which usually describes the topic or sets out the argument) followed by six lines (the sestet), which reflects or comments on the subject of the octave. The last two lines usually sum up the argument of the poem or state the speaker's final message.

Spiritual or sacred (see **secular**) In the broad sense, that which is religious or sacred. Used in literature (especially with reference to medieval and Renaissance poetry) to distinguish works written for religious purposes (also often called **devotional**) from secular works, which deal with non-religious topics (such as human love).

Spoken word poetry Poetry that is intended to be performed live, and heard by an audience. Often plays with rhyme and repetition and different languages and dialects to create unusual and interesting sound effects. Isabella Motadinyane's '[Touting Taxi](#)' is an example. See also [rap](#) or **hip-hop poetry**.

Syntax This refers to the grammatical construction of sentences into an order and shape that is readable and obeys the 'rules' of correct usage.

Tragedy (as in drama) Tragic events and actions befall characters either through their own weakness or sin (their 'fatal flaw') or through the twists of 'fate'. The narrative moves inevitably towards the death of the hero and/or heroine (as well as many of the other characters), after which a new sense of resolution is found. The Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that the purpose of tragedy was to arouse emotions of pity and fear in the audience, and then to provide a catharsis (outlet) for these feelings.

Vernacular Local or indigenous language. Throughout the centuries, the revival or flowering of vernacular languages has been associated with national and cultural pride.

Xenophobia Irrational fear and hatred of strangers.

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- 1 War-like nomadic tribes that threatened the borders of the old Chinese empire.
- 2 Long, fortified wall built as a defence against the Tartars. It stretched for thousands of kilometres, and much of it still stands today. It is a great tourist attraction.
- 3 Grave of a royal mistress and Tartar empress. According to legend, grass grew on her grave all year round.
- 4 Constellation of stars; their flickering was seen as an omen of Tartar attack.
- 5 An outpost on the Great Wall of China (see also Li Ho's [poem](#)).
- 6 Seafaring warriors from northern Europe (Scandinavia); among the Germanic tribes that repeatedly raided (and eventually conquered and settled) the British Isles.
- 7 'Avarice (or love of money) is the root of all evil' (1 Timothy 6:10).
- 8 Letters of authorisation from a bishop.
- 9 The papal ('lige lorde' refers to the Pope) seal on my license.
- 10 Try to stop me doing Christ's holy work.
- 11 Relics supposed to have belonged to holy figures were very popular in medieval times; this led to widespread manufacture and sale of fake relics.
- 12 Confess and be forgiven.
- 13 Made her husband a cuckold (i.e., been unfaithful to him).
- 14 Nod my head.
- 15 Even if their souls go black-berrying (i.e., go to hell).
- 16 I preach for no reason except greed.
- 17 Nor make a living from weaving or handiwork (basket-making).
- 18 Even if it was given by the poorest child.
- 19 Even if her children died of hunger.
- 20 Now keep quiet.
- 21 'Touch me not'. The last two lines probably refer to Wyatt's relationship with Anne Boleyn.
- 22 Cupid, god of love, who shoots his victims with a bow and arrow.
- 23 Written in response to Christopher Marlowe's '[The Passionate Shepherd to His Love](#)'.
- 24 Classical name given to the nightingale. In legend, Philomel was a princess who was raped. The gods turned her into a bird so that she could escape her attacker.
- 25 Coral is a hard, reddish substance formed by sea-creatures; amber is fossilised tree-sap that is a rich golden-brown colour. Both are used in making jewellery.
- 26 Symbols of wickedness.

- 27 This poem inspired a response by Sir Walter Raleigh. Other poets who wrote humorous replies were John Donne and, more recently, Cecil Day-Lewis (father of the actor Daniel Day-Lewis).
- 28 See footnote 3.
- 29 Reference to the measurements of a ship, in particular the height of the mast.
- 30 Curved knife used for harvesting or cutting crops.
- 31 See footnote 3.
- 32 Measurement used to judge depth of water.
- 33 See footnote 3.
- 34 Probably the Milky Way (a broad, dense band of stars).
- 35 Donne suggests that nudity is, literally, heavenly.
- 36 Goddess, who in classical legend was distracted in an important race by golden apples dropped in her path.
- 37 Wearing white usually signified innocence or repentance.
- 38 Reference to the Christian belief in the Trinity (the belief that the deity comprises Father, Son and Holy Spirit).
- 39 Sin or Satan.
- 40 Reference not just to India, but also South-east Asia, which was seen as a mysterious and exotic source of spices, jewels, and precious metals.
- 41 The medieval art, part chemistry, part magic, of trying to create gold; it was widely discredited by Donne's time.
- 42 Reference to the belief that the body would eventually be physically resurrected ('fleshly birth') from the grave and reunited with the soul.
- 43 This is the literal meaning of the name 'Benjamin', shared by father and son.
- 44 The poet seems to be hoping that he will never love selfishly.
- 45 Musical term for conclusions.
- 46 Reference to the end of the world in flames, as described in the Bible.
- 47 Church bell tolled to announce a death.
- 48 Reference to the parable of the talents told by Jesus (Matthew 25:14-30). This teaches that it is essential to make use of the gifts granted to one.
- 49 Paper used to be made out of cloth and rags.
- 50 This pun refers to the metre of poetry; feet are units made up of one stressed (or 'strong') syllable together with a few unstressed syllables.
- 51 Holy river in the north of India.
- 52 River beside Hull, Marvell's home town in the north of England.
- 53 The great flood described in the Old Testament.

- 54 This conversion (to Christianity) would supposedly be a sign that the world was ending.
- 55 A bawdy pun; since Chaucer's time, 'quaint' had been affectionate slang for female genitals (today degraded to the deeply offensive 'cunt').
- 56 Chaps are jaws; time is presented as slowly consuming human beings.
- 57 Those physically unable to speak.
- 58 Fountain reputed to be the source of wisdom and inspiration.
- 59 Classical goddess supposed to prompt inspiration.
- 60 Highest mountain range in western Europe.
- 61 Pet monkey.
- 62 The arrow with which Cupid (the god of love) was supposed to strike.
- 63 Reference to highwaymen, who held up and robbed travelling coaches.
- 64 Borrow money against land or property.
- 65 Enjoys a noisy drinking-party.
- 66 Tyre was an ancient Mediterranean city where purple dye was made from shellfish.
- 67 Sea goddess.
- 68 Mapped out; also legally defined or restricted.
- 69 River running through central London.
- 70 Legal prohibition or punishment; possibly also a pun on 'bann' (marriage announcement).
- 71 Swearing; also a reference to the sexually transmitted disease syphilis; babies born to infected women were often blind or deformed (see line 15).
- 72 Central bridge over the Thames River in London.
- 73 Broad, dense band of stars.
- 74 Kubla was the first Mongol ruler, or 'Khan' of China. Coleridge invents the name of the capital city, calling it 'Xanadu'.
- 75 Possible reference to Amara, supposed to be the location of paradise.
- 76 Greek name for the Egyptian king Ramses II, who had a huge statue of himself built as a monument to his power.
- 77 Destruction of liberty.
- 78 Probably the Act of Union, which legally bound Ireland under English rule.
- 79 French for 'The beautiful woman without pity'.
- 80 Either the Straits of Gibraltar, a headland controlled by Britain that guards the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, or the Straits of Dover, another name for the English Channel, the narrow stretch of sea that separates Britain from France.
- 81 Roman name for Odysseus, the Greek hero of Homer's *Odyssey*.

- 82 Group of stars; their rising was thought to herald rain.
- 83 Scene of the Trojan War, an epic battle described in Homer's *Iliad*.
- 84 Staff; symbol of royalty and authority.
- 85 This image refers to rowing through waves.
- 86 The Greek paradise, where the brave and the good lived after death.
- 87 The most heroic of the Greeks killed in the Trojan war.
- 88 God of the sea.
- 89 This poem is part of a series that Whitman wrote in celebration of what he called 'manly love'.
- 90 See [footnote 55](#)
- 91 Headlands on either side of a channel of water.
- 92 Classical Greek author of tragic dramas.
- 93 Part of the Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Turkey.
- 94 River in Germany, which runs through a region famous for its vineyards and wine.
- 95 Person addicted to sensual indulgence.
- 96 Name given by Hardy to his home region of southwest England.
- 97 Dry interior plateau of South Africa.
- 98 Mary, mother of Jesus; a source of religious comfort to Catholic Christians.
- 99 Iron block on which metal is hammered into shape.
- 100 Perforce; necessarily.
- 101 Kestrel or falcon; bird of prey known for its ability to hover against the wind.
- 102 Son of (and heir to) the king of France.
- 103 French word for knight or nobleman.
- 104 Game of combined skill and luck (involving tossing a coin repeatedly) that attracted bets.
- 105 Literally, 'universal spirit'.
- 106 Reference to the Sphinx, a mythological monster worshipped and feared by the ancient Egyptians and Greeks.
- 107 Birthplace of Jesus.
- 108 Pádraic Pearse, a teacher and writer; the reference to the winged horse, Pegasus, associated in legend with poetry, suggests the common literary ground shared by Pearse and Yeats.
- 109 Thomas MacDonagh, also a poet.
- 110 John MacBride; his marriage to Maud Gonne, whom Yeats loved, was an unhappy one.

- 111 Britain had promised that once the First World War was over, Ireland would be granted a measure of independence.
- 112 James Connolly, a trade unionist and socialist.
- 113 A village close to the airman's home in western Ireland.
- 114 Underground railway system in Paris.
- 115 Helen of Troy, whose abduction led to the Trojan War.
- 116 This could be a comparison either to olives themselves, or olive trees, which have silver-coloured leaves.
- 117 According to Greek mythology, Helen was born after Zeus, ruler of the gods, seduced Leda (a human woman).
- 118 Trees often planted in graveyards.
- 119 According to the Bible, wise men from the East who travelled to pay homage to the baby Jesus.
- 120 Beam set above a door.
- 121 This title (which means 'the art of poetry') is taken from a work on the subject of poetry by the classical Latin poet, Horace.
- 122 Chemical gas bombs.
- 123 Sticky chemical sometimes used to trap birds.
- 124 Ironic quotation from the Latin poet Horace: 'Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country'.
- 125 Chemical used as an artificial sweetener.
- 126 The southern states of the United States, which relied heavily on slave labour until the civil war between the northern and southern states in the 1860s ended slavery.
- 127 Cotton was the chief crop of the southern states; harvesting it was backbreaking work.
- 128 Racial type of European origin.
- 129 Small grey-green bushes with purple flowers typically found in the north of England and Scotland.
- 130 Province in Italy.
- 131 A fish was one of the figures used by the early Christians to symbolise Jesus as the risen Christ.
- 132 Thin black fabric, worn to indicate mourning in Western cultures until about fifty years ago.
- 133 Slang term for an African; now considered degrading.
- 134 Hunter-gatherer tribe (initially called Bushmen) indigenous to the Cape; now largely exterminated.
- 135 The 'trekboers' were farmers of Dutch descent who left the Cape and travelled ('trekked') on wagons drawn by oxen into the interior of the country. One of the reasons they left was to escape new laws that made slavery illegal, and which would have forced them to free their slaves.
- 136 'By God' or 'I swear on oath' (Tswana).
- 137 These words are translated in the next line.
- 138 Flying fish are small tropical fish with wing-like fins that they use to leap from the sea into the air.

- 139 Dry interior plateau of South Africa.
- 140 Mother of Jesus.
- 141 A typical Chicago club.
- 142 Port on the Atlantic coast of South America.
- 143 Insects that make a high, rhythmic chirping sound.
- 144 The festival of Christmas.
- 145 Wise men from the East.
- 146 Brief moralising statement or generalisation.
- 147 Container made from hollowed-out fruit or vegetable.
- 148 Gold-coloured fossilised plant sap; insects were sometimes trapped in it.
- 149 Reference to the togas (garments) worn by rulers of the Roman Empire.
- 150 Russian emperor.
- 151 Holy image or symbol.
- 152 Sound made by African drums.
- 153 African trees bearing edible fruit.
- 154 Green semi-precious stone, often used in Oriental carving and sculpture.
- 155 Post, device used to shut cattle up in stalls.
- 156 Strong-smelling anaesthetic gas.
- 157 Flightless bird, now extinct.
- 158 Day of Independence in the USA.
- 159 April Fool's Day, 1 April.
- 160 Mythical figure who, according to legend, carried the world on his back.
- 161 Large bird (about the size of a guinea fowl) with green and red feathers; often hunted and eaten.
- 162 Horn filled with natural produce; a symbol of abundance.
- 163 White spring flowers.
- 164 In Shakespeare's , a sub-human monster who was lord of the island until Miranda and her father took over. In post-colonial *The Tempest* criticism, often identified as a symbol of the demonised indigenous inhabitants of a colonised territory.
- 165 Name given to armoured cars.
- 166 Those who participate in the Christian ritual of holy communion.
- 167 Reference to Timbuktu (spelled Timbouctou in French), the ancient trading city in the heart of Mali.

- 168 Mosioatunya or ‘the smoke that thunders’, also known as Victoria Falls, is the spectacular waterfall on the Zambezi River bordering Zambia and Zimbabwe. Rainbows appear constantly in the mist thrown up by the falling water.
- 169 The capital city of Mali.
- 170 Naval base and residential area on the Cape Peninsula.
- 171 Ropes that support masts.
- 172 Luxury resort with pseudo-Mediterranean architecture.
- 173 Eighteenth-century Cape farm architecture, famous for its beauty.
- 174 Ornamental patterning in wire and metal.
- 175 6 Strong wind which blows during summer in the Cape.
- 176 Reference to ‘hob-nailed’ boots (boots with metal studs in the sole).
- 177 Early form of writing developed in the Middle East, consisting of marks made on clay tablets or stone.
- 178 Joined-up writing or script, in which the letters are connected.
- 179 Lively form of township music, featuring the penny-whistle; made internationally famous through Mango Groove’s song ‘Special Star’.
- 180 Impregnation by medical means.
- 181 A spice with a subtle flavour and scent, also used as a dye.
- 182 These two lines, in Xhosa and Afrikaans, translate roughly as ‘how many does this one make?’
- 183 Black township outside Johannesburg.
- 184 Ravines caused by soil erosion; associated with drought and overcrowding.
- 185 City at the heart of the urban sprawl centred on the mining industries in and around Gauteng. Historically, it has relied on black labour while remaining a white residential area.
- 186 See [footnote 4](#).
- 187 Luminous gas used in lighting and coloured signs.
- 188 Bird that fishes in rivers or dams.
- 189 Figure in Greek legend who was kidnapped by the king of the underworld (the realm of the dead). Her return to the earth heralded the coming of spring, but while underground, she ate six seeds of a pomegranate (type of fruit), thus condemning herself to spend winter there each year.
- 190 In Caribbean dialect, a party.
- 191 Drunken festival, named after Bacchus, the Greek god of wine.
- 192 During Nelson Mandela’s years as a political prisoner, family members had to sit behind a glass panel while visiting him. No physical contact was allowed.
- 193 Chemical substance that changes colour to pinkish-red under acid conditions. The implication is that these children are white, as they burn easily in the sun.

- 194 'Please', a colloquial greeting in the Cape Muslim community, which translates literally as 'please in the name of God'.
- 195 Major manufacturing city in Germany; Main is the name of the river on which it is built.
- 196 Distinctive peak in the Table Mountain range that encircles central Cape Town.
- 197 See the notes.
- 198 Greek God of flocks and shepherds; musical and mischievous.
- 199 Hindu goddess of wisdom; watches over libraries.
- 200 Cakes made of dough and fried in oil.
- 201 Portable gas stove.
- 202 Township slang for thug or criminal.
- 203 Species of butterfly.
- 204 Dry interior plateau of South Africa.
- 205 Afrikaans word for a homemade guitar, used in some Karoo folk music.
- 206 To stem the flow of a liquid, usually blood.
- 207 A section of the huge township of Soweto, outside Johannesburg (Jozi).
- 208 Streets in central Johannesburg.
- 209 Brand of gin.
- 210 Vietnamese revolutionary and leader who symbolised the struggle for a united, Communist country even after his death in 1969. The city of Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City in his honour.
- 211 Wordplay on the title of a classic black comedy and murder mystery , which became a popular film in the 1940s. *Old Lace and Arsenic*
- 212 Concept of greater political openness, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the former USSR in the 1980s.
- 213 Possible reference to the symbol of the extreme right-wing South African fringe group, the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB). The symbol resembles the swastika of the Nazi party.
- 214 Chiwoniso Maraire is a Zimbabwean singer, songwriter, and exponent of the mbira, a traditional instrument.
- 215 These are all African countries or cities fabled for their great wealth in the past.
- 216 'Spaza' shops are informal stores, often found in townships, offering basic foodstuffs and supplies to local communities.
- 217 Arabic word meaning 'shaking' or 'rebellion'. Refers to many uprisings in the Middle East, but usually the Palestinian uprisings against Israeli occupation.

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