

Section 1: Poetry 1

Unit 1: Introduction to poetry

Responding to poetry and writing about it

This section of the book will help you to express your thoughts and feelings about poetry. The units on this topic are designed to help you to enjoy poetry to the full and to feel more secure about expressing your responses, formulating your own interpretations and supporting your ideas with examples.

Poetry can stretch words to their limit to record unique, direct impressions of experience. A word can achieve its full potential when a skilled poet combines it with other carefully selected words. The elements of a word – its meaning, associations, context, history, sound, even its shape and length – all combine with other words to produce the distinctive qualities of a poem. No wonder that many writers see poetry as the ultimate achievement of any language, the utterance that can never really be translated without losing some of its magic. Read any poem aloud to savour its sounds and rhythms; critical appreciation will follow with practice.

All syllabuses focus on a very important Assessment Objective that reminds us that every writer chooses forms, structures and words to shape meanings. Both the writer selecting the words and the reader absorbing their effects are important in this process. You are the reader, whose close listening and reading, personal experience and enjoyment are most significant for your appreciation. You may find that you observe and give emphasis in a different way from your classmate. Providing that both of you can express your feelings, identify the evidence from the poem you are discussing and argue your case, then neither of you is wrong, necessarily. Both of you are literary critics.

What makes a poem?

ACTIVITY 1.1

Discuss with your group, or teacher if possible, what qualities you think a poem should have in order to be defined as a poem, and make a list.

COMMENT

Here's a table for you, which shows where various points are discussed in the following Poetry units. You may have come up with some of these points in your discussion about the qualities that define poems.

Possible qualities of a poem	Where these are discussed
A Reading a poem out loud can be very exciting/thrilling/funny/sad even if you don't understand all of it completely.	
B It is usually 'about' something – a theme; but it doesn't have to tell a story.	Later in Unit 1
C The writer is expressing her/his thoughts on a particular subject so it can be full of humour or emotion such as anger or sadness.	Later in Unit 1

<p>D The meaning can sometimes be difficult at first reading because:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the words aren't in the usual order • some of them even seem to be missing • they appear to be new words not in the dictionary, or don't have their usual meaning • the language is concentrated or ambiguous. 	Unit 2
<p>E The language can have lots of figures of speech (such as metaphor and personification) and be very descriptive.</p>	Unit 2
<p>F Sometimes words or phrases or ideas are repeated.</p>	Unit 2
<p>G It is written in lines and the sentences don't reach the end of the page.</p>	Unit 3
<p>H There is a pattern to the way it is laid out (e.g. in verses, stanzas or groups of lines).</p>	Unit 3
<p>I Sometimes it is very rhythmical and there are rhymes or other sound effects such as alliteration.</p>	Unit 4 and 5

Of all the points in the list, it's probably **D**, with its range of challenges for readers, that worries students the most, especially when they have never studied poetry before or are looking at a poem for the first time. Try not to be too worried about what you see as difficulties of interpretation. Some students spend too much time trying to chase the 'meaning' of a poem and forget about the real words that are the poem. It's important to remember that the poet has made choices to create particular effects, and considering these in detail – their sounds, their rhythm, their combination together – often clarifies meaning where it has seemed tricky.

Then, in Unit 6 you focus on writing for an exam, with two different examples of questions. Throughout the units you will have Study and Revision tips. The examples used are from the Literature texts on Cambridge syllabuses, as well as others that are especially memorable or appropriate to illustrate particular points.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Look again at the table of qualities that could characterise a poem. How many of them can be seen in the following short poetic text?

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

Ezra Pound *In a Station of the Metro* (1913)

SAMPLE RESPONSE

At first there do not seem to be enough qualities to make this into a poem as such. It has only two lines, which are not of the same length; there is no distinctive rhythm or rhyme and there is not even a verb to give action to the situation and point to a theme. (Some students think this is too fragmentary to be classed as a poem and you may have some sympathy with that view.) But it is a very descriptive fragment and it uses two different images – one in each line – to capture the poet’s experience of seeing people in a crowded station. (The Metro is the Paris underground system. If you do not have an underground train system where you live, imagine crowds pouring off a train.) The poem’s title is important because it places the poet’s observation and allows the reader to conjure up similar experiences.

The first image is that the faces are an *apparition*, a word that means ‘appearance’, but also ‘ghost’, suggesting that they do not look like living beings and perhaps are pale and sad. The second image develops the idea by the metaphor of their faces being like petals on a wet black bough: perhaps the poet is suggesting spring when the trees have blooms but no leaves and the weather is still rainy; the petals are white or pale pink and delicate, easily blown away. Both images suggest helplessness and transience: there is nothing substantial or robust in the description at all. So although the poet has only offered us images, they are suggestive ones, haunting even, and the experience of seeing people as vulnerable in the hurly-burly of modern urban life has been communicated in two lines and two evocative images.



KEY TERMS

The **Imagists** were a group of early 20th-century poets who believed that experience was most effectively communicated through images of the senses and this approach is an important element in appreciating *what* a poet is expressing by considering *how* it is expressed. Sense images do not have to be metaphors. The senses are sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell; to these we can add the ‘sense’ of energy or movement, which could be termed the **kinetic** sense.

The poem is a good example of Imagism. Ezra Pound was one of a group of poets called **Imagists**.

Here is another example of a short poem with vivid images by Ong Teong Hean. Tai-chi was originally a training for Chinese martial arts, but is now considered a very valuable exercise regime.

the man of tai-chi
with such sequestered ease
creates a clean calligraphy
of graceful peace:
a centre of concentration
to pump his heart and arteries
with measured arm-motion
and steps of gnarled artistry.

Ong Teong Hean *The Tai-chi Man* (2010)

ACTIVITY 1.3

Write down the names of five poems you have studied and in one or two sentences say what they are about. If possible, with your partner or in a group discuss in more detail how each theme develops as the poem progresses.

What are poems usually about?

Poets can express thoughts and feelings about anything, so poems can have as their subject matter anything in the world you can think of, like the Underground or exercising in the morning! There are great poems created about apparently trivial objects like a lock of hair, insects such as a flea or mosquito, or growing things such as thistles or mushrooms. Major life dramas such as love, treachery and war do of course also feature. What the poet does with the subject matter, and how these ideas are developed, is the poem's theme, or it can be expressed as 'the poet's concerns'. These ideas are not separate from the words they are expressed in: the words *are* the poem.

Your exam syllabus for AS Level does not set longer narrative poems for study, so all the examples used in this part of the book will be of shorter lyric poems with distinct themes; you will find that length is not necessarily a criterion for excellence.

Themes in poetry

It is often easier to summarise the theme of a poem than it is to analyse the poet's methods and the effects of the language used. This poem is about the waste and futility of war, you might say, or the sadness of death, or the passage of time, or how relationships can be difficult, or how some people in power can make others suffer dreadfully.

Perhaps the poet gives a different example in each **stanza** and then concludes by emphasising his point, or uses a little anecdote that illustrates the issue. Or possibly the poet chooses images which are suggestive of a thought but don't express the thought directly, but we still grasp the gist of the argument.

ACTIVITY 1.4

How would you describe the theme of this poem by William Blake? When you have answered, consider what other elements in the poem could affect the expression of this theme and your appreciation of it.

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt:
Helpless, naked, piping loud:
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

Struggling in my father's hands,
Striving against my swaddling bands.
Bound and weary, I thought best
To sulk upon my mother's breast.

William Blake (1757–1827) *Infant Sorrow*

KEY TERMS

Stanza is an Italian word that means 'room', a place to stop. Poetic stanzas can be irregular as well as regular (see page 18).

SAMPLE RESPONSE

This poem, one of the *Songs of Experience*, presents a newborn baby uttering its thoughts and feelings, but this infant is very different from the sweet and innocent baby usually imagined being born into a loving, happy family environment. The baby is physically weak, but its spirit is already corrupt and aggressive. The poet may be suggesting that children are not born innocent and then corrupted by the world as they grow up. Rather, he suggests, they have an inborn nature which disposes them towards ill temper and sin from the moment they are born into this 'dangerous' world.



Illustration from William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

What is missing from this response?

This answer interprets the theme of the poem quite successfully, but to focus on theme alone is to neglect other aspects of the poem that influence the theme very powerfully. Consider the effect of having the child's voice as the speaking voice of the poem – this creates a powerful impression of a character already formed.

Look at the simile *Like a fiend hid in a cloud* and what it suggests about the devilish and hypocritical potential of the child. The evocative descriptive words *struggling*, *striving* and the verb *sulk* are linked in sound as well as meaning, emphasising the child's hostile, resentful attitude and self-conscious behaviour. Similarly the words *hands* and *bands* rhyme, suggesting by the implication of their linkage that the hands of the father are restraining rather than lovingly protective. The concise lines, regular rhythm and rhyme give a confident certainty to the meaning and tone of the poem, and are thereby all the more shocking.

In a Station of the Metro, that little fragmentary poem, showed the importance of style in interpretation. You are reminded similarly by Blake's poem that the way a theme is expressed is vital to its meaning: all the work you do on analysis of style will help you to refine your ideas about theme and you will be able to return to your initial statement about the writer's concerns and make it more subtle and comprehensive.



TIP

The words make the poem: its meaning doesn't exist as a separate entity underneath or inside the words like a nut whose shell has to be cracked to find the kernel inside. If you changed some of the words to others with similar meanings but different sounds, the poem would disappear and become something else.

Students usually write about a poem's theme and say little about the poet's style and methods. Any close analysis of the language of a poem will enhance the quality of an essay.