

Part 1
AS Level



Section 1

Poetry 1

2

Unit 1

Introduction to poetry

Learning objectives

In this unit you will:

- enjoy reviewing the basics of poetry
- reflect on poems you already know and what you think about them
- consider any difficulties you may have experienced in discussing or writing about them
- remind yourself of the importance of words, their meaning and sound.



KEY CONCEPTS

Language, form, structure, genres, context, style, interpretation.

Before you start

- Remember that you are the reader and your personal response is vital! Get ready to read, concentrate and enjoy yourself. This is Unit 1 and it's always reassuring to go back to basics.
- Have your pens and notebook (whether paper or electronic) at your side. Some activities demand your undivided attention, but some can be enjoyed with a friend. If you are working alone, best to switch your phone to silent. You can share afterwards!

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. When you come to a poem you have never seen before (such as an examined unseen exercise), you will feel confident and alert, able to use everything you've learnt. All your reading experience will help you.

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.

Reflection: Consider why you came to this conclusion.

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. If you are working on your own, think particularly of short fragments and any texts you’ve come across before which didn’t seem very ‘poetic’ (perhaps rhymes in birthday cards). Consider whether song lyrics can be called poems, since they need the music to complete their effect.

What makes a poem?

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

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.



Unit 5 gives you hints and tips for tackling an unseen poem, helping you to interpret and to write about a poem you’ve never seen before. You will have more confidence in your work. There are examples of students’ essays on an unseen poem, with the marker’s comments showing what is good and what could be improved, which you’ll find helpful.

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

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.

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Reflection: Did the poem’s images have this effect on you? Look at some crowds emerging from a station or underground train. Do they look cheerful and lively?

KEY TERM

Imagists: a group of early 20th-century poets who believed that experience was most effectively communicated through images of the senses. 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 Singaporean poet Ong Teong Hean. Tai-chi was originally a training for Chinese martial arts but is now considered a very valuable exercise regime. There are some effective rhymes and half-rhymes at the ends of the lines, features that you will discuss in Unit 4.

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)

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, such as 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. Poems used in an unseen exam question will also be of this kind.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Write down the names of five poems you have studied and, in one or two sentences, say what they are about.

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.

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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. You'll look more closely at this in Unit 3.


ACTIVITY 1.4

Before you read the next poem, *Egrets* (1962) by Australian poet Judith Wright, see if you can find a picture of these graceful white birds, perhaps on the internet. Then, in one sentence, say what you think the poem is about. When you have answered, consider what other elements in the poem could affect the expression of this theme and your appreciation of it.

Once as I travelled through a quiet evening,
I saw a pool, jet-black and mirror-still.
Beyond, the slender paperbarks* stood crowding;
each on its own white image looked its fill,
and nothing moved but thirty egrets wading –
thirty egrets in a quiet evening.

Once in a lifetime, lovely past believing,
your lucky eyes may light on such a pool.
As though for many years I had been waiting,
I watched in silence, till my heart was full
of clear dark water, and white trees unmoving,
and, whiter yet, those thirty egrets wading.

(*A paperbark is an Australian tree with white bark which resembles strips of paper)
Judith Wright, *Egrets* (1962)

KEY TERM

Stanza: an Italian word that means 'room', a place to stop. Poetic stanzas can be irregular as well as regular (see Unit 3, Verse and stanza).



SAMPLE RESPONSE

The poet speaks of the beauty of some birds she sees at a pool as she is walking one evening and how she is affected by this memorable 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 powerfully. Wright uses images of silence and the stillness of everything except the birds. There is effective colour contrast in the dark pool and the white birds and trees. She uses repetition of words and phrases for emphasis, and the poem's two-stanza structure takes the reader from a single incident (*Once as I travelled through a quiet evening*) to the idea that this is a special *Once in a lifetime* experience which anyone would be lucky to have. When she says *my heart was full / of clear dark water* she is using language metaphorically to express the way that experiences can overwhelm the mind. The rhymes and half-rhymes skilfully enhance the theme. You will revise these in more detail in the next three units.

ACTIVITY 1.5

Another well-known poet has written a poem about white egrets and has a collection of poems with this title, which was first published in 2010 when he was 80 years old. See if you can find out who he is!

In a Station of the Metro, that little fragmentary poem, showed the importance of style in interpretation. You are reminded similarly by Wright’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.



FURTHER READING

- 1 The website ‘Poemhunter’ is a useful source for poems on particular topics (such as nature, animals, cities and so on).
- 2 *Language for a New Century: Contemporary Poetry from the Middle East, Asia and Beyond*, edited by Ravi Shankar and Nathalie Handal (Norton, 2008).

Self-assessment checklist

Reflect on what you’ve learnt in this unit and indicate your confidence level between 1 and 5. If you score below 3, revisit that section. Come back to this list later in your course. Has your confidence grown?

	Confidence level	Revisited?
I can appreciate and discuss the different elements that may make a poem		
I understand what the Imagists were aiming to do		
I can identify aspects other than theme in Wright’s poem about the birds		
I acknowledge the importance of style		

Unit 2

The language of poetry


Learning objectives

In this unit you will:

- remind yourself of metaphorical and other non-literal language, with examples to clarify
- revise and consider the effect of language with unusual word order and syntax
- review the importance of repetition and parallelism in poems and their effect.

Before you start

- Look back at the poem by Judith Wright in Unit 1 and see if you can find any similes or metaphors. This will put you in the right frame of mind for reviewing figures of speech.

KEY CONCEPTS

Language, form, structure, genres, context, style, interpretation.

This unit will help you to appreciate and deal with some of the poetic uses of language: first, the figurative language that characterises many poems and expands their imaginative range; second, the uses of language that challenge your understanding.

The meaning of lines of poetry can sometimes be difficult to unravel because the words are new to you, they are not in the usual order, or perhaps some are missing, making the utterance ambiguous. It's important to remember that a poet's style is not seeking difficulty for its own sake but striving for freshness of presentation and thought, so that when you study the poem you will be engaged by it and remember it with pleasure as a unique utterance.

Metaphorical language

The language of poetry can be very concentrated. One of the reasons for this intensity of expression is the use of **metaphor**. Literal language – the language of fixed predictable meaning – is relatively straightforward, but as soon as language becomes figurative (filled with **figures of speech**) then it becomes highly suggestive and open to imaginative interpretation. Look at the difference between *My love is eighteen years old and has black hair* (literal) and *My love is like a red, red rose* (a figurative comparison).

Metaphor is a broad term which encompasses all the comparative figures of speech (**simile** and **personification**, for example) rather as the term 'mammal' includes a wide range of animals. It is based on comparison. In the hands of a skilled poet, metaphor can extend and enrich meaning, often working at more than one level of comparison and extending through several lines or a whole poem.

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KEY TERMS

Figures of speech: Don't be put off by the fact that many words for figures of speech are unusual, often deriving from ancient Greek. This shows that using them has been an essential feature of language since ancient times. There are literally scores of them, but the following list gives you the most common ones.

Imagery: the images of any of our senses (sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell) produced in the mind by descriptive language. These images are often being compared with something else, so frequently associated with specific figures of speech.

Metaphor: the most important and widespread figure of speech. It is a comparison in which unlike objects are identified with each other so that some element of similarity can be found between them. Here a comparison is made by identifying one thing with another, but without using *as* or *like*. In its identification of one thing with another it goes further than a simile. For example:

If music be the food of love, play on (Shakespeare *Twelfth Night*): music to a lover is like food to a hungry person, feeding and sustaining.

The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (Shakespeare *Hamlet*): life's blows are like missiles thrown at us, but note that fortune is also personified here.

Her skills have blossomed since she started lessons: her skills are growing like a plant – a bud has grown and has gradually become a beautiful flower.

Extended metaphor: where the identification of similar qualities is elaborated over a number of lines, and may run throughout a poem or paragraph of prose.

Simile: a figure of speech (really a kind of metaphor) in which two things are compared using *as* or *like*. A good simile will be clear and economical, but also suggestive; for example, *My love is like a red, red rose* (Robert Burns): beautiful, with soft skin like petals.

Personification: a form of metaphor in which the qualities of a person are transferred to non-human things or abstract qualities, to 'humanise' them and make them easier to understand; for example, *the street lamp muttered* (T.S. Eliot): the environment is just as alive as the person walking down the street.

Hyperbole: exaggeration – an over-statement, used for effect. It isn't used to disguise the truth, but to emphasise. It can be an ingredient of humour too; for example, *An hundred years should go to praise thine eyes* (Andrew Marvell, praising his lover).

Litotes: an understatement used for effect, often using a double negative (such as *not bad*); for example, Wordsworth uses *not seldom* to mean 'quite often' in *The Prelude*.

Antithesis or **contrast:** places contrasting ideas next to each other for effect; often they are in balanced phrases or clauses. This placing can also be termed **juxtaposition** (see Unit 14). You will find many examples of this throughout the book.

Climax: (from a Greek word meaning 'ladder') is the point of highest significance which is gradually reached; for example, *to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield* (Alfred Lord Tennyson). Its opposite, **anti-climax** or **bathos**, suddenly undercuts the climax (and may be humorous); for example, from a poem describing the survivors of a shipwreck (the cutter is the ship carrying foodstuffs): *they grieved for those that perished with the cutter / and also for the biscuit casks and butter* (Lord Byron).

Paradox: two apparently contradictory ideas placed together which make sense when examined closely; for example, *the child is father of the man* (William Wordsworth). If the contradiction is expressed in words in close proximity, it is called an **oxymoron**. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo makes a whole speech using them (e.g. *Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health*).

Repetition: extremely common for emphasis. The word **parallelism** is used for similar structures, phrases or clauses placed together. You will find many examples of this throughout the book; for example, Tennyson's *Mariana* (see the section on repetition and parallelism later in this unit).

Anaphora: repetition of introductory phrases.

Irony: in its simplest form, irony involves a discrepancy between what is said by a writer and what is actually meant, or a contrast between what the reader expects and what is actually written. More complex forms of irony are dealt with in Part 2 of this book. The word **sarcasm** refers to speech rather than writing, although it would be appropriate for a character speaking in a play.

Sarcasm: The use of a mocking or scornful tone of voice. If analysing a writer's tone you should use the word 'irony', but a character's direct speech can be called sarcastic.