

10 Year
Anniversary

The Complete Poetry Resource

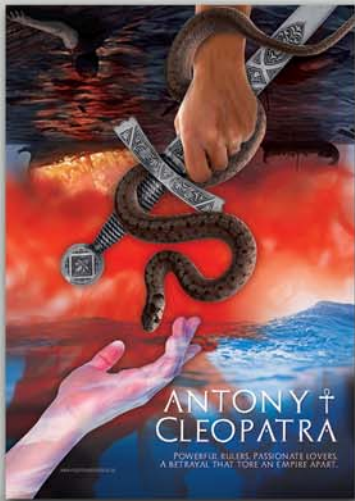
Sixth Edition

Prescribed Poems and Learning Materials

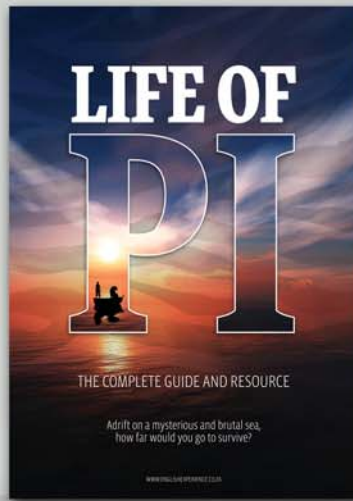
IEB ENGLISH

WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

**Antony and Cleopatra:
Complete Guide and Resource**



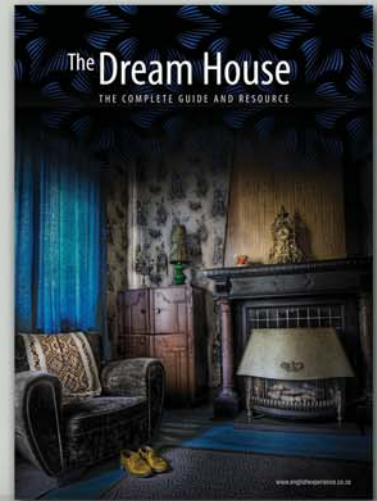
**Life of Pi: Complete
Guide and Resource**



**The Complete IEB
Poetry Resource for Grade 12
(Sixth Edition)**



**The Dream House: Complete
Guide and Resource**



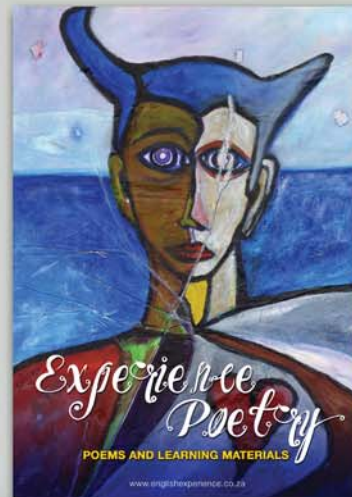
**The Complete Life Orientation
Resource for Grades 10-12**



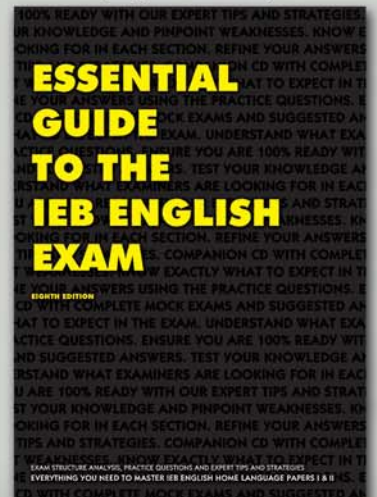
**The Complete Poetry Resource
for Grades 10 & 11**



**Experience Poetry:
Poems and Learning Materials
for Grades 8 & 9**



**Essential Guide to the IEB
English Exam for Grade 12
(Eighth Edition)**



The English Experience
Publishers of high-quality educational resources
www.englishexperience.co.za
info@englishexperience.co.za
Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702

the
English
experience

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

About The English Experience.....	7
Our approach	7
Using this resource	8

INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

Reading and understanding poetry.....	10
Answering contextual poetry questions	16

THE RENAISSANCE

Introduction to the Renaissance Period.....	18
The Elizabethan Era	21
Michael Drayton: "Love's Farewell"	25
Biography	25
Poem.....	26
Analysis	27
Questions	29
William Shakespeare: "No longer mourn for me when I am dead".....	35
Biography	35
Poem.....	37
Analysis	37
Questions	39
The Caroline Era	43
Richard Lovelace: "To Althea, from Prison"	45
Biography	45
Poem.....	46
Analysis	47
Questions	49

THE ROMANTICS

Introduction to the Romantic Period	54
Percy Bysshe Shelley: "To the Night"	57
Biography	57
Poem.....	59
Analysis	60
Questions	63

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

THE VICTORIANS

Introduction to the Victorian Period.....	69
Alfred, Lord Tennyson: "Ulysses"	73
Biography	73
Poem.....	76
Analysis	78
Questions	82
Robert Browning: "My Last Duchess"	88
Biography	88
Poem.....	91
Analysis	92
Questions	97

MODERNISM

Introduction to Modernism.....	103
Emily Dickinson: "The wind begun to rock the grass"	106
Biography	106
Poem.....	108
Analysis	109
Questions	112
Wilfred Owen: "Dulce et Decorum Est".....	118
Biography	118
Poem.....	120
Analysis	121
Questions	122
E E Cummings: "nobody loses all the time".....	128
Biography	128
Poem.....	130
Analysis	131
Questions	132
W H Auden: "Refugee Blues".....	136
Biography	136
Poem.....	138
Analysis	139
Questions	141

LATE MODERNISM/POSTMODERNISM

Introduction to Late Modernism/Postmodernism	147
Don L Lee: "Assassination"	150
Biography	150
Poem.....	151
Analysis	152
Questions	154

SOUTHERN AFRICAN POETRY

Introduction to Southern African Poetry	159
Olive Schreiner: "The Cry of South Africa"	161
Biography	161
Poem	162
Analysis	162
Questions	163
Ruth Miller: "Penguin on the Beach"	167
Biography	167
Poem	168
Analysis	168
Questions	171
Dennis Brutus: "Nightsong City"	176
Biography	176
Poem	176
Analysis	177
Questions	178
Hugh Lewin: "Touch"	183
Biography	183
Poem	184
Analysis	185
Questions	187
Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali: "Portrait of a Loaf of Bread"	193
Biography	193
Poem	194
Analysis	194
Questions	196
Mongane Wally Serote: "Lost or Found World"	201
Biography	201
Poem	202
Analysis	202
Questions	205
Christopher van Wyk: "I Have my Father's Voice"	210
Biography	210
Poem	211
Analysis	212
Questions	214
Na Ncube: "The Tenant"	221
Biography	221
Poem	222
Analysis	222
Questions	223

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

UNSEEN POETRY

Getting to grips with unfamiliar poetry: some guidelines	228
Carol Ann Duffy: "War Photographer"	230
Richard Nturu: "The gourd of friendship"	235
Ruth Everson: "Poetry is Dangerous"	239
Tatamkhulu Afrika: "Small bird singing in a bush"	245
Lebogang Mashile: "Desert child"	250

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	255
-------------------------------	-----

FOREWORD

ABOUT THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for IEB educators and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind The English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate — enriching and challenging both educators and students — without losing sight of the important goals of academic success and examination readiness.

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource The English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features — including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials — designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher-order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields, such as historical fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proofreaders and obsessive fact checkers — together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help to ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While academic success is a non-negotiable consideration, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.

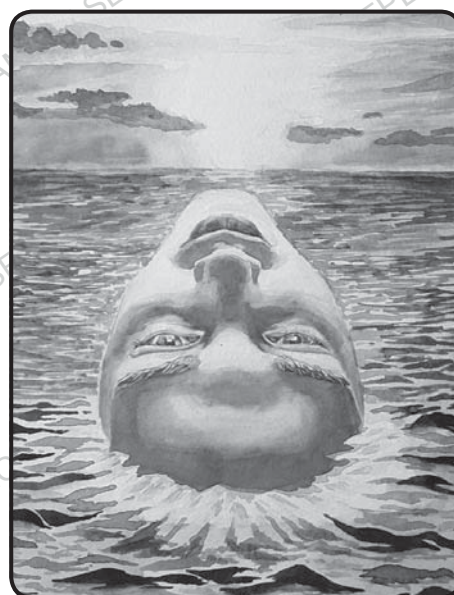


Visit www.englishexperience.co.za to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code to launch the site on your phone automatically. Please note that you may need to have a 'tag reader' app installed. There are free versions of these apps available, which you can download from the app store on your device or by visiting <https://www.scan.me/download/>

OUR APPROACH

Perhaps the toughest challenge in teaching poetry to modern learners is convincing them that the effort often required to grasp the meaning of a poem is worth it. Decoding the language and deciphering the message of a poem can be taxing for young adults so it's perhaps not surprising that many of them view poems as works through which they must slog in order to earn marks or pass an examination.

This resource has been written with this reality in mind and particular attention has been paid to providing the kind of context and insight necessary to help students engage fully with each poem and to discover for themselves why it has captivated others.



© AnnaFleckArtist (Deviantart)

'The world is full of poetry. The air is living with its spirit; and the waves dance to the music of its melodies, and sparkle in its brightness.'

— James Gates Percival

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

We believe that studying poetry rewards us with a broader, deeper understanding of ourselves and of the world around us; that is why this resource does more than provide learners with a detailed and, hopefully, eye-opening analysis of each poem. It also encourages them to engage with each work on a personal level and to uncover their own responses to the verse through the extensive contextual and intertextual questions.

Throughout this resource, students are challenged to agree or disagree with the analyses provided. By formulating and expressing their own responses to the opinions, ideas and themes explored in the pages of this resource, learners are encouraged to reflect and grow as individuals, as well as students.

In the end, we have approached the poetry syllabus the same way we approach every text: with two, interrelated goals in mind. The first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure academic success and examination readiness. The second objective is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the works being studied.

USING THIS RESOURCE

This comprehensive resource ensures that educators are fully equipped to present the prescribed poems in context and in an interesting way, as well as ensuring that students have everything that they need to explore the syllabus with confidence.

This resource includes: the full text of each of the poems prescribed in the IEB Grade 12 syllabus; an introduction to the era in which each poem was written; a biography of every poet; an in-depth analysis of each poem and a set of stimulating contextual and intertextual questions that challenges students to think critically about, and to formulate their own responses to, each work.



'Study hard, for the well is deep, and our brains are shallow.'
— Richard Baxter

POETRY IN CONTEXT

The poems written by Europeans are arranged into sections (eras, time periods or 'movements') that illustrate the progression of **European English poetry** through the five centuries covered by the syllabus, from the late Renaissance period in the 16th century to the Postmodernist movement of the 1950s.

The purpose of this structure is to help students appreciate how European English verse has developed over the last 500 years and to provide them with a social, political and personal context that, it is hoped, will help them to understand better and to value the work of each poet. With this in mind, we recommend working through this resource in chronological order.

The contexts in which the African poets included in the syllabus wrote are significantly different to their European counterparts and so they merit being considered separately. This has been facilitated through the inclusion of a **Southern African poetry** section, which features an introduction to the literary contexts and traditions of Southern African poets, from Khoisan oral poetry and colonial poems to contemporary African verse.

Each section begins with an **introduction** to the period that draws attention to the major events and influences of the time, and some of the themes that are highlighted in the analyses that follow. After this introduction, a concise **biography** of each poet is presented, followed by his or her **poem**, an **analysis** of the poem and then a set of contextual and intertextual **questions**.

The **Unseen poetry** section prepares students for tackling poetry they have not come across before and, thus, the poem they will be presented with in Paper 1, Question 4 of the examination. This section has been completely updated and revised and also features guidelines on how to prepare for this section of the final examination.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We hope you enjoy this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any comments, queries or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us by calling our offices on (011) 786-6702 or emailing info@englishexperience.co.za.

KEY TO USING THE BOXES IN THIS RESOURCE:



Definition or Glossary

Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text



Information

Provides additional details or facts about a topic



Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention or of which you need to be aware



Quirky Fact

Fun, interesting, extraneous information



Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily



Questions

Contextual and intertextual questions on the preceding poems

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

READING AND UNDERSTANDING POETRY

Reading and analysing poetry effectively is just as much about attitude as it is about mastering the necessary techniques. You will benefit from developing useful methods and honing your skills, but, ultimately, understanding poetry is about being open to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world around you.

Many readers complain that they develop a kind of 'block' when it comes to poetry, which prevents them from understanding the 'hidden message' in the poem; however, poets aren't trying to trick or confuse readers. Their message isn't actually 'hidden', but expressed in a way that is unique, complex and often very striking.

Poets don't wish to frustrate you, but they are trying to challenge or provoke you – not to work out an obscure meaning hidden behind fancy poetic techniques, but to think about their subject in a new, enlightening way. If a poem makes you think about an issue or look at something in a different light, then the poet has succeeded (and so have you!).

HOW TO ANALYSE A POEM

Before tackling a set of contextual questions about a poem, take the time to read through the verse carefully and to conduct a 'mini-analysis' (using the guidelines that follow). That way, when you tackle the questions, you are likely to have many of the answers at your fingertips already.

- **Be curious**
- **Be open-minded**
- **Ask questions**
- **Enjoy the poem**

Even if you are unable to use all of your observations in your answers, conducting a 'mini analysis' is likely to enrich your understanding of the poem as a whole and ensure that your answers are as comprehensive and well-informed as possible.



Poets are often trying to challenge or provoke you to perceive something in a new, enlightening way.



Remember that interpreting a poem is not just working out what the poet means, but also **what the poem means to you**.

This is more than just the fun, potentially enlightening part of the process. Developing and substantiating your own views is exactly the kind of independent, individual thinking the IEB encourages. It will also serve you well in the examination because the examiners will always want to reward a different, fresh interpretation.



STEP 1: READ THE POEM

It is a rare event for a person to understand a poem fully the first time they read it; most poems take several readings to be truly appreciated. Avoid trying to analyse the poem as soon as you start reading it. If you decide what the poem is about or what message it is trying to convey too early on, you may run the risk of missing an important point later and could try to 'force' a particular meaning on the poem. Be curious, be open-minded, ask questions and enjoy the poem before you start trying to deconstruct and analyse it.

Simply reading the poem through several times without over-thinking it will help you to process the poet's meaning and technique(s). If you can, read the poem aloud. This will not only help you to detect patterns of rhyme and rhythm, it will often make the meaning of the poem clearer.

Be sure that you are reading the poem correctly by paying special attention to the use of punctuation or lack thereof. The 'sentences' or 'pauses' within the poem, for instance, will help you to decipher its meaning. Make sure that you differentiate between **enjambéd** and **end-stopped** lines.

Once you have read through the poem a few times, pick up a pencil and read through it again, this time making notes or marks on the poem. *React to the poem* — write in the margins, circle words or phrases that stick out or confuse you, underline repeated words or striking images, and draw lines to indicate related ideas or metaphors.

STEP 2: WHAT MIGHT THE MESSAGE BE?

Once you have read the poem through several times (not just once, but twice or even three times), you are likely to be ready to start deciphering its meaning. Before anything else, ask yourself: *What is the poem about? What message is the speaker trying to convey?*

If the poem is particularly long, it may help you to re-read each stanza and jot down a few words or phrases that summarise that stanza. Once you have done this, write one or two sentences that accurately sum up the *subject and theme* of the poem.

When determining the subject and theme of a poem, it is important to know something about its *context*. Obviously, knowing a few facts about the poet — such as when he or she lived — will help with your understanding and appreciation of the poem.



An **enjambéd** line occurs when a sentence or phrase (a unit of syntactic meaning) runs on from one line of verse to the next without a punctuation mark for pause, requiring you to read the two (or more) lines together to grasp their meaning fully.

An **end-stopped** line occurs when the sentence or phrase is completed at the end of the line of verse and is usually indicated by a full stop.

Consider the following extract taken from the opening lines of Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's poem "An Abandoned Bundle":

*The morning mist
and chimney smoke
of White City Jabavu
flowed thick yellow
as pus oozing
from a gigantic sore.*

These lines don't make much sense if you stop or pause at the end of the first, second, third, fourth or fifth line. Read together, on the other hand, the six lines make up one thought. Notice the full stop at the end of the sixth line. This indicates that we should read these lines as one thought or unit of meaning.



© elbrethali (Deviantart)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

If you were to publish a poem now, your poem would be better understood by future generations if they knew a little about you as a person: for example, when and where you lived, your beliefs, what the social climate was, what society expected or frowned upon and what your personal philosophies included.

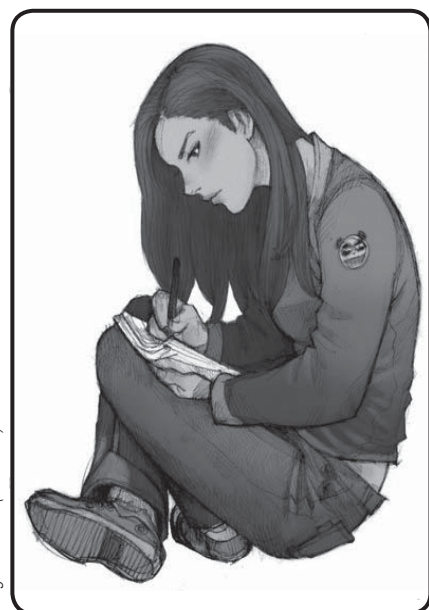
The same is true for any poem and poet you encounter and so it is often very useful to familiarise yourself with the different literary periods and the common concerns or styles of these eras, as well as any major historical events that may have influenced the poets of a particular era.

Many people believe that any work of art — poetry included — should be seen as an independent entity, but you should be aware that no artist exists in a vacuum, free from outside influences. This is often particularly true of poets, who regularly feel compelled to offer commentary on their society, and to engage with the social or political concerns of the day.

Even if a poem has a 'universal' or timeless theme, it still helps to know what may have compelled the poet to put pen to paper. The date of birth of the poet will usually give you a good indication of the period or movement to which he or she belonged, particularly if you aren't given any additional information. Remember, however, that you should *avoid making sweeping statements or generalisations about a particular time period or literary movement*.

You should also determine who is speaking in the poem. Remember that the *speaker* is not necessarily the poet and the views expressed by the speaker are not necessarily an indication of the poet's own views. A 'persona' might have been adopted in order to tell a particular story or present a certain viewpoint. Just as authors create characters in novels, poets often create characters through which to tell the story of their poems.

STEP 3: CLOSE READING



© lighterheaven (Deviantart)

Conducting a close reading of a poem is a skill that you can learn and apply to any verse. Once you have mastered the technique of recognising particular poetic devices and the effects created by them, you will be able to adapt your approach to suit the text you have been asked to analyse.

First, consider what caught your attention (the phrases or words you underlined or circled when first reading the poem, perhaps). Why did these particular features strike you as effective or interesting? Is the poet using a particular poetic device or Figure of Speech? Why is the poet trying to draw your attention to this particular aspect of the poem?

Once you have dealt with the aspects of the poem that proved most striking to you, return to the beginning of the poem and work carefully through each line, taking note of the more subtle poetic devices and Figures of Speech employed by the poet. Again, ask yourself each time: why has the poet done this?

058
the sleeping puppy
barks away
the sneaky cat

© haikutrainer.tumblr.com



©The Pokémon Company International

059
a snowball hit
doesn't faze him...
loyal komainu

© haikutrainer.tumblr.com



©The Pokémon Company International

What sense will future generations of students be able to make of these verses and images without an understanding of Pokémon video games and characters and the Haiku traditional form of Japanese poetry?

Remember to consider the connotations of the words chosen by the poet, particularly any words that seem unusual or particularly arresting. Every word in a poem is carefully chosen by the poet, and should be considered in context in order to appreciate its impact or affect on your understanding of the poem as a whole. The word 'red', for example, could simply be a colour or it could be representative of anger, passion, hatred or danger.

Punctuation or typography may give you further clues about the particular emphasis being given to a word by the poet. A word on its own line, for example, is always significant and the poet is drawing attention to it. Again, always ask: why has the poet made these particular decisions?

Be aware of the speaker's **tone**, as this will influence the way in which a poem should be read. Remember that 'tone' and 'attitude' are synonymous when analysing poetry and will, usually, be indicated by the use of particular diction (word choice), punctuation or typography. Try to learn and memorise as many words describing tone as possible so that you have a 'tone vocabulary' at your fingertips, allowing your answers to be more specific.

POPULAR POETIC TECHNIQUES

An important thing to remember is that every choice a poet makes is deliberately implemented to emphasise or enhance the meaning of the poem. Whenever you recognise a specific feature of a poem, your main concern should be determining why the poet has chosen to express him or herself in that way; for example, consider some of the possible effects of the following popular poetic techniques:



TONE VOCABULARY

Words that describe tone can include: admiring, ambivalent, amused, anxious, angry, apologetic, bitter, celebratory, condescending, contemplative, critical, cynical, defensive, defiant, desperate, depressed, determined, disdainful, disgusted, disheartened, dramatic, earnest, enthusiastic, excited, fearful, formal, frank, friendly, frustrated, gloomy, happy, honest, hopeful, humorous, indifferent, indignant, informal, intimate, ironic, irreverent, judgmental, light-hearted, lofty, malevolent, malicious, melancholic, mischievous, mocking, negative, nostalgic, objective, optimistic, patient, patronising, pensive, perplexed, persuasive, pessimistic, reflective, regretful, remorseful, reverent, sarcastic, satirical, scathing, self-pitying, sensationalist, sentimental, serious, sincere, sceptical, solemn, stiff, straightforward, sympathetic, thankful, threatening, tragic, urgent, vindictive and witty.



CLOSE READING CHECKLIST

The basics:

Make sure that you are clear on the following:

- the subject (what the poem is about)
- the context (poet's background and/or literary period)
- the speaker
- the tone or attitude
- the theme or message

Style and technique:

Determine whether the poet has employed any of the following techniques:

- a particular form or structure (such as a sonnet or ode)
- unusual diction (word choice) or punctuation
- striking or unusual typography (layout of the poem)
- a specific rhyme scheme
- a regular rhythm or meter
- repetition or other forms of emphasis
- metaphors or similes
- Figures of Speech

REMEMBER: As well as pointing out the particular styles or techniques used by the poet, examine what effect they have and how these features enhance or impact on the meaning of the poem as a whole.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

Alliteration:

- to echo the sound of something (e.g. 'whispering winds' mimics the sound of a whistling wind)
- to draw attention to particular words
- to create mood or atmosphere

Assonance:

- to link words and ideas by 'echoing' the sounds of these words
- to create mood

Simile:

- the similarities between the two things compared are really striking
- to emphasise certain characteristics

Metaphor:

- to clarify an idea with an unusual comparison
- certain associations or connotations may be evoked that emphasise or echo the poet's meaning or theme

**THREE FINAL POINTS TO REMEMBER:**

- No statement will be given credit without evidence from the text
- There are no short cuts: revise your work and take the time to interpret the questions properly
- Poetry is meant to be enjoyed; approach a poem with the right attitude and the rest is likely to happen more easily than expected



*Love has taken away my practices
And filled me with poetry.
— Rumi*

OPENING UP TO NEW IDEAS AND WAYS OF SEEING

In the end, understanding poetry has everything to do with being open to new ideas and taking your time when assessing each work. Taking into account pronouncements made by teachers, critics and fellow students is commendable, but every examiner will reward handsomely students who show that they have read the poem carefully and are not afraid to make unique observations in considered, well-constructed answers that reveal a clear understanding and are supported by evidence from the text.



GLOSSARY OF POETIC TERMS AND FIGURES OF SPEECH

alliteration: the repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words (e.g. 'some sweet sounds')

allusion: a reference to a familiar literary or historical person or event, used to make an idea more easily understood

apostrophe: a statement or question addressed to an inanimate object, a concept or a non-existent/absent person

assonance: the repetition of similar vowel sounds in a line of poetry (e.g. 'fleet feet sweep by sleeping geese')

ballad: a short poem with a repeated refrain, that tells a simple story, and which was originally intended to be sung

blank verse: a line of poetry or prose in unrhymed iambic pentameter

caesura: an extended or dramatic pause within a line of verse

connotations: the range of associations that a word or phrase suggests, in addition to the straightforward dictionary meaning; for example, the word 'discipline' means order and control, but also has connotations of suffering and pain

convention: a customary or typical feature of a specific type of literary work (e.g. all sonnets contain 14 lines)

couplet: a pair of rhymed lines, often appearing at the end of a poem or stanza

diction: the selection and arrangement of words in a poem

elegy: a lyric poem written to grieve yet celebrate the life of a person who has died

epigraph: a short phrase or quotation at the beginning of a literary work that serves to introduce the theme or subject of that work

foot: a unit used to measure the meter of a poem; one foot is made up of two to three syllables

free verse: poetry without a regular pattern of meter or rhyme

hyperbole: a Figure of Speech in which something is deliberately exaggerated

iamb: a foot containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable

image / imagery: the verbal representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or idea

internal rhyme: two or more words rhyme within a single line of verse

irony: when the intended meaning of a statement or comparison is the exact opposite of what is said

juxtaposition: the placement of two things (often abstract concepts) near each other in order to create a contrast

lyric: a poem expressing the subjective feelings or emotions of the poet

metaphor: a comparison between essentially unlike objects or ideas without an explicitly comparative word such as 'like' or 'as'

meter: the repetition of sound patterns to create a rhythm

metonymy: the name of one thing is replaced by the name of something closely associated with it (e.g. the place 'Hollywood' is regularly used to refer to the American film industry)

octave: a stanza or section of a poem that is eight lines in length and is often used in the sonnet form

ode: an extended lyric poem that is characterised by exalted emotion and a dignified style and that is usually concerned with a single, serious theme, praising or glorifying an event or individual

onomatopoeia: a word that imitates the sound it describes (e.g. 'buzz', 'meow')

oxymoron: a descriptive phrase that combines two contradictory terms (e.g. 'Oh loving hate!' from *Romeo and Juliet*)

paradox: a statement that appears illogical or contradictory at first, but which may actually point to an underlying truth

parody: a humorous, mocking imitation of another literary work, often intended to be playful and respectful of the original work, but can sometimes be sarcastic or critical

pastoral: derived from the word 'pastor', which means shepherd; a pastoral poem is concerned with a rural or nature-based theme

personification: giving an inanimate object or concept the qualities of a living thing

pun: a play on words that have similar sounds, but different meanings

quatrain: a four-line stanza

rhythm (meter): the recurrent pattern of accents or natural stresses in lines of verse

satire: a work that criticises or ridicules human vices, misconduct or follies

sestet: a stanza or section of a poem that is six lines in length, often used in the sonnet form

simile: a comparison between two unlike things using comparative words, such as 'like', 'as' or 'as though'

sonnet: a fourteen-line poem, usually written in iambic pentameter

subject: what the poem is about; the person, event or theme that forms the focus of the poem

symbol: an object that means or represents something beyond itself

synecdoche: the use of a part to symbolise its corresponding whole (e.g. the word 'wheels' may be used to refer to a car)

theme: the main idea or message of a literary work

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

ANSWERING CONTEXTUAL POETRY QUESTIONS

Answering contextual poetry questions effectively is as much about being methodical and prepared as it is about mastering how to read and understand poetry. The following list highlights some of the common mistakes to avoid and offers suggestions on how to answer such questions properly.

- **Read the questions carefully**

Examiners want to see that you know what the poem is about; however, many questions are based on how the verse works, how the poem has been constructed, for instance, and what effect the poet has managed to achieve by using certain linguistic techniques. Ensure that you read the questions carefully and that you know exactly what is being asked before attempting to answer a question.

- **Avoid re-telling the 'story' of the poem**

Avoid re-telling the 'story' of the poem unless you have been asked to paraphrase or summarise it.

- **Answer in coherent, well-structured sentences**

Always answer in coherent, well-structured sentences and avoid awkward constructions; for example, instead of beginning your answers with 'That the man is ...' or 'Because the man is ...', use 'It is evident that the man is ...' or 'The man is ... therefore ...'.

- **Avoid rewriting the question in your answer**

It is also important to note that you are not expected to rewrite the question before you answer it. If the question asks: 'Quote an adjective that means "outspoken"', for example, avoid answering: 'An adjective that means outspoken is frank'. It is acceptable simply to write the answer: 'Frank'.

- **Take note of the mark allocation**

The mark allocation is a clear indication of the length and depth of answer that is required. A one-word answer will not suffice for a question worth three marks.

- **Be aware of 'double-barrelled' or multi-layered questions**

Many students do not answer the different aspects or sections of a given question; for example, a question may ask:

'What emotion do the words in line 1 convey, and how does this emotion change by the end of the poem? Provide a reason for your answer.'

This example question requires the student to do three things:

1. State the emotion.
2. Explain how it changes by the end of the poem.
3. Provide a possible reason for the difference.

- **Be prepared to comment on the effect of Figures of Speech**

Identifying a Figure of Speech will be awarded a mark, but you are also expected to discuss how it adds to the meaning of the poem. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What does the Figure of Speech contribute to the poem?
- Does it clarify a point?
- Is it unusual and therefore striking?
- Does it emphasise a point or add humour?

- **Be sincere in your response to the poem**

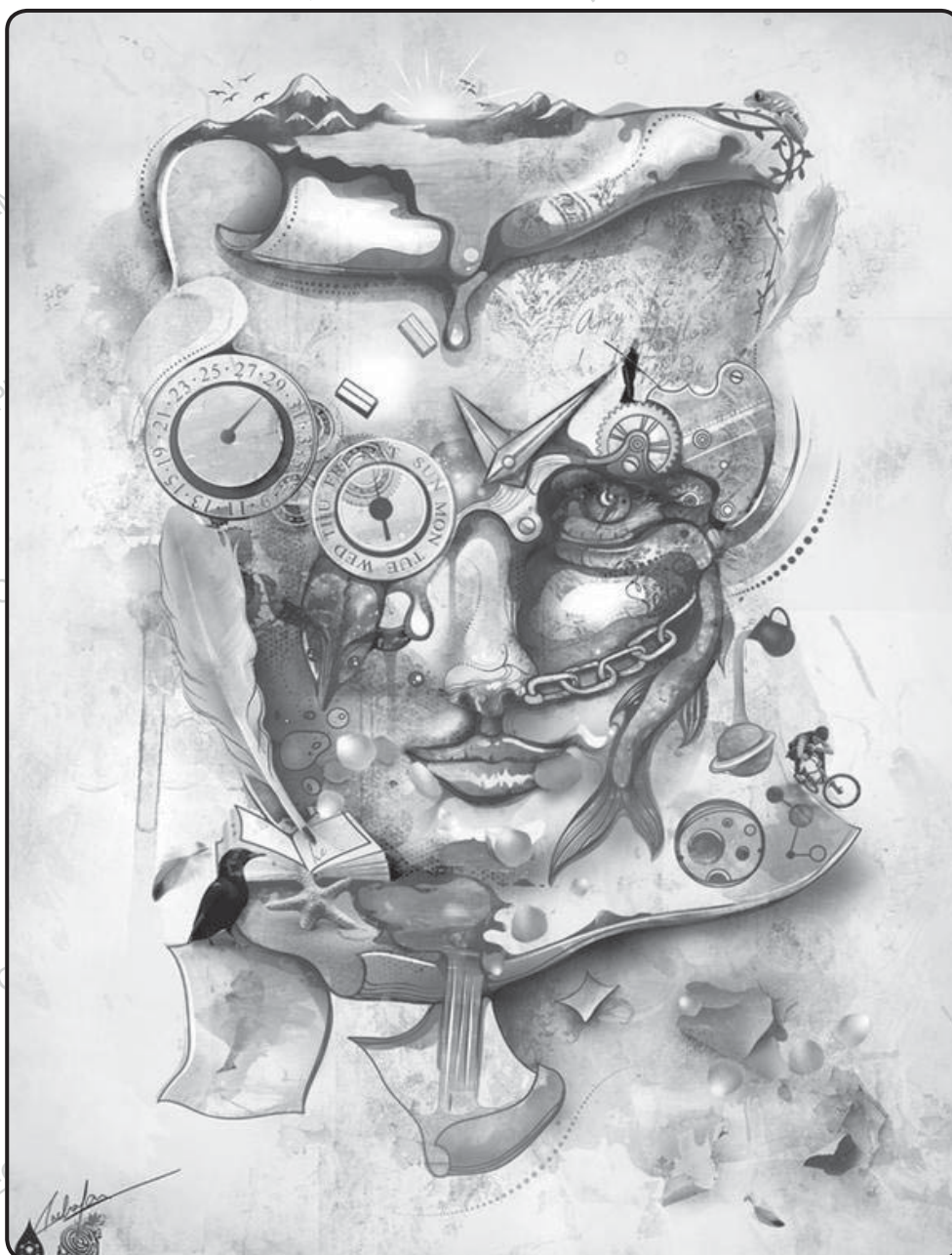
Avoid stating that a poem is brilliant or deeply moving if you do not agree with this sentiment. You should engage with the text and formulate a genuine response to the verse, instead of expressing what you think is the expected opinion or a view you have gathered from a rushed reading of a study guide or website on the internet.

- **Avoid sweeping, generalised statements**

You are expected to validate your answers with evidence from the text. It is no use saying: 'This is a really effective line' or 'This simile is the best I have ever read'. To earn marks, you must PROVE the statements and observations that you have made.

- **Be prepared to offer your honest opinion about the issues the poem addresses**

You should be familiar with the range of themes expressed in the poem and your answers should be well thought out, candid, insightful and well supported with evidence from the poem.



*'But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.'*
— William Butler Yeats

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

THE VICTORIANS

INTRODUCTION TO THE VICTORIAN PERIOD



Portrait of Queen Victoria, the monarch after whom the era is named.

Like the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, the Victorian era is named after its reigning monarch. Victoria became the queen of Great Britain in 1837 and reigned until her death in 1901. Victoria's reign is often associated with strict social conventions, sexual restraint and prudishness. The legs of tables had to be completely covered, for example, to prevent any indecent association with the same part of the human anatomy. The literature of the period was governed by similarly strict conventions. In contrast to the Romantics, who emphasised the imagination and fantasy, Victorian writers and audiences favoured realism.

It was a period characterised by peace, economic prosperity, positive political reforms and a strong sense of British nationalism. Education was made more widely available (particularly for girls) and rapid progress was made in science, medicine, commerce and manufacturing. Britain also expanded its territorial acquisitions overseas considerably. Despite all these positive developments, however, the Victorian era was also fraught with severe social problems.

The urban population of Britain grew rapidly during this period. The Industrial Revolution triggered massive waves of migration from the countryside to the cities as people sought work in the newly built factories. At the height of the Industrial Revolution, between 1800 and 1851, an estimated 40 per cent of the population of Britain moved from the countryside to urban areas. The infrastructure of the cities could not cope with such rapid expansion and a large portion of the urban population found themselves living in overcrowded, unhygienic slums.



Piccadilly Street in central London at the start of the 20th century

Hunger and malnutrition were rife as increased populations put a strain on urban food supplies. The lack of sanitation facilities in the densely-populated shantytowns — where it was common for up to 10 people to share a single room — meant that disease spread rapidly and children, in particular, were susceptible to deadly diseases like typhoid, cholera and tuberculosis. High levels of unemployment and rampant crime were also common problems, particularly in London.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

George Birch (The Premier Photographic View Album of London, (1907) Valentine & Sons, London)

The abundance of unskilled labourers compounded the situation as employers would keep wages meagre. Prostitution was rife and children as young as four years old were routinely made to work to help raise money, performing odd jobs, such as sweeping chimneys, and even employed under very dangerous conditions in the factories and mines.

THE VICTORIAN POETS

Victorian poets are often viewed as the chroniclers of their day, reflecting the social conditions and concerns of the era. The 19th century saw major developments in poetic ideals; as a movement, however, the Victorian era is often difficult to categorise. Victorian poets were the heirs to the Romantics, and their works often reflect similar concerns – their subjective experiences of the world, for instance – but they tried to avoid the florid and indulgent descriptions of the Romantics.



As with many attempts to classify literature, the title and definitions of an era can be misleading. Not all writers in a period will share all (or even any) of its stated characteristics. When analysing a work of literature, be careful not to force the characteristics of an era upon it. Rather, identify the commonalities and use this part of your analysis to describe those aspects of the work that do not conform to other works in the same era.



(Warner H. (1912) Spitalfields Nippers)

Many children worked during Victorian times to help supplement family incomes, taking in washing or chopping wood to sell as kindling.

The Victorian poets inherited a sense of scepticism about their world and society that had been passed down from the Reformation and the Enlightenment via the Romantic poets. Like the Romantics, the

Victorians were grappling with humanity's place in the universe as the authority of religion continued to be eroded. Two of the key themes of poetry during this era were the relationship between religion and science, and the power of nature. "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold, for example, ponders the displacement of religion by science as the 'sea of faith' is withdrawing like the tide.

Another area of focus was the Industrial Revolution and its consequences, which appeared to be slowing and stabilising. While the revolution had brought the benefits of technological change that made everyday life more comfortable (for those who could afford it), it had also separated English society into two: a wealthy middle and upper class and a larger poor population, many of whom lived on or close to the streets. Arnold, in particular, struggled to reconcile the benefits of human progress with the 'festering mass' of 'half-sized, half-fed, half-clothed' children that roamed the streets of London.

By contrast, some poets dealt with this tension by choosing to look away. Many Victorian poets drew from classical and neoclassical literature and mythology, rather than from the realities of urban life; for example, Gerard Manley Hopkins drew on the English epic poem "Beowulf" in both the style of his poetry and its content. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who became the British Poet Laureate in 1805, wrote *Idylls of the King*, a series of twelve narrative poems that retell the story of King Arthur and the Round Table. As the century progressed, however, many writers – most notably, Matthew Arnold – began to anticipate the transition to the Modernist movement.



SPIRITUALLY BANKRUPT?

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian poet-priest, commented that the age in which he lived 'lacked a spiritual centre' because the scientific rationalism and materialism that was flourishing undermined Christian principles.

Perhaps one of the most significant literary developments of the 19th century was the emergence of the voices of women writers. Before the Victorian era, very few women achieved recognition as poets. As their access to education and involvement in public life increased during this century, more and more women began to publish their writings, causing some controversy among the more conservative members of society.

Among the most famous women writers were the Brontë sisters, Anne, Charlotte and Emily, who produced several volumes of poetry and novels between them. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti also achieved recognition and acclaim for their poetry. These women were responsible for introducing new voices and perspectives to the reading public, and paved the way for future female writers.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Though attitudes were gradually beginning to change, it was still not considered 'proper' for women to write and publish novels and poetry during the Victorian era. As a result, many female authors concealed their identities and published their works under male pseudonyms. George Eliot, for example, was the penname used by Mary Ann Evans, while the three Brontë sisters wrote under the names of Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell.

RISE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

The Victorian Era witnessed the rise of the English novel and of the great English novelists. Like their poet counterparts, Victorian novelists frequently engaged with the social problems of the day. The novels of Charles Dickens, for instance, featured the middle and lower classes and tackled poverty and child labour, with the grimy streets of London as a backdrop. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) also used her novels to comment on societal issues, for example, the position of women in Victorian society.

The Victorian era is also credited with 'inventing' childhood — in reaction to the practice of child labour — as this was when efforts to implement compulsory education for children gained significant momentum. A positive side effect of these efforts was that the children's publishing industry flourished for the first time in history.

GOOD VERSUS EVIL AND THE BACKLASH OF GOTHICISM

The central theme of many Victorian works is good and evil. When comparing the literature of the era with more modern works, this theme often seems quite didactic. In other words, Victorian works of literature and art often acted as **moral tales**, promoting a stern code of 'correct' behaviour by ensuring that bad characters were always suitably punished and good ones rewarded.



The term '**moral tale**' is derived from the term 'morality tale', but they have slightly different meanings. Morality tales were allegories in which good battled evil and won, often commissioned by the church and written during the 15th and 16th centuries. Moral tales are also about moral values, but these values depend on those of the age. The Victorians valued hard work and perseverance, for instance, and so the novels of the era often reward the characters who display these values.

A reaction against this strict morality found expression in an artistic genre called the **Gothic**. Gothic works are often described as scary ghost stories, but there is more to them than that. While the realistic works of Dickens and Eliot draw a firm boundary between right and wrong, Gothic works often cross or question this boundary. One example of this transgression is Heathcliff, the anti-hero of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, who resorts to all sorts of trickery to torment the love of his life after she spurns him.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

i

Gothic refers to an artistic style that typically combines elements of horror with high emotion and romance. Gothic works may be imbued with a sense of terror or dread and impending doom, but will often use this gloomy backdrop to explore, celebrate and exalt intense love and passion. Originally published in 1794, "The Sick Rose" is a poem by William Blake that exhibits many characteristics of the Gothic tradition:



© Nanre (Deviantart)

"The Sick Rose"

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

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark secret love
Does thy life destroy.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Although they express it differently, the realistic and the Gothic genres of Victorian literature have one thing in common: nostalgia. Both look back to the past with longing, to the Elizabethan age, in particular. Shakespeare's plays were regularly performed, and contemporary poets often wrote odes and sonnets in the Elizabethan style during the 19th century. There was also a revival of interest in classical and mediaeval literature, epitomised by Tennyson's famous *Idylls of the King*. It is often argued that this longing was the result of the many changes — some very negative — brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation.

**TECHNOLOGICAL DISRUPTION**

The Victorian era was a time of exciting, rapid, disrupting technological change. Some of the inventions of the era that revolutionised society include:

- the camera
- the typewriter
- the telephone
- the internal combustion engine
- the gramophone
- the electric lightbulb

ROBERT BROWNING (1812 — 1889)



© Field Talfourd

Robert Browning was born in London, England in 1812. Browning's father (also named Robert) came from a wealthy family of slave-owners, but he became an **abolitionist** after a brief journey to the plantations in the West Indies. Although he had hoped to pursue a career in the arts, Robert's father became a bank clerk to support his wife and children and made a comfortable living. Browning's mother was a concert pianist who passed on her appreciation of music to her son.



An **abolitionist** was someone who opposed the slave trade and actively campaigned for it to be abolished. Today, the term is sometimes used to describe a person who is against the death penalty and, likewise, fights for it to be abolished.

**IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME**

After reading Alexander Pope's English translation of "The Iliad" by Homer, Browning taught himself Greek in order to be able to read the original text.



A **dramatic monologue** is a poem in which an imagined speaker addresses a silent listener, usually not the reader. It is considered dramatic because the verse usually has a theatrical quality and is designed to be read aloud to an audience. It is a monologue because only one character speaks.

Browning's first published poem was a homage to the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley titled "Pauline, a Fragment of a Confession". It was a **dramatic monologue** initially planned as the first in a series of poems that would introduce Browning as a poet and as a man. It was heavily criticised, however, and he abandoned the project. Some scholars argue that these reviews dissuaded Browning from writing about personal topics; he would choose to write about historical figures and events for most of his career instead.

PROMISING SIGNS

Despite this initial challenge, Browning seemed to have a promising literary career ahead of him when he published his next work, "Paracelsus", two years later. Perhaps staying true to a decision not to write about personal topics, Browning based this poem on the life of a Swiss physician and alchemist, **Paracelsus**, who had lived in the 16th century.

Browning was shy and socially awkward to the point of being a recluse, but the modest success of "Paracelsus" helped the young poet to gain access to London's literary circle. Browning wrote a total of three plays, none of which was successful. One of the most glaring issues was the absence of a dramatic plot, which can be ignored in many types of poem and which is not an issue when recounting the lives of historical figures, but is essential in drama.



Paracelsus (Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim) was a famous German-Swiss physician and alchemist who established the role of chemistry in medicine and the foundations of chemotherapy. Paracelsus attended universities across Austria and Germany, but was disappointed with them all and famously wondered how ‘the high colleges managed to produce so many high asses’.

For a decade, Paracelsus wandered through almost every country in Europe. ‘The universities do not teach all things,’ he wrote, ‘so a doctor must seek out old wives, gipsies, sorcerers, wandering tribes, old robbers, and such outlaws and take lessons from them. A doctor must be a traveller [...] Knowledge is experience.’ He died in mysterious circumstances at the White Horse Inn in Salzburg in 1541.



© Clef-en-Or (Deviantart)

CRITICAL DISASTER, ROMANTIC SUCCESS

In 1840, Browning published “Sordello”, a narrative poem that tells the story of a 13th-century Italian bard who is also mentioned briefly in Dante’s “The Divine Comedy”. Browning used the poem to consider the obligations of a poet and his place in society. The poem was a critical disaster, however. Some critics commented that the poem was too dense, with too many literary allusions that obscured, rather than illuminated, its meaning. Even Tennyson commented that he understood nothing except the first and last lines.

Between 1841 and 1845, Browning published a series of eight pamphlets under the title *Bells and Pomegranates*. He initially intended the series to include only his plays, but his publisher advised him to include some of his poems, too. One unexpected success was a narrative poem titled “The Pied Piper”, based on the classic children’s story, which Browning only included to fill empty space.

Another poet named Elizabeth Barrett was so impressed by Browning’s work that she mentioned him in one of her own poems. After he wrote to thank her, they began corresponding and met four months later. They began courting and exchanged hundreds of love letters, but Barrett’s father was a domineering, possessive man and disapproved of the match. Elizabeth had serious health problems and father and daughter had formed a mutually co-dependent relationship.



ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

Elizabeth Barrett Browning was a well-known poet in her own right. She was known for writing poetry that considered current issues and events of the time, including a poem about child labour and two poems in support of the abolitionist movement, but one of her most famous poems “How Do I Love Thee?” (Sonnet 43) is a declaration of love made to her husband:

‘How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

I love thee to the depth and breadth and height

My soul can reach, [...]’



(Wikimedia Commons)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

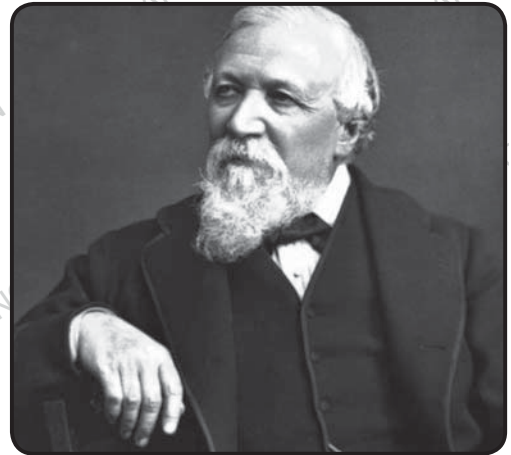
ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

Despite her father's condemnation, the couple married in secret the next year and then fled to Italy on the advice of Elizabeth's doctor. It would have been a scandalous and wildly romantic elopement at the time as Elizabeth was a famous and popular poet. The couple appear to have been happy together until Elizabeth's frail health overcame her and she died 15 years later. The couple had one son, in 1849, whom they nicknamed 'Pen'.

LOSS AND REMEMBRANCE

Browning did not write much poetry during his marriage and his wife was the far better known poet — she was even considered for the post of Poet Laureate. Browning's only serious publication during this time was a collection of 51 poems titled *Men and Women* in 1855. The final poem in the collection is narrated by Browning, making it the only exception to his declaration that he would write on objective topics exclusively.

When his wife died in 1861, Browning returned to London with their son, where he turned his attention to editing and publishing a collection of his late wife's poems, titled *Last Poems*. Then, in 1863, he republished some of his earlier works, as well as some minor new poems. His first real publication since *Men and Women* was titled *Dramatis Personae*, which was published in 1864 and sold reasonably well.



'Grow old along with me! / The best is yet to be, /
The last of life, for which the first was made.'
('Rabbi Ben Ezra' by Robert Browning)

RENOWN AND RESPECT

In 1868, Browning cemented his reputation as a poet by publishing *The Ring and Book*, which some historians describe as his greatest work. It consists of twelve books and describes a well-known Roman murder trial that took place in 1698. The dramatic monologue is told from the perspective of the victim, a young woman married to a sadistic nobleman who murders her and her parents when she tries to leave him.

Beginning in 1871, Browning published a number of narrative poems, as well as shorter lyrics and elegies. As he still refused to write on personal topics, some of these poems were based on classical texts, such as 'Aristophanes' Apology', which was published in 1875. One of Browning's final works was *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day*, which was published in 1887. In it, Browning conducts imaginary interviews with notable philosophers and historical figures. Browning died two years later in Venice, Italy while visiting a friend, and was buried in Westminster Abbey.



THE DARK TOWER

One of Browning's more famous poems is titled "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came". Published in Browning's collection *Men and Women*, it describes the knight Roland's journey to the Dark Tower through a barren and desolate plain. It was published in Browning's collection *Men and Women*. Browning's poem is cited as the primary influence of author Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series. King's famous 'gunslinger' protagonist, Roland, takes his name from the poem; the setting and destination of the Dark Tower also appear in the novels, as do the characters of Cuthbert and Giles. The novel series was adapted as a movie in 2017, also titled *The Dark Tower*, starring Idris Elba and Matthew McConaughey.



An artist's impression
of the eponymous
Dark Tower.

© AnoraAlia (Deviantart)

“MY LAST DUCHESS”

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

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

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there; so, not the first

Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not

Her husband's presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps

Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps

Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint

Must never hope to reproduce the faint

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

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.

Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,

The drooping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace—all and each

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

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

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
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
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

40

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
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, tho',
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

45

50

55



GLOSSARY

countenance (line 7): face or expression

durst (line 11): dared

mantle (line 16): cloak

bough (line 27): branch

officious (line 27): intrusive, meddlesome

trifling (line 35): pettiness

lessoned (line 40): taught

forsooth (line 41): in truth, truly

munificence (line 49): generosity

warrant (line 50): guarantee

ANALYSIS

"My Last Duchess" is a dramatic monologue written by Robert Browning. The poem was first published in 1842 in the third instalment of a series of eight pamphlets that Browning published between 1841 and 1845 titled *Bells and Pomegranates*. The speaker of the monologue is 'a Duke', who reveals himself to be a jealous husband and implies that he murdered his wife, the 'Duchess' of the title, on the suspicion that she was cheating on him.

WHO IS THE DUCHESS?

Underneath the title in the original edition was the word 'Ferrara', which, according to historians, suggests that the speaker of the dramatic monologue was the fifth Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II d'Este. The Duke married his first wife, Lucrezia, when she was only 14 and he was 25. Lucrezia was a member of the influential de Medici family and it is believed that he married her for her dowry. She died when she was only 17, allegedly after being poisoned by the Duke, who married the daughter of Emperor Ferdinand I soon after.



Lucrezia de' Medici, generally believed to be the Duke's wife in "My Last Duchess". Portrait painted by Agnolo Bronzino in 1560.

(North Carolina Museum of Art)

SETTING AND SUBTEXT

The poem is set after the death of the Duke's first wife and before the Duke's second marriage. The speaker is hosting a representative of the family of the woman he is courting to discuss their match. Historical sources suggest that the representative was Nikolaus Madruz, a representative of Emperor Ferdinand I. To impress this representative, the Duke shows him his extensive art collection, stopping at the portrait of his late wife.

"My Last Duchess" can also be read as a commentary on the values of Renaissance society (the Duke of Ferrara lived in the sixteenth century) and a counter to the notion of the 'ideal man' that was popular during that period. Like many noblemen of the time, the Duke collects works of art, which was considered to be the mark of an erudite and civilised gentleman; however, Browning's depiction of the Duke inverts this assumption by revealing that he values his collection of art for superficial reasons and by implying that he is capable of murder.



BLUEBEARD

The Duke in the poem has been compared with Bluebeard. Bluebeard is the title character in a famous French folk tale. He is a rich nobleman with a string of beautiful wives who have disappeared mysteriously. In the tale, he leaves to conduct business and gives his newest wife the keys to the castle, telling her she can go into any room except one. Overcome with curiosity, she lets herself into the room and finds the corpses of Bluebeard's missing wives. When he returns and discovers that she has been in the room, he threatens to kill her for her disobedience, but, before he can, he is murdered by her brothers.

The notoriety of the tale is such that the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word 'Bluebeard' as 'a man who marries and kills one wife after another' and the verb 'bluebearding' has even emerged as a way to describe a man's seduction and abandonment of a series of women.



© Gustave Doré (Wikimedia Commons)

THE NARRATIVE

The monologue begins nostalgically, with the Duke remarking that the painting is so realistic that it is as if his late wife is still alive. Although the reader may at first mistake this for an expression of romantic love, it quickly becomes clear that the Duke is commenting on the value of the painting as a work of art, not its content or his love for his deceased wife. He remarks that the painting is 'a wonder' (line 3) and that the artist (whom we can assume is well known, since the Duke is identifying him by name) worked hard to produce it.

The Duke then invites his guest to sit with him and appreciate the painting. Instead of using the pronoun 'it' to refer to the painting, he uses the pronoun 'her'. This pronoun reinforces the sense that the Duke is unable to distinguish between the value of the painting as a work of art and the Duchess as a person.

The Duke continues to praise the artist's skill in depicting his late wife's expression, specifically '[t]he depth and passion of its earnest glance' (line 8). He interjects, however, with the self-aggrandising comment that everyone who has seen the painting has wondered about the Duchess's expression, but that no one has had the courage to ask him about the reason for it. He uses the word 'durst' (line 11), which implies that his guests are usually intimidated by him and his social status. The Duke also assumes that this is his current guest's question, even though the other person doesn't seem to have said anything.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

Much like the beginning of the monologue, the Duke's comments begin innocently and quickly become more sinister. The Duke attributes the Duchess's expression in the painting to her flirtatiousness (or what he perceives to be her flirtatiousness). He explains that her expression, with 'that spot / Of joy [in] the Duchess' cheek' (lines 14–15), was not a response to her 'husband's presence only' (line 14), but to the compliments of the painter. These compliments were mere 'courtesy', but the Duke alleges that the Duchess perceived them as more.

The Duke finally gets to the heart of his insinuations, complaining euphemistically that 'She had / A heart ... too soon made glad' (lines 21–22) and 'She thanked men ... / Somehow ... I know not how' (lines 31–32). He is accusing his late wife of being flirtatious and perhaps even promiscuous, although, so far, the only evidence he can provide is this painting. He alleges that the Duchess responded to his 'favour' (line 25) in the same way as she did to the sun setting or another admirer presenting her with a branch of cherries.



'Sir, 'twas not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek;' (lines 13–15).

Portrait of Annalia de Liano by Federico de Madrazo y Kuntz (1853).
(Prado Museum, Madrid)

Instead of strengthening the Duke's argument, these lines weaken it by suggesting that the Duchess was a kind, thoughtful and perhaps naïve person who appreciated the small things in life. By contrast, the Duke shows himself to be, at the least, narcissistic and jealous. It becomes clear that the Duchess's true crime was not being flirtatious or promiscuous, but treating the Duke the same way that she treated everyone else. It offended the Duke's sense of superiority that his wife 'ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift' (lines 32–34).

The next two lines suggests that the Duke has some sense of how ludicrous his suspicions appear to be, as he asks rhetorically 'Who'd stoop to blame / This sort of trifling?' (lines 34–35). This question recognises that to blame the Duchess for her warmth would be petty and beneath him. He continues, self-deprecatingly, that it would take more skill than he possesses to communicate why the Duchess's behaviour is so offensive, although the **dramatic irony** is that he doesn't recognise that this suggests that the problem lies with him and not her.



Dramatic irony occurs when the audience knows something about the plot that the characters do not. This additional knowledge alters the significance and meaning of the character's dialogue and actions for the audience.



Venus of Urbino by Titian Vecelli (1534). (The Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

'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.' (lines 21–24).

The moment of self-awareness is short-lived. Not only does the Duke not have the verbal skills to articulate his problem, but he explains that there was no way to educate the Duchess about her failings because she would make an excuse. He fancies there would be grovelling and apologies, which he claims are beneath him as he chooses '[n]ever to stoop' (line 43). The last straw, it seems, was the Duchess's smiles, which he repeats she gave out freely.

The meaning of the poem hinges on the next two lines. In response to the Duchess's behaviour, the Duke 'gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together' (lines 45–46). The most common reading of these lines is that the Duke had the Duchess murdered. When asked about these lines, Browning himself said that this is the most likely interpretation, although it could also mean that the Duke sent his wayward wife to a convent; however, the fact that the Duke is now looking for a new wife (which is a few lines further on) makes it more likely that he murdered her.

Another clue that the Duke has murdered his wife is that, instead of taking a moment to grieve for the loss of his wife, even silently, the Duke ends his diatribe by repeating the sentiment from the opening of the poem: 'There she stands / As if alive' (lines 46–47). This suggests, once again, that the Duke sees no difference between the value of a person and the value of a painting — even when that person is his wife. He continues without any more emotion, asking his guest to stand so that they can meet the rest of his guests.

The reader only learns who the Duke's guest is in the next few lines, which makes his descriptions of his late wife and this painting more chilling. The Duke is entertaining a representative of a 'Count' (believed to be Emperor Ferdinand I) who is visiting to discuss the Duke's marriage proposal. He doesn't disguise his financial interests in the match, as he talks about the Count's 'known munificence' (line 49) and the dowry involved. This cements the reader's suspicions that the Duke has had his last wife murdered.

In the final three lines of the dramatic monologue, the Duke points out another prized work of art in his collection: a statue of the Roman god of the sea, Neptune '[t]aming a sea-horse' (line 55). Much as he did at the beginning of the monologue, the Duke explains that the value of this work is that it is 'a rarity' (line 55) created by a renowned artist (whom he again mentions by name). Beginning and ending the monologue like this reinforces how superficial the Duke is, since there isn't a difference, in his mind, between these two artworks.

These last few lines are anticlimactic: the Duke insinuates that he has murdered his wife, but then moves on to more trivial matters, such as greeting his guests and admiring the statue of Neptune. This leaves the reader without a sense of closure or resolution, only suspicions regarding what really happened to the Duchess.

STRUCTURE AND RHYTHM

The structure of the poem mimics the rhythm of speech, which lends this dramatic monologue a sense of authenticity. It comprises one stanza of 56 lines, with the rhyme scheme AABCCDDEE. It is also written in iambic pentameter.

In addition, the lines of the poem ramble, with thoughts often introduced mid-sentence, in much the same way that ordinary speech does. A number of lines are enjambed; for example, line two runs on into line three with no punctuation



'I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together.' (lines 45–46)

© "Roman School, 16th Century"

i

BROWNING'S VILLAINS

Many of Browning's other poems also feature villains who commit evil acts. "Porphyria's Lover", for instance, is a dramatic monologue in which a murderer explains how he murdered his lover. Browning was interested in psychology, which was a relatively new discipline at the time.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

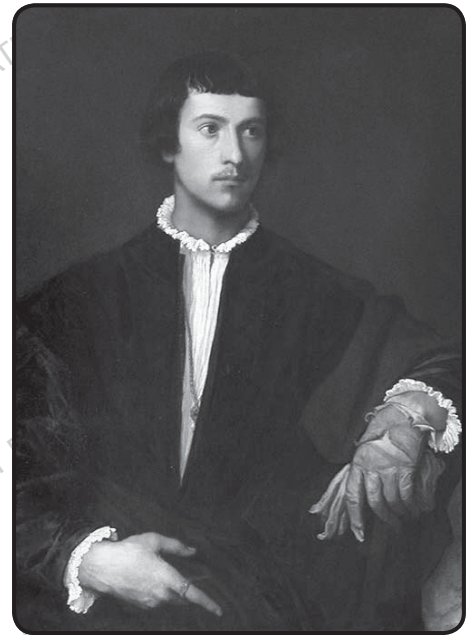
ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

to stop the flow of meaning, again, much like a conversation. The poem also contains a number of interjections, such as 'I know not how' in line 32, which are punctuated with dashes and ellipses. This replicates the flow and pattern of speech.

The flow of the Duke's speech suggests his smooth urbanity as he explains his eminently reasonable objections to his wife's 'misbehaviour' (her flirtatiousness and insistence on treating others as equals and her apparent infidelity). It also underscores his preoccupation with himself, his social status and his sense of superiority.

THEMES OF OBJECTIFICATION AND CONTROL

One of the themes of the poem is **objectification** which means that a person has been treated as a mere object that can be owned or possessed. In the poem, the Duchess has literally become an object: a painting, which is owned and displayed by the Duke. This is implicit from the first line of the poem, where the Duke doesn't clearly distinguish between the Duchess's person and the painting of her. In line 5, he even asks his guest to 'sit and look at her'.



Man with a Glove by Tiziano Vecelli (1520) (Louvre Museum, Paris)

*'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 / This sort of
trifling?' (lines 31-35)*



Objectification is the act of treating a person like an object — for example, as a tool or a toy — without feelings, opinions, autonomy or rights of his or her own. It denies the person his or her subjective, emotional and psychological experiences, perceptions and responses. Objectification is considered 'dehumanising' because it strips a person of his or her full 'humanness' — his or her complexity, independence and dignity. It weakens empathy and enables people to mistreat and harm each other more easily.

One of the most common forms of objectification is the sexual objectification of women, which reduces a woman to her body parts and to being an object of sexual desire. Rather than being viewed as a person in her own right, she is devalued and perceived as an object to be used to achieve sexual gratification.

The term 'selfie-objectification' has emerged recently to describe how social media encourages people to objectify themselves and each other. Social media may encourage people to objectify themselves by reducing themselves to a series of curated images. Social media can also encourage people to objectify each other and reduce people to an impersonal, disconnected audience of 'likes' and 'follows' that is used to achieve personal satisfaction.



© Allen Jones (Tate Gallery, London)

The reader's first clue to the themes of objectification and control is in lines 9 to 10, when the Duke explains that there is a curtain in front of the painting that is only ever drawn back by him: 'none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I'. This physical barrier could be a metaphor for the Duke's desire to control his wife while she was still alive, a desire which was constantly frustrated. From this perspective, the Duke was only able to gain this control by murdering her, which he celebrates in this monologue.

By retelling the Duchess's story in the form of a dramatic monologue recited entirely by the Duke, the poet is suggesting that the Duchess is objectified so much that she is literally and metaphorically voiceless — she has no voice to tell her own story or to defend herself and her character. In addition, we do not hear the responses of the Duke's guest and can only infer his reactions to the monologue from the Duke's responses to him, but he seems to defer to his host's authority; if he has suspicions about the Duchess's death, he doesn't appear to express them, which makes him complicit in the Duke's deceit.

The theme of objectification is extended by framing the poem so that it begins and ends with the Duke describing two works of art in his collection: the painting of the Duchess and a bronze statue of Neptune. The subject of the statue is a patriarchal male figure dominating the natural world, which encourages the reader to interpret the Duchess's story as a similar story of patriarchal values and male domination. This comparison also suggests that the painting of the Duchess has the same value to the Duke as the statue, even though the painting of a loved one should have greater sentimental value.

A contemporary feminist reading of the poem argues that there is an implicit threatened violence in the poem that reflects the divide between the genders that still persisted in Browning's lifetime. This interpretation emphasises that Victorian women were still objectified — they had few rights and married women were still legally controlled or 'subsumed' by their husbands until the law changed in 1882. This type of objectification could be seen as an insidious form of domestic violence because it prevented women from being independent and from leaving abusive relationships.



A bronze statue of Neptune, the name that the ancient Romans gave to the Greek god of the sea and earthquakes, Poseidon.

© Veronese Design

THE ROLE OF ART

The poem can also be read as a metaphor for the role of art in society. In the Renaissance context of the poem, art is used to maintain a façade. His late wife is presented in the painting as beautiful, even though, according to the Duke, she was immoral. The painting disguises this immorality. In addition, the meaning of the poem is down to interpretation. The Duke doesn't say anything incriminating; he only insinuates that his wife was a flirt and she died. This also represents the nature of all art, including poetry: the meaning is open to the interpretation of the reader or audience.

? QUESTIONS

- Using the correct symbols, rewrite the first two lines of the poem, indicating stressed symbols (■), unstressed symbols (□) and feet (|). (3)

2. Based on your answer to the previous question, identify the type of meter used in these lines, and comment on its effect on the verse. (2)

3. Provide a synonym for the word 'earnest' (line 8). (1)

4. Of what misconduct is the Duchess accused by the speaker, and to what transgression against her husband does the speaker imply this behaviour led? (2)

5. Describe the character of the speaker, drawing on evidence from the text to support your answer. (6)

6. Identify the punctuation used in lines 22 and 32. Explain its purpose in the context of the poem, and comment on the way its usage conveys or changes the intention of the speaker. (3)

7. What does the Duke mean when he observes that it was 'as if she ranked / My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name / With anybody's gift' (lines 32-34), and what does this remark suggest about his values and those of his late wife? (2)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

9. In your own words, explain the meaning of the lines 'I gave commands; / Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands / As if alive.' (lines 45 – 47), commenting on how these remarks made by the Duke are ambiguous in the context of the poem. (6)

10. Paraphrase lines 49-53. (4)

11. How does the poet use framing to develop the theme of the poem? (2)

12. Consider the following extract from the poem “The Angel in the House” by Coventry Patmore. Published 12 years after “My Last Duchess” in 1854, Patmore’s poem proved extremely popular for its description of the behaviour to which a Victorian wife should aspire. Consider how the feminine spousal ideal portrayed by Patmore would have justified the Duke’s response to his late wife’s behaviour. Quote from both poems to substantiate your response. (8)

“THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE” — COVENTRY PATMORE

Man must be pleased; but him to please

1

Is woman’s pleasure; down the gulf

Of his condoled necessities

She casts her best, she flings herself.

How often flings for nought, and yokes

5

Her heart to an icicle or whim,

Whose each impatient word provokes

Another, not from her, but him;

While she, too gentle even to force

His penitence by kind replies,

10

Waits by, expecting his remorse,

With pardon in her pitying eyes;

And if he once, by shame oppress’d,

A comfortable word confers,

She leans and weeps against his breast,

15

And seems to think the sin was hers;

And whilst his love has any life,

Or any eye to see her charms,

At any time, she’s still his wife,

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

Dearly devoted to his arms;

20

She loves with love that cannot tire;

And when, ah woe, she loves alone,

Through passionate duty love springs higher,

As grass grows taller round a stone.

[40]

MODERNISM

INTRODUCTION TO MODERNISM

Artistic expression in the 20th century was dominated by what is known as the Modernist movement. The use of the term 'modern' can be confusing. Today, we use the term modern to describe anything that was created in the last couple of decades, but when we talk of Modernism, we are describing a particular artistic and philosophical movement that is associated with the turn of the 20th century and the beginning of what is considered 'the modern age'.

Although it is considered a relatively recent movement in art and literature, many critics believe **Modernism** to be the pinnacle of artistic expression in Western history. They argue that its roots lie in the questioning of religion and humanity's place in the universe that began during the Renaissance, and that it was then further developed and refined by the rationality of the Enlightenment period, the excesses of Romanticism and the realism of the Victorian era. From this perspective, they argue it is the culmination of 300 years of cultural development initiated by the Renaissance.

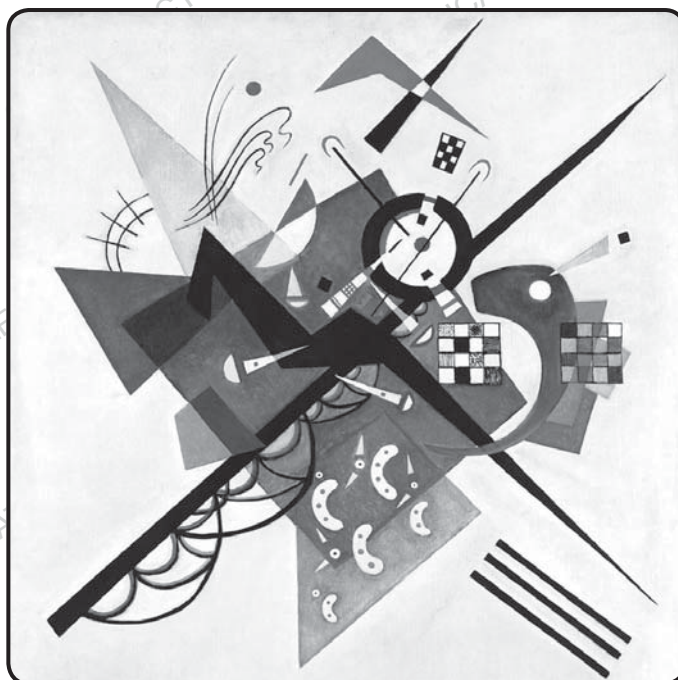
Modernist artists recognised that the turn of the 20th century marked the beginning of a 'modern age'. They were excited by this idea and wanted to reflect the new age in which they were living by interrogating artistic rules and conventions and then reinventing them. The Cubist deconstructions of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, for instance, illustrate how artists were taking the conventions of painting and twisting them into exciting new shapes.

Modernism wasn't limited to art. Important Modernist intellectuals include Sigmund Freud, who revolutionised the way we think about the mind, and Karl Marx, who suggested a radically new structure for politics and society.



DEFINED BY WHAT IT IS NOT?

Scholars continue to debate the exact definition of **Modernism**, but broadly agree that it is a style or movement in art, literature, philosophy and architecture that rejects classical or traditional forms and experiments with new methods of artistic expression.



(Museum of Modern Art, Paris).

Painted in 1923, *On White II* is widely considered as one of the greatest masterpieces by the Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, who is credited with the first fully abstract painting. The use of white colour is said to represent life and all of the opportunities that are available, and the use of black colour inside the white represents death and how all of those opportunities can be taken away in an instant.



REJECTING SUBJECTIVITY

Early Modernist poets were often preoccupied with objectivity and making intellectual statements about society. Their work focused on breaking with the past and rejecting outmoded literary traditions and forms.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

LITERARY PIONEERS

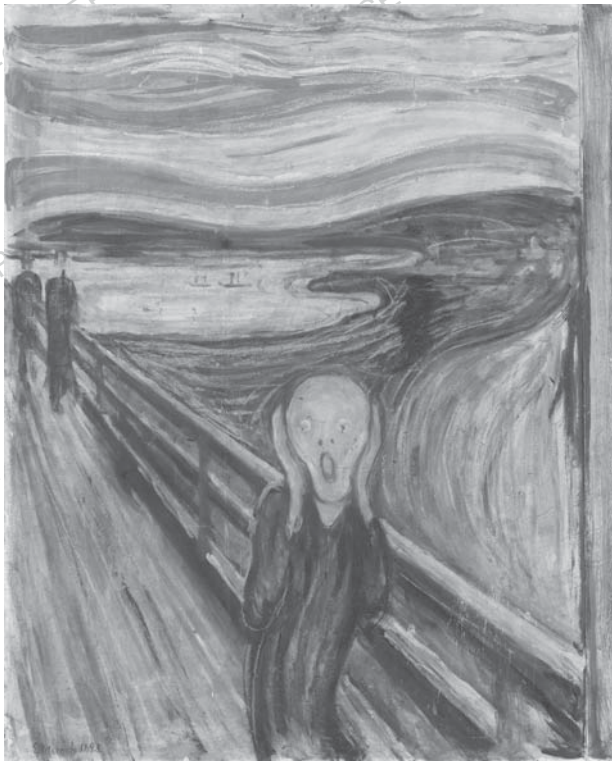
Ezra Pound's call to "Make it new" in 1934, in his book of the same name, is often cited as embodying the spirit of Modernist literature. The rejection of traditional forms and an emphasis on innovation and experimentation were the driving forces behind the poets and novelists of the movement. Pound proved to be one of the most influential founding fathers of Modernism, and was a mentor to other major literary figures of the day, including TS Eliot, James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway.

i

Modernism presented a slightly different character on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In Britain, the literary movement was best exemplified by novelists and poets who reflected on the political and social changes of the 'modern age'. In America, it represented the idea of a totally new, 'modern society'. This notion was more easily assimilated in America because it was still a relatively young country, having gained independence a mere 200 years before. Modernism has since come to be considered the first authentic artistic movement to develop on that continent.



The Scream is the popular name given to a composition created by Norwegian artist Edvard Munch. Painted in 1893, the agonised face in the painting has become an most iconic image, seen as symbolising the anxiety of modern man. Discussing the inspiration behind the painting, Munch recalled that he had been out for a walk at sunset when suddenly the setting sunlight turned the clouds 'a blood red' and he sensed an 'infinite scream passing through nature'.



The term Modernism brings together a number of disparate sub-movements from around the globe, from the free forms of the American Beat poets to the radical perspectives on gender and sexuality of Britain's Bloomsbury Group.

The Beat poets were a group of writers who rejected societal norms and embraced experimental countercultures. Notable members of this group of writers were Jack Kerouac, author of *On the Road* and *Doctor Sax*, and Allen Ginsberg, whose famous poems include "Howl", "America" and "A Supermarket in California".

The Bloomsbury Group was a close-knit circle of progressive writers and thinkers that got its name from the area of London in which they all lived. The group included Virginia Woolf, author of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To The Lighthouse*, and EM Forster, who wrote the classic *Howard's End*.

In many respects, the main unifying factor between these diverse sub-movements (apart from the timing of their development) was the will of the writers to express themselves and their worlds in new and innovative ways.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRYTHE
RENAISSANCETHE
ROMANTICSTHE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

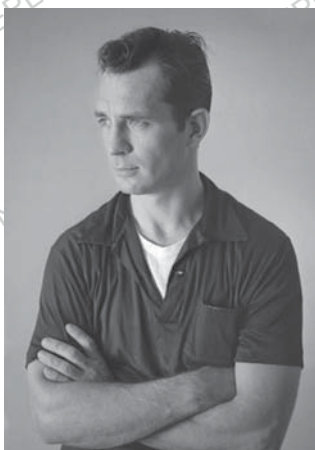
LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISMSOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRYUNSEEN
POETRYACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS



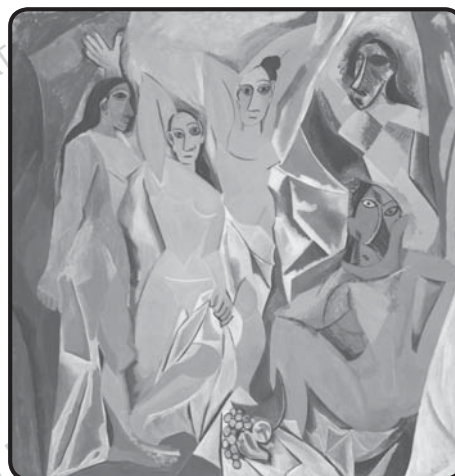
THE ONLY PEOPLE FOR ME ARE THE MAD ONES

'The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!"'

— Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*



Jack Kerouac by Tom Palumbo circa 1956 (Wikimedia)



(Museum of Modern Art, New York City) (Wikimedia Commons)

Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* ("The Young Ladies of Avignon") caused a huge controversy when it was created in 1907, due to the experimental nature of its composition. Critics have since hailed it as re-inventing the art of painting.

SHATTERED BY WAR

Many Modernist writers in Europe, such as William Butler Yeats, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, were heavily influenced by the political turmoil in the early years of the 1900s, created by war, revolutions and imperialism.

The key event of this time period was, of course, World War One (1914–1918). This 'war to end all wars' was the culmination of almost 200 years of instability that had begun with the French Revolution and led to a shift in the way not only artists, but all citizens, understood the world. The previous religious and political structural frameworks, which had provided an illusion of stability, were shattered by the war, and the artists and writers of the Western world were exploring what lay behind these illusions.



© Thomas Keith Aitken (Imperial War Museum, London)

Blinded by tear gas, British soldiers hold on to each other as they line up for treatment during the Battle of Estaires, 10 April 1918.



(Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain)

Guernica is a famous anti-war painting by Pablo Picasso depicting the suffering of people and animals wrenched by violence and chaos. Prominent in the composition are a gored horse, a bull, screaming women, dismemberment and flames. The original painting is over 7.5 metres long and 3.5 metres high.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

EMILY DICKINSON (1830 — 1886)



© superlauri (Deviantart)

Emily Dickinson was born in 1830 in a town called Amherst in the American state of Massachusetts. She was the second of three children. Her father was a lawyer and worked at the law firm that his father had founded. Soon after Emily was born, her father moved into politics, first locally and then serving one term in the United States Congress. Little is known of Dickinson's mother, except that she was an academic and was devoted to her studies.

Unusually for women of the time, Dickinson received extensive schooling, first attending a local school called Amherst Academy for seven years. Although the mission of the school was described simply as 'morality, piety, and religion', the curriculum focused on the sciences and allowed for some freedom in the students' choice of reading matter. Dickinson's favourite subjects included philosophy, geology and Latin. She was also interested in botany and was an avid gardener throughout her life.

INTELLECTUAL AND DOMESTIC MATTERS

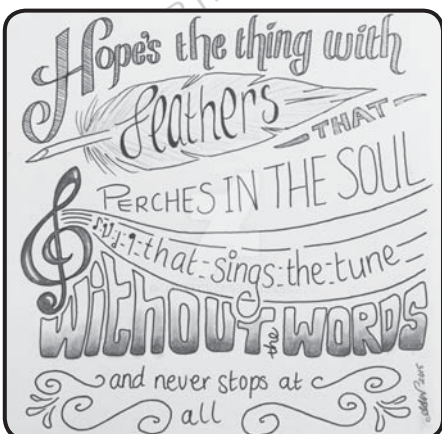
When Dickinson was 16, she began attending Mount Holyoke Female Seminary a few kilometres away from Amherst. Although religious instruction featured heavily, the curriculum also included a number of scientific disciplines such as botany, natural history and astronomy. Other subjects offered at the school were the languages (predominantly English and Latin), history, algebra and philosophy, as well as music.

Dickinson left Holyoke after only a year. Some accounts indicate that Dickinson was homesick and missed her family, while in a letter to a friend, she noted that she left school because her father asked her to come home and attend to domestic matters. It was common then for women to attend school for only two or three years, as they were expected to focus on running a household. Another source argues that Dickinson didn't find the curriculum stimulating enough, as she had already read most of the books on the reading list.



© Yale University, Connecticut

Emily Dickinson, around the age of 18 years old, circa 1848. This image was captured using the first photographic process, known as daguerreotype, and Emily would have had to sit still for 10 minutes while the image formed.



© AsteryW (Deviantart)

RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

Although Dickinson never married, she received at least two proposals (the first in her youth and the second when she was in her forties); however, she stated more than once that she was not interested in the life of a wife and mother, and she hated domestic chores. She craved connections with others, but the ideal connections, to her mind, were intellectual. While she increasingly avoided social obligations and became a recluse, she corresponded for years with several editors and publishers that she admired, seeking their advice about her poetry.

In 1856, her brother Austin married Susan Huntington Gilbert, who became one of her closest friends. The couple built a house next door to the Dickinson family home. As a girl, Susan had also attended Amherst Academy (although not at the same time as Dickinson), and she was a teacher before marrying Austin. Dickinson valued Gilbert's opinions on her poetry, once writing in a letter that '[w]ith the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living. To say that sincerely is strange praise'.



© Beatriz Martin Vidal (Deviantart)

*'That it will never come again
Is what makes life so sweet.'*

CURIOSITY AND PRIVACY

Dickinson wrote 1 800 poems in total, more than half of which were written between 1858 and 1865. Most of these were written in handmade notebooks that she didn't share with anyone, although she shared 250 of her poems with her sister-in-law and another 100 with an editor named Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who would help to edit and publish her poems after she died. Several of her poems were published while she was still alive, but anonymously and not with her permission.

Dickinson continued to read widely on her own and was influenced by a number of poets. There is a sense of curiosity in many of her poems, suggesting that she saw writing as primarily a way to record her observations and to study her subject, as if with a magnifying glass. In some of these poems, there is the sense that she has just made a discovery and she can't wait to share it with someone. Having said that, many of her poems also have a keen wit that is vital to understanding their meaning.



Dickinson withdrew from social life to the point that she didn't leave her family property for the last two decades of her life. She was so reluctant to face visitors to the house that she is known to have spoken to them through doors. When her father died in 1874, his funeral was conducted in the hall of the family home and Dickinson chose to listen to the service from the privacy of her bedroom above.



© James Golden (federalthrust.blogspot.com)

The Dickinson family home in Amherst, Massachusetts, in which Emily ensconced herself and which she refused to leave during the last 20 years of her life. Her bedroom is pictured in the upper left corner and, from it, she had a view of the small woods and path toward her brother's house. This small landscape and path were most of Emily's world. She sometimes would take her niece Maggie to her room, lock the door, and say to her, 'This is freedom.'

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

POSTHUMOUS POPULARITY

Little more is known of Dickinson's private or intellectual life. Although she wrote many letters, preferring them to face-to-face interactions, even with her closest friends, very few letters survive and those that do seem to be intentionally cryptic. Some of the letters that she sent to friends suggest that she was romantically involved with someone, but no one knows who this was or why it ended. After 1865, she became a recluse and rarely even accepted visitors. Her health also began to deteriorate.

Her father and mother died, in 1874 and 1875 respectively, and Dickinson died more than a decade later, in 1886, after a protracted illness. Her poetry notebooks, described as 'fascicles', were discovered after her death.

A selection of these poems was published in 1890, although they were heavily edited. They were immediately popular, selling out a number of times in the first two years. The first complete edition of her poetry was published in 1955.



"To make a prairie" (1755)

© Fanny Hughes

"THE WIND BEGUN TO ROCK THE GRASS"

The wind began to rock the grass

1

With threatening tunes and low—

He flung a menace at the earth—

A menace at the sky.

The leaves unhooked themselves from trees—

5

And started all abroad;

The dust did scoop itself like hands

And throw away the road.

The wagons quickened on the streets,

The thunder hurried slow—

10

The lightning showed a yellow beak

And then a livid claw.

The birds put up the bars to nests—

The cattle fled to barns—

There came one drop of giant rain

15

And then as if the hands

That held the dams had parted hold

The waters wrecked the sky,

But overlooked my father's house—

Just quartering a tree—

20



GLOSSARY

menace (lines 3 and 4): a threat

started (line 6): surprised, startled

livid (line 12): bluish, leaden in colour

quartering (line 20): dividing into four parts (i.e. shattered the body of the tree)

ANALYSIS

“The wind begun to rock the grass” is a poem written about an approaching storm. Since Dickinson rarely gave her poems a title, they are often referred to by their first line or by a number assigned by the first editors of her poems. This poem is also known as “Poem 796”. There are two versions of this poem, however; this version was sent to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, while Dickinson sent the other version to her sister-in law. The second version is known as “The wind begun to knead the grass” or “Poem 824”.

The poem consists of 20 lines, divided into five stanzas of four lines each. There is no rhyme scheme, but like many of Dickinson’s poems, most of the stanzas consist of three lines of eight syllables each and one line of six syllables. This structure allows the poet some flexibility in her choice of words and imagery, while retaining a sense of unity and rhythm.

PUNCTUATION

When reading any poem by Emily Dickinson, pay attention to the use of punctuation and diction. Dickinson’s poems are often deceptively simple, and their themes are often developed by these two elements.

The first three stanzas of “The wind begun to rock the grass” are made up of one complete sentence each and end with a full stop, with dashes used at the end of certain lines to form or create a transition from one image of movement to the next. These stanzas describe the approach of the storm.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the animals seek shelter as the storm arrives and its power is unleashed. These two stanzas together form one complete thought and are punctuated only with dashes — even the final line of the poem ends in a dash, not a full stop. This use of punctuation in the final two paragraphs creates a flurried rhythm that suggests the progress and intensity of the storm.

Other than these full stops and dashes, the poem uses only two other punctuation marks: a semicolon at the end of line 6 and a comma at the end of line 15. The semicolon marks the transition from the leaves being blown around by the wind to the dust being blown from the road. It slows the pace of the poem to suggest that the storm is still building up. The comma is used in the final stanza to move attention from the peak of the storm to the description of how the speaker’s home is untouched by the storm, as if it was intentionally saved. This shift in punctuation suggests that the reader should pay special attention to these lines.

The final line of the poem also ends with a dash, instead of a full stop. This ending is consistent with the use of dashes elsewhere in the poem, which represent the movement and the progress of the storm. This final dash could also imply that the speaker is surprised and breaks off her description of the storm before she is quite finished. Perhaps she has more to say, but she is distracted by how the storm has seemed to avoid destroying her father’s house intentionally, even though it destroys the tree next to the house.

Whatever the reason for this final dash, the reader is left to fill in the blanks and decide for themselves what has happened, making them a part of the poetic process.

i

POEM 824

The main difference between the two versions of this poem is that the first stanza of “The wind begun to knead the grass” compares the wind to a woman pounding dough to make bread:

‘The wind begun to knead the grass
As women do a dough—
He flung a hand full at the plain—
A hand full at the sky.’

i

USE OF CAPITAL LETTERS

In some editions of Dickinson’s poetry, many of the nouns are capitalised, even when they don’t denote proper nouns. The poet’s original manuscripts use capital letters liberally, but this style was edited out by the first editors of the poems (Thomas Wentworth Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd). In 1998, Dickinson’s poems were published for the first time with the original capitalisations.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification to describe the effects of the storm on the environment. This imagery begins in the very first line of the first stanza, when the wind shakes the grass, as if it were rocking a baby. In the second line, this imagery is developed as the sound of the wind is compared to a song sung by a person. Then, in the third line, the pronoun 'he' is used for the first and only time in the poem, to describe how the wind or the storm attacks the earth and then the sky.



*'The wind begun to rock the grass
With threatening tunes and low—' (lines 1-2)*

With the exception of the third and fourth lines of the first stanza, most of the elements of the storm are not personified as thinking human beings with will and agency; instead, they are assigned the action of one part of the human body: the hands. This partial personification suggests that the elements of the storm are being manipulated by another entity, for example, the wind. As a result of the gusting winds, '[t]he leaves unhooked themselves' (line 5) and '[t]he dust did scoop itself like hands' (line 7). This imagery is effective because we don't see the wind itself when it blows; instead, we see the effects of the wind: the grass rustling and the leaves and dust being blown into the air.



*'There came one drop of giant rain
And then as if the hands*

*That held the dams had parted hold
The waters wrecked the sky,' (lines 15-18)*

In contrast to this personification, in stanza three, the lightning is compared to the 'yellow beak' (line 11) and 'a livid claw' (line 12) of a bird, both images representing the flash of the lightning in the sky and its sudden, darting movement. Unlike the hands that pluck the leaves and gather up the dust, this description of the bird's movement is passive; the beak and claw don't perform an action. They simply appear and then recede.

The use of human hands to describe the actions of the storm is employed again in stanza four. The hands are now the storm clouds that are holding the rain back. The speaker describes how it seemed 'as if the hands / That held the dams had parted hold / The waters wrecked the sky' (lines 16-18). The storm has now begun in earnest.

The final instance of personification in the poem is implicit. In the final two lines of the poem, the speaker explains how the storm batters everything, including a tree next to the house, but leaves the house untouched. She uses the verb 'overlooked' (line 19), which suggests that a sentient being has either intentionally or unintentionally left the house intact. She doesn't identify who or what has left the house intact, however; it could be the storm, it could be nature, or it could be something spiritual/supernatural. The speaker seems to be leaving it up to the reader to decide on the nature of this 'being' and whether it has acted with intention.

DICTION

The same ambivalence that surrounds the use of personification in the poem can be found in the word choice. The first stanza begins neutrally, with the verb 'rock' in line 1 to describe the wind ruffling the grass; however, the second line uses the adjectives 'threatening' and 'low' to describe the sound of the wind, hinting that the wind is somehow menacing, but without explicitly explaining how.

The same pattern can be found in the third stanza, in the description of the lightning, and in the fifth stanza, in the description of the storm clouds releasing the rain. In line 11, the lightning shows a neutral 'yellow beak', but in line 12, the 'livid claw' sounds sinister. In lines 16 and 17, the hands holding the rain back simply part, but in line 18, '[t]he waters *wrecked* the sky' (emphasis added). Once again, the speaker leaves the decision of whether the storm (or the force behind the storm) is intentionally or unintentionally destructive to the reader.

In a similar vein, at least one of the descriptions in the poem is an oxymoron. In stanza three, line 10, the speaker describes how '[t]he thunder hurried slow'. The words 'hurried' and 'slow' seem at first to be oxymorons. If you reflect on the sound of thunder, though, the description is accurate. Thunder is often surprising and even frightening, as it marks the approach of a storm, but the sound itself is the opposite: slow and ponderous as the rumbling continues after the first clap of thunder. Both descriptions are accurate and reinforce the speaker's feelings of ambivalence toward the approaching storm.

Another interesting feature of Dickinson's choice of diction in this poem (as well as in her poetry in general) is that words are used in unusual ways. The word 'menace' in lines 3 and 4 is used twice to describe something threatening that is thrown at the earth and at the sky. The reader is left to imagine the nature of this 'menace' that attacks both earth and sky indiscriminately.

An additional example of the poet's unusual use of diction is found in the description of the wind blowing the leaves and the dust in stanza two. The verb 'unhooked' (line 5) could be used to describe someone taking an item of clothing off a hanger, but it is not often used to describe leaves being plucked from the branches of a tree by the wind. The verb 'scoop' (line 7) could be used to describe someone gathering and then sifting flour while they cook, rather than the dust being blown off the road by the wind.

The careful use of diction suggests that one of the themes of the poem is transformation and stability. Each line of the poem describes a change that has been brought about by the storm, whether it is the wind moving through the grass, the wagons and animals seeking shelter or the clouds finally releasing the anticipated rain. Only line 19 describes a moment of stability: 'my father's house'. The stability of the domestic environment versus transformation in the natural world, as well as in society, is a recurring theme of Dickinson's work, making this single line especially revealing.



*'The lightning showed a yellow beak,
And then a livid claw.' (lines 11–12)*

© jerusalemhouseministries.com

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

POETRY AS DEFINITION

Dickinson's poetry has been described as an exercise in definition. This suggests that she used her poetry to describe in detail the phenomena that she had observed in the world around her (such as the storm, in this instance), so that she could try to understand these phenomena and the larger forces at work behind them. This process is evident in "The wind begun to rock the grass", in which she begins by noting how the wind makes the grass sway, before turning her attention to the leaves falling from the trees and being blown by the wind.

In this poem, Dickinson seems to be analysing a storm she has witnessed by first observing and describing each of the effects of the wind, then noting the wagons that are disappearing, and the arrival of the thunder and the lightning. There is the sense that by describing each moment of the storm, the poet will somehow be better able to understand its nature.



© RHADS (Deviantart)

i

DICKINSON AND THE ROMANTICS

The theme of nature in Dickinson's poem is reminiscent of the Romantic poets, who often described nature in a spiritual and transcendental way; however, unlike the Romantic poets, the speaker appears ambivalent about the nature of the force she is describing.

?

QUESTIONS

1. Identify an example of personification in the first stanza of the poem, and comment on its effect in this context. (2)

2. Find synonyms in the poem for the following words:

- a) surprised
- b) hurried
- c) destroyed

(3)

3. Identify the Figure of Speech in line 10, and comment on its effect.

(2)

4. Suggest an antonym for the word 'giant' (line 15).

(1)

5. In some versions of the poem, the nouns are capitalised:

'The Wind begun to rock the Grass
With threatening Tunes and low—
He threw a Menace at the Earth—
A Menace at the Sky.'

How does this use of capitalisation affect the meaning of this stanza?

(2)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

6. Why do you think the poet used dashes so extensively in the poem, rather than more conventional punctuation marks, such as commas and semicolons? (3)

7. In the context of the poem, what does the word 'livid' (line 12) mean, and what is suggested by this description? (2)

8. Why is the sky described as 'wrecked' (line 18)? (1)

9. Consider the following assessment of "The wind begun to rock the grass" and discuss whether you agree with this interpretation of the poem, drawing on evidence from the text to substantiate your response. (5)

'In the poem, Dickinson uses the power of nature to represent humanity and its capacity for destruction.'

10. Consider the following images. Explain which image would be best suited to illustrate the poem, with specific reference to the tone and thematic concerns expressed by the poet.

(5)

Image A:

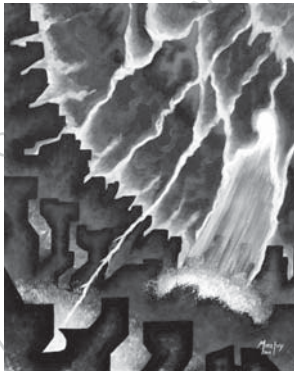


Image B:



Image C:



CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

11. What effect is created by the use of dashes in the final two lines of the poem, and what impact does this have on its meaning? (4)

12. Consider the following poem “Storm Fear” by Robert Frost. An American Modernist poet, Frost is known for his poetry about nature and rural life. Compare and contrast the representation of nature in both “Storm Fear” and “The wind begun to rock the grass”, paying particular attention to the use of personification. Provide evidence in the form of quotations from both poems in support of your response. (10)

“STORM FEAR” — (ROBERT FROST)

When the wind works against us in the dark,

1

And pelts the snow

The lower chamber window on the east,

And whispers with a sort of stifled bark,

The beast,

5

‘Come out! Come out!’—

It costs no inward struggle not to go,

Ah, no!

I count our strength,

Two and a child,

10

Those of us not asleep subdued to mark

How the cold creeps as the fire dies at length,—

How drifts are piled,

Dooryard and road ungraded,

Till even the comforting barn grows far away

15

And my heart owns a doubt

Whether ‘tis in us to arise with day

And save ourselves unaided.

Sample text area with horizontal lines for writing. The area is overlaid with a diagonal watermark reading "SAMPLE SECTION" and "NOT FOR REPLICATION".

[40]

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

UNSEEN POEMS

“WAR PHOTOGRAPHER” - CAROL ANN DUFFY (1955-)

In his dark room he is finally alone **1**

with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.

The only light is red and softly glows,

as though this were a church and he

a priest preparing to intone a Mass. **5**

Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.

He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays

beneath his hands, which did not tremble then

though seem to now. Rural England. Home again

to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel, **10**

to fields which don't explode beneath the feet

of running children in a nightmare heat.

Something is happening. A stranger's features

faintly start to twist before his eyes,

a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries **15**

of this man's wife, how he sought approval

without words to do what someone must

and how the blood stained into foreign dust.

A hundred agonies in black and white

from which his editor will pick out five or six **20**

for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick

with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers.

From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where

he earns his living and they do not care.

? QUESTIONS

1. Explain what the photographer is doing in the first stanza. **(2)**

2. Explain the phrase 'spools of suffering' (line 2).

(2)

3. Discuss the irony of comparing the darkroom in which the photographer is working to a church in which a priest is getting ready for Mass (stanza 1).

(6)

4. Comment on the use of caesuras in the last line of the first stanza.

(2)

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

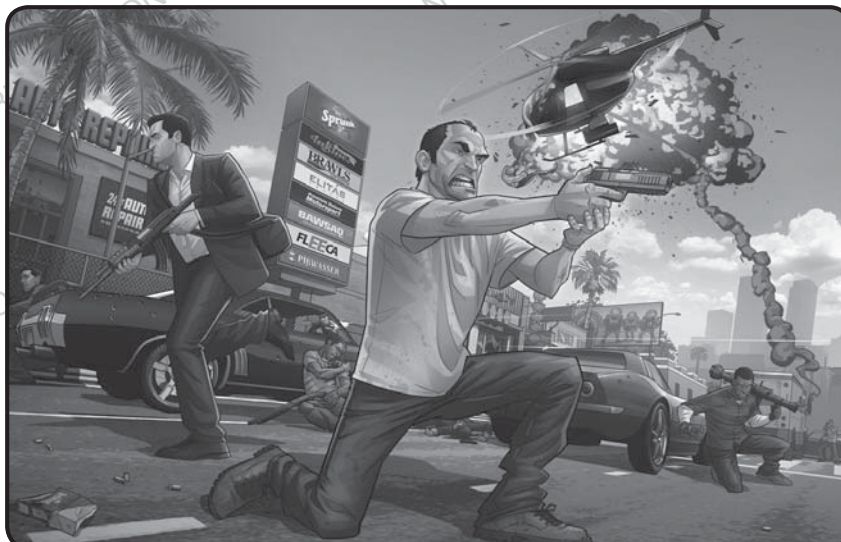
5. Why does the photographer tremble only once he is home safely in 'Rural England'? (4)

6. Why is the phrase 'half-formed ghost' (line 15) appropriate in the context of the poem? (2)

7. How does the tone of the final stanza register the speaker's cynicism about the whole process? Quote from the poem to support your answer. (6)

8. Comment on the structure and rhyme scheme of the poem. (3)

9. The visual below is an artist's impression of a scene from the popular video game *Grand Theft Auto V*. Compare and contrast the ways in which the themes of violence and war are explored in "The War Photographer" and in the following image. (8)



CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

INTRODUCTION
TO POETRY

THE
RENAISSANCE

THE
ROMANTICS

THE
VICTORIANS

MODERNISM

LATE MODERNISM
/ POSTMODERNISM

SOUTHERN
AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN
POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGE-
MENTS

[35]

Prepared for Matric English finals?

ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THE IEB ENGLISH EXAM

EIGHTH EDITION

Exam structures
analysis, practice
questions & expert
tips and strategies

Essential Guide to the
IEB English Exam

Order your copy today!



The English Experience

Publishers of high-quality educational resources

www.englishexperience.co.za

info@englishexperience.co.za

Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702

the
English
experience

A NEW WAY TO EXPERIENCE ENGLISH

- **PROVEN** — USED BY OVER 120 TOP SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS AND THOUSANDS OF PAST STUDENTS
- **TRUSTED** — HIGH-QUALITY, AUTHORITATIVE CONTENT CRAFTED BY A TEAM OF ENTHUSIASTIC EXPERTS
- **TESTED** — EACH RESOURCE USES AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING METHOD THAT DELIVERS
- **FOCUSED** — *ON PROCESS*: APPLYING AND MASTERING CRITICAL LEARNING SKILLS
- **COMPLETE** — UNIQUE COMBINATION TEXTBOOK AND WORKBOOK ENSURES STUDENTS ALWAYS HAVE WHAT THEY NEED
- **INSPIRING** — SYLLABUS IS BROUGHT TO LIFE AND PRESENTED IN A FRESH, INTERESTING WAY



Find out more:

Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702

Fax: +27 (0)86 612 4437

E-mail: info@englishexperience.co.za

Postal: Suite 111, P.O. Box 92418, Norwood, 2117

www.englishexperience.co.za

THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE - FREEING EDUCATORS TO TEACH!