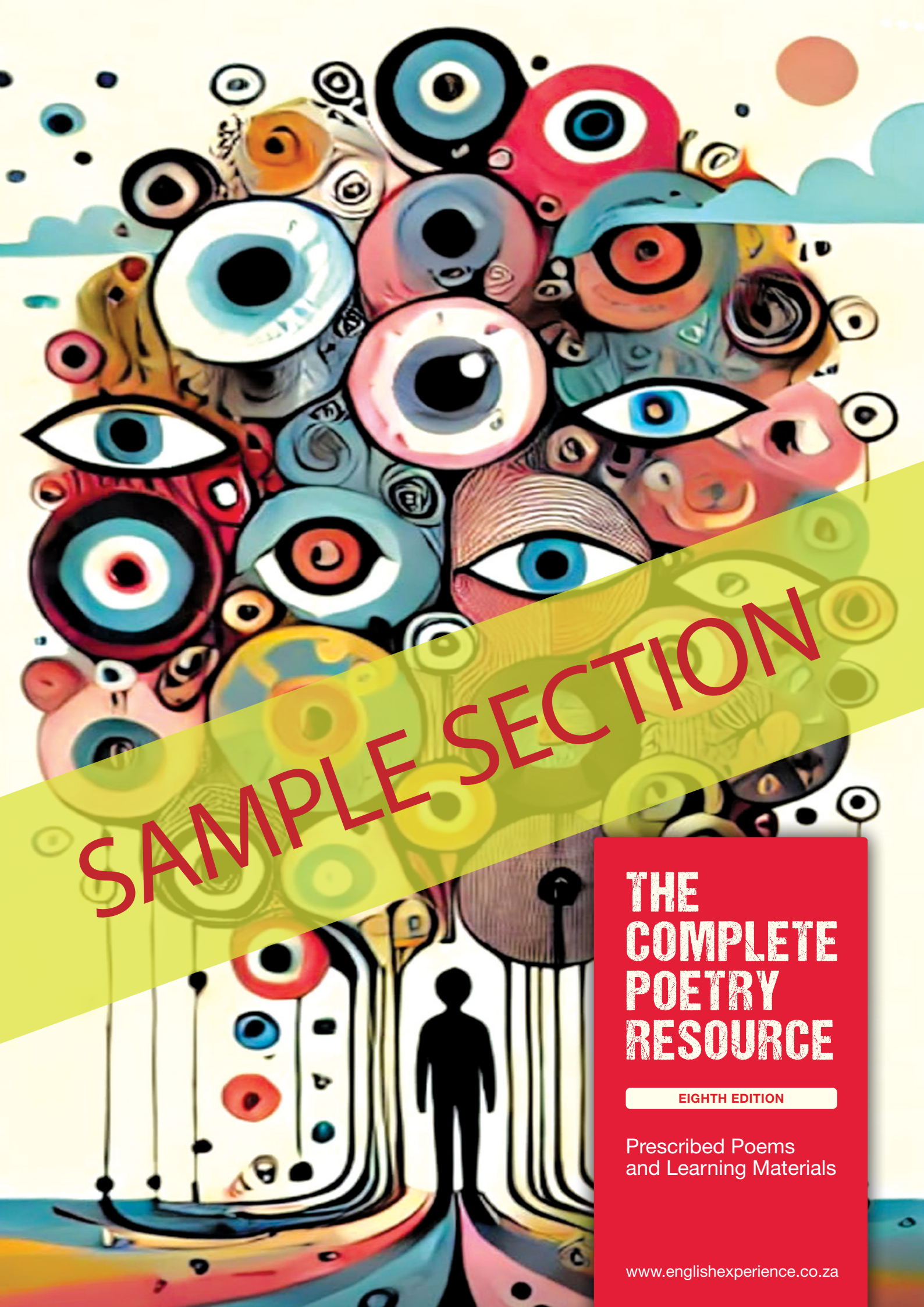
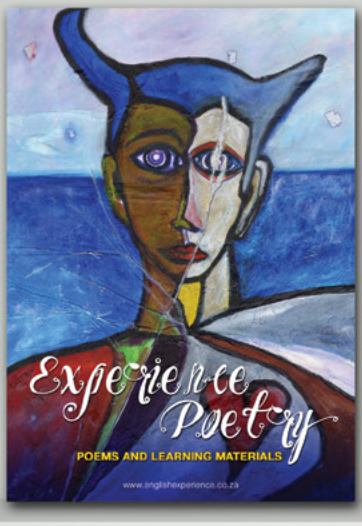

SAMPLE SECTION
THE COMPLETE POETRY RESOURCE
EIGHTH EDITION
Prescribed Poems and Learning Materials
www.englishexperience.co.za

IEB ENGLISH
WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

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

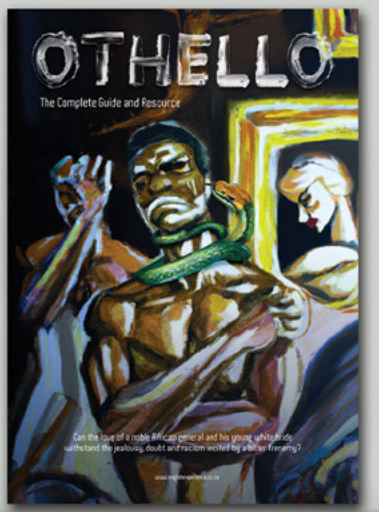


The Complete Poetry Resource for Grades 10 & 11

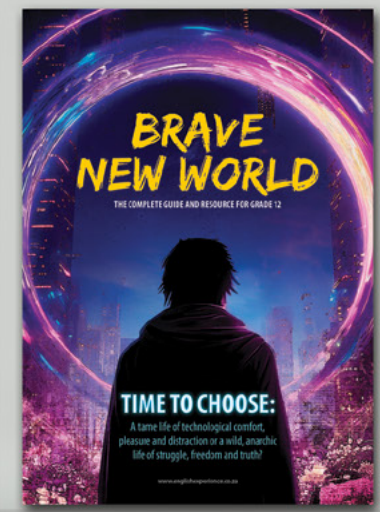
Essential Guide to the IEB English Exam for Grade 12 (Fourteenth Edition)

The Complete IEB Poetry Resource (Eighth Edition)

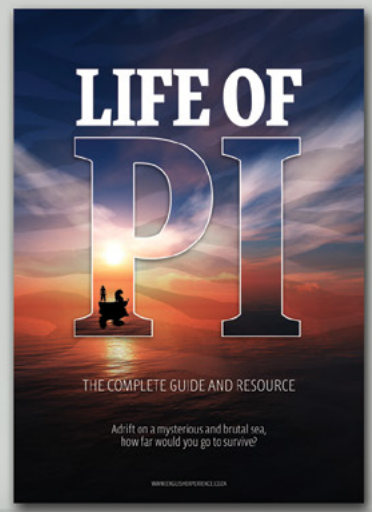
Othello: Complete Guide and Resource



Brave New World: Complete Guide and Resource



Life of Pi: Complete Guide and Resource



The White Tiger: Complete Guide and Resource

The English Experience
Publishers of world-class educational resources

www.englishexperience.co.za
info@englishexperience.co.za
Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702
WhatsApp: +27 (0)67 880 5557

the English experience

THE COMPLETE POETRY RESOURCE

PRESCRIBED POEMS AND LEARNING MATERIALS FOR GRADE 12

EIGHTH EDITION

PUBLISHED AND EDITED BY: THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

ISBN: 978-1-77634-579-3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

MODERNISM

POSTMODERNISM

AFRICAN POETRY

UNSEEN POETRY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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.*

© DALL·E (OpenAI)

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 proof-readers 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 use the camera on a digital device like a phone or tablet to scan this QR code and launch the site 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.

OUR APPROACH

Perhaps the toughest challenge with 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 is perhaps not surprising that many of them see poems as works through which they must slog 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.

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. Our first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and academic success. Our second ambition is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the works being studied.

© yuumei (Deviantart)

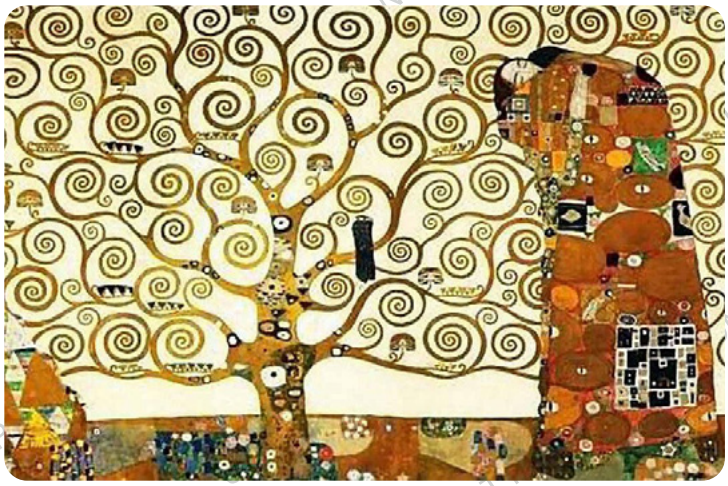
'The world is full of poetry. The air is living with its spirit; and the waves dance to the music of its melodies, and sparkle in its brightness.'

— James Gates Percival

USING THIS RESOURCE

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

This resource includes: the full text of each of the 16 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 challenge students to think critically about, and to formulate their own responses to, each work.



© Gustav Klimt (Wikimedia Commons)

POETRY IN CONTEXT

The poems written by Europeans are arranged into sections (eras, time periods or artistic '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 Modernist 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 more 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 from their European counterparts and so they merit being considered separately. This has been facilitated through the inclusion of an **African poetry** section, which features an introduction to the traditional or pre-colonial literary styles and contexts of African poets, and two sub-sections: **Colonial African poetry,** which includes poets born between the mid-1800s and the early-1900s, a time during which many African kingdoms were subjugated and absorbed into the colonies and protectorates of the imperialist European nations, and **Post-colonial African poetry**, which includes poets born between the late 1930s and the 1970s, a time period during which the people of many African nations fought for their liberation and achieved independence. Again, South Africa offers a somewhat unique case because of the policy of Apartheid enforced between the 1940s and 1990s and so the impact of this is mentioned specifically.

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**.

As its name suggests, the **Unseen poetry** section prepares students for analysing and interpreting unfamiliar poems that they have not read before. Working through the poems and questions in this section will help students to practise and develop the processes and skills required to respond to Question 4 of Paper I in the final examination. This section has been updated and revised and includes general guidelines on how to prepare for the contextual poetry section of the English Home Language examination.

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

© Christian Schloe (Wikimedia Commons)

'Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.'
— William Wordsworth

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
We hope you enjoy using 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 emailing info@englishexperience.co.za, calling our offices on (011) 786-6702 or scanning this QR code to launch our WhatsApp channel automatically.

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 are not trying to trick or confuse readers. Their message is not actually 'hidden', but expressed in a way that is unique, complex and often very striking.

Poets do not 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!).

© RandallSurreal (Deviantart)

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 prefer a different, fresh interpretation and reward it.

© Keyade (Deviantart)

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.

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.

STEP 1: READ THE POEM

It rarely happens that you will understand a poem fully the first time you 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.

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

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, but it will also 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 the lack thereof. The 'sentences' or 'pauses' within the poem, for instance, will help you to decipher its meaning. Make sure that you differentiate between **enjambed** 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've 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, work out 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.

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.

An **enjambed** 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.

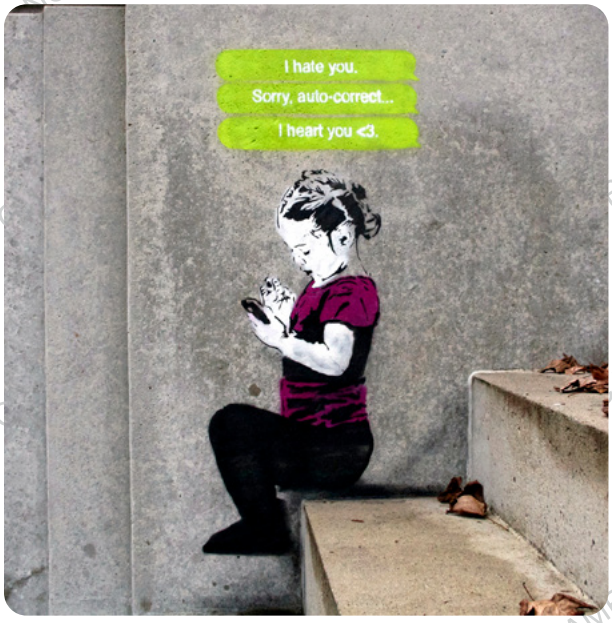
An **end-stopped** line occurs when the sentence or phrase is completed at the end of the line of verse and is usually indicated by a full stop.

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.

© William Kentridge (Art Institute of Chicago)



© iHeartstreetart.com

STEP 3: CLOSE READING

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?

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 effect 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.

© lighterheaven (Deviantart)

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.

TONE VOCABULARY

Positive:	Neutral:	Negative:
Admiring	Ambivalent	Anxious
Amused	Apathetic	Angry
Apologetic	Contemplative	Bitter
Celebratory	Formal	Critical
Confident	Frank	Cynical
Enthusiastic	Honest	Disdainful
Excited	Impartial	Disgusted
Friendly	Indifferent	Fearful
Happy	Informal	Frustrated
Hopeful	Intimate	Gloomy
Humorous	Meditative	Irritated
Light-hearted	Nostalgic	Judgmental
Lofty	Objective	Malevolent
Loving	Pensive	Malicious
Optimistic	Questioning	Patronising
Patient	Reflective	Pessimistic
Persuasive	Serious	Sarcastic
Reverent	Sincere	Satirical
Sentimental	Solemn	Scathing
Sympathetic	Speculative	Sceptical
Thankful	Straightforward	Threatening
Witty	Unconcerned	Vindictive

CLOSE READING CHECKLIST

The basics:

Make sure that you have established the following:

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

Style and technique:

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

- ☑ particular form or structure (such as a sonnet or an ode)
- ☑ unusual diction (word choice) or punctuation
- ☑ striking or unusual typography (layout of the poem)
- ☑ specific rhyme scheme
- ☑ 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.

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 popular poetic techniques described in the following glossary of terms.

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 poem with either an ABCB or ABAB rhyme scheme and a repeated refrain, which was originally intended to be sung

blank verse: lines 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 or more accented (stressed) or unaccented 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 consisting of a short or unaccented (unstressed) syllable followed by a long or accented syllable

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

internal rhyme: two or more words that 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: poem that praises something, which is characterised by exalted emotion and a dignified style and that is usually concerned with a single, serious theme

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, usually deliberately exaggerating the styles and habits of the work being parodied for comedic effect

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

personification: inanimate objects or concepts are given 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

trochee: a foot consisting of one long or accented (stressed) syllable followed by one short or unaccented syllable (reverse of an iamb)

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 handsomely reward 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.

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, if the question asks:
  '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 <u>three</u> 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.
- **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.

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.

© archanN (Deviantart)

'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

THE JACOBEAN ERA

© King James I by Paul van Somer I (circa 1620) (Royal Collection, Windsor Castle) (Wikimedia Commons)

The period during the reign of King James I of England, from 1603 until his death in 1625, is known as the Jacobean era. The name 'Jacobean' is derived from the Latin word for James: Jacobus. When Elizabeth died childless in 1603, King James VI of Scotland inherited the crown of England and became King James I of England as well. He had a claim to both thrones as he was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and the great-great-grandson of Henry VII, King of England. Known as the 'Union of the Crowns', this dual kingship became a highly significant historical moment. While the nations of England and Scotland remained separate, James made clear his intention to unite them under his imperial rule, which fomented the opposition of the aristocrats and parliaments in both countries and set in motion the events that would lead to the English Civil War, the public execution of James's son, Charles I, and the banishment into exile of his grandson, Charles II.

POPULAR WITH HIS SUBJECTS

James was considered a peaceful, scholarly man and a markedly different character from his predecessor, the flirtatious, dramatic and belligerent Elizabeth I. In general, he remained popular with his subjects as the people enjoyed a period of peace and low taxation under his rule. In 1604, he negotiated the end of the unofficial naval war between the English fleet and Spanish Armada that Elizabeth had encouraged. He also spent much of his reign avoiding the devastating religious wars that were fermenting across Europe and attempting to dissuade the warmongering members of the English Parliament who wanted to wage war against Spain.

UNPOPULAR WITH HIS PARLIAMENTS

While James was careful to avoid the major expense of waging war, he was less vigilant regarding the expenditure of his court. He regularly neglected the business of government in favour of academic and leisurely pursuits. The government of Scotland was already deeply in debt in the late 1500s, and James inherited debts of between £350 000 and £400 000 from Elizabeth in England in 1603. Within seven years, the debts of the English government had ballooned to £1 400 000 — partly because of inflation, but also because of the recklessness and wastefulness of James's royal court — and financial pressures became a source of conflict between him and the English Parliament. Indeed, the subsequent series of tense, angry and largely unsuccessful negotiations with Parliament for financial support played a significant role in the build-up of tensions between the English Monarchy and Parliament that culminated in open civil war in 1642.

As well as wanting to combine the English and Scottish Parliaments into one body, James believed in the divine right of kings — the idea that kings were created by God with a heavenly mandate to rule on His behalf on earth. James even wrote and published two treatises (lengthy essays) on the subject in 1597 and 1598. In these essays, he suggested that Parliament should be little more than an administrative extension of the Monarchy, helping kings to implement royal laws and collect taxes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these ideas angered and agitated members of his parliaments.

© Bridgeman Images

James attending the English Parliament in 1624.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC PATRON OF THE ARTS

English literature, drama, poetry and music flourished during the Jacobean era. James and his wife, Anne of Denmark, were both active, enthusiastic patrons of the arts. James promoted the literature of both England and his native Scotland. At the age of 18, he wrote a guide to Scottish poetry, and he was the patron to an influential group of Scottish poets and musicians, now known as the 'Castalian Band' by many scholars. He continued his active patronage of, and participation in, the arts in England during his reign and many critics consider him to be a defining figure for English Renaissance poetry and drama, which arguably reached its high point during the Jacobean era.

A few months after assuming the English throne, James I officially adopted Shakespeare's acting company and became its patron. In recognition of the King's sponsorship, the group changed its name from the Lord Chamberlain's Men and became known as the King's Men. It was a great boon for Shakespeare and his colleagues in terms of their fame and financial and social status, and some of Shakespeare's most prominent plays, including *King Lear* (1605), *Macbeth* (1606), and *The Tempest* (1610), were written during this period. In fact, James is believed to have inspired the inclusion of the trio of witches and witchcraft in *Macbeth* as he studied the subject and in 1597, he wrote a treatise called *Daemonologie* on the threat it posed. This book is believed to be one of the principal sources used by Shakespeare, who wrote the play at a time when King James I, as well as much of England, searched for and killed many supposed witches for their crimes against the Crown and against God. The playwright himself also referenced the Scottish setting and themes of the play to the witch trials in which King James was involved.

'Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and cauldron bubble …' The three witches or weird sisters in Shakespeare's* Macbeth *have become one of the most iconic and well-known features of the play.

JACOBEAN POETRY AND DRAMA

The Jacobean era was a time of innovation as well as prominence for playwrights and poets. John Webster, Thomas Middleton, John Ford and Ben Jonson all published powerful works. Webster wrote his two celebrated tragedies, *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. Middleton wrote several satirical comedies, including *Women Beware Women*, an ultimately gory examination of the pitfalls of affairs and illegitimate relationships, and *The Roaring Girl*, a play based on the life of the notorious London criminal, **Mary Frith** (known as Moll Cutpurse), who dressed as a man and preferred her freedom as a gangster to marriage.

© Cheek by Jowl Theatre Company

Ford is perhaps best known for his revenge play, called *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (*pictured left*) about incestuous relationships and duped suitors. Jonson was a well-known and important dramatist, poet and literary critic during the Jacobean era. He was the first poet laureate of England, a title and salary awarded for poetic excellence that began when James I bestowed a royal pension on Jonson in 1616. He was well-educated and drew on classical stories, themes and techniques in his works. He was also lively, mischievous and raucous and used his art to expose the follies and vices of Jacobean society. His impact on the theatre is second only to Shakespeare's and the two men were rivals and good friends. Among his most popular plays were the comedies *Volpone; or the Foxe* (1606) and *The Alchemist* (1610) that lampoon men's obsessive lust for gold and riches. Jonson was also an important innovator in the specialised literary subgenre of the **masque**, which went through an intense development at the time. A hybrid, highly-technical, visual and literary art, the masque was an expensive spectacle that proved popular with James I and his royal court but alienated the middle classes and growing numbers of Puritans who considered the subgenre wasteful, self-indulgent and excessive.

THE ROARING GIRL

Mary Frith was a divisive figure in London in the 1600s. In the guise of the semifictional character Moll Cutpurse, she smoked, cursed, stole and — most shocking of all — dressed like a man. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the upstanding, law-abiding, conservative and religious inhabitants of the city considered her a disgrace. Yet many working-class citizens and artists saw her as an expression of everything that was exhilarating and terrifying about London life in the years when the city began its mutation from mediaeval town into modern metropolis. For them, she became the personification of the city in which anything was possible.

© National Portrait Gallery London (Wikimedia Commons)

THEY WANT TO CANCEL CHRISTMAS!

In the 1600s, Christmas was a mixture of religious and pagan (Yuletide) festivities that consisted of 12 days of feasting, partying, drinking, carousing, merriment and mayhem. *Christmas, His Masque* was performed at the royal court in 1616. Written by Ben Jonson, the **masque** was both a fun pantomime-style show about what makes Christmas great, and a satirical rebuke of the growing numbers of Puritans and wealthy merchants who, for different reasons, wanted to tame or cancel the popular mid-winter festival. James is likely to have thoroughly enjoyed the masque as he was a vocal supporter of the traditional holiday.

© Michael Hurst (Wikimedia Commons)

There has always been one person at the party who takes it too far. Depiction of the infamous drunken Twelve Days of Christmas revels at Haddon Hall in Derbyshire, England in the 1830s.

THE KING JAMES VERSION OF THE BIBLE

One of the most important literary publications sponsored by King James I was a new English translation of the Christian Bible for the Church of England. James commissioned a panel of 47 translators to start on the work in 1604 and it was completed and published seven years later in 1611. Known to this day as the 'King James Version', the 400-year-old work is considered one of the most important books in English culture and a driving force in shaping the English-speaking world. By the 1700s it was entrenched as the standard translation used in Protestant churches and it remains one of the best-selling, most widely printed books in history.

GUNPOWDER, TREASON AND PLOT

James survived several plots and assassination attempts, the most famous of which is still commemorated by English people today. Tired of decades of persecution, a group of English Catholics planned to blow up Parliament during its official opening ceremony on 5 November 1605, when James and his government would also be present. Known as the Gunpower Plot, 36 barrels of gunpowder had been secretly stored under the building, but an anonymous letter to one of the people who would be attending the event warned of the plan and it was foiled. The citizens of London lit bonfires to celebrate the survival of the king and, a few months later, Parliament made 5 November an annual public day of thanksgiving. The occasion is also called **Guy Fawkes** Night, after the member of the plot who was found guarding the explosives, and effigies of the soldier are traditionally burnt on bonfires as part of the celebrations, accompanied by fireworks.

The **Guy Fawkes** mask (*pictured*) is now a well-known symbol of protest and resistance. The contemporary mask is based on a stylised version of Guido (Guy) Fawkes's face created by illustrator David Lloyd for the graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*. In the graphic novel, the protagonist, V, wears the mask to remain anonymous and reinvents Fawkes as a rogue hero and champion of human rights rather than a violent traitor. *V for Vendetta* was first published in the 1980s, when it was still common for children to create effigies of Guy Fawkes by stuffing old clothes with newspaper and strapping on a mask for a face. Guy Fawkes costumes with masks were also popular choices for Halloween. In 2008, the mask was adopted by members of the hacktivist group Anonymous to hide their identities at anti-Scientology protests, a choice probably inspired by the scene in *V for Vendetta* in which a group of masked protesters marches on the English Parliament. The mask is now used by numerous protest groups, including Occupy Wall Street, Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter.

© p2pnadie2pp (Deviantart)

WACKY ABOUT BACCY

In 1604, James wrote one of the very first anti-tobacco publications. In the book, called *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*, James complains about passive smoking, warns of dangers to the lungs, and decries tobacco's odour as 'hatefull to the nose'. Tobacco was the first profitable export from the Virginia colony in America and historians maintain that the colony is unlikely to have survived had the English not acquired the habit of smoking nicotine. By 1612, there were more than 7 000 tobacconists and smoking houses in London. James disliked tobacco so intensely that he authorised the levy of a high excise tax on the product, and it has been taxed heavily by the English government ever since.

© James Gillray (1793) (Wikimedia Commons)

Heavy taxation made tobacco expensive and, thus, an indication of wealth and social status in 18th century Europe.

JOHN DONNE (1572 — 1631)

*Born in London in 1572 (a few years after Shakespeare), John Donne is considered one of the leading poets of the **metaphysical school** of poetry, a style of verse that he helped pioneer and develop. He wrote witty, sensual and satirical verse about love, sex, spirituality and the shortcomings of English society. As well as a poet and scholar, Donne was a soldier in the Anglo-Spanish war, a lawyer, a diplomat and Member of Parliament and, finally, a prominent cleric in the Church of England. In fact, during the Jacobean era, he was better known for his eloquent sermons than for his poetry. Thirteen collections of Donne's works have been published, several of them after his death, as he himself shunned publishing his own writing.*

The **metaphysical school** of poetry is considered to be a deliberate reaction to the smoothness and conventionality of Elizabethan verse. Metaphysics, in its philosophical sense, is the study of the nature of reality. Among other things, it asks questions about how we perceive and experience the world. Metaphysical poetry also examines the nature of perception and experience by comparing paradoxical, unrelated and often far-fetched ideas and/or objects. These comparisons are made using similes and metaphors that are described as metaphysical conceits. One famous example is Andrew Marvell's comparison of the human soul and a dewdrop in the poem "On a Drop of Dew". Metaphysical poets also rejected the strict conventions and stylistic and structural principles of Elizabethan verse where necessary to disturb, startle or challenge their readers.

© Sandie Croft (www.sandiecroftart.com)

'Because so long divided from the sphere.
Restless it rolls and unsecure,
Trembling lest it grow impure,
Till the warm sun pity its pain,
And to the skies exhale it back again.'

— extract from "On a Drop of Dew" by Andrew Marvell

PIOUS OR PRAGMATIC?

© wORkiNGaRTs Studio

Religion was a major preoccupation of society during the Jacobean era and dominated Donne's life. He was born into a Catholic family, at a time when it was illegal to practice that religion openly in England. Queen Elizabeth introduced yet more stringent measures when Donne was 20 years old, making it unlawful for Catholics to travel further than eight kilometres from their homes and banning them from gathering in numbers. A year later, Donne's brother Henry was arrested for harbouring a Catholic priest and died in prison shortly afterwards. Biographers suggest that it was these events that prompted Donne to begin questioning the validity and expediency of his Catholic faith.

By 1610, Donne had converted to Anglicanism and contributed to the religious propaganda pamphlet war of the time, writing two anti-Catholic polemics, *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Ignatius His Conclave*, which were the first appearances of his writing in print. Five years later, at the age of 43, Donne took holy orders and was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. Yet this was only because King James I had been pressuring him to do so and Donne felt it unwise to ignore James's wishes. It proved to be a satisfactory career move and, after a spell as a Royal Chaplain and as chaplain to the English Embassy in Germany, Donne was made Dean of St Paul's in 1621, a leading and well-paid position in the Church of England, which he held until his death ten years later.

SCHOLAR AND SOLDIER

Donne was an excellent scholar. At the age of 12, he began studying at Hart Hall in Oxford, a refuge for Catholics at the time, and three years later, he was admitted to the University of Cambridge. He was unable to obtain a degree and graduate from either institution, however, because he refused to take the divisive Oath of Supremacy and swear allegiance to the reigning monarch as Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The oath was used to exclude Catholics from Parliament and government positions.

At the age of 19, Donne was accepted as a student at the Thavies Inn legal school and began a career as a barrister; however, soon afterwards, during his early 20s, Donne left to travel across Europe (probably to escape growing anti-Catholic sentiment in England) and fought in the Anglo-Spanish war. He spent enough time in Italy and Spain to master both of their languages.

©Nicholas Hilliard (circa 1591). Reproduction. British Library. (Wikimedia Commons)

An engraving of 18-year-old John Donne. The image includes the inscription, 'Antes muerto que mudado', which means 'Sooner dead than changed' in Spanish.

LOVE AND THUNDER

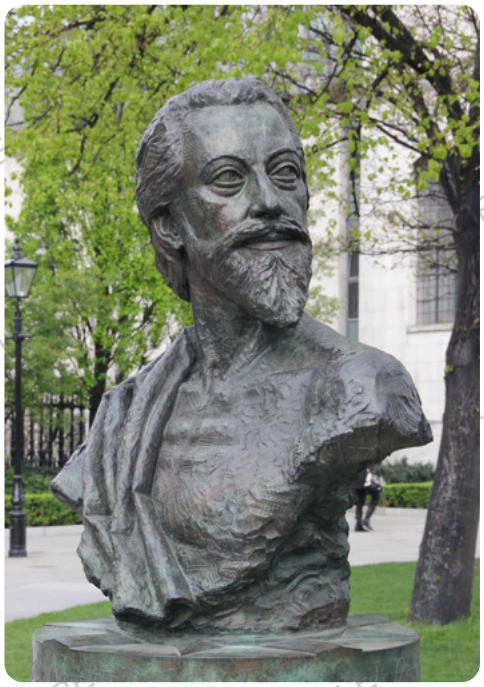
Donne returned to England when he was 25 years old and secured the position as chief secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton. His career as a diplomat seemed set, but Donne fell in love with Egerton's niece, Anne More, and married her in secret in 1601. Both Egerton and Anne's father were thunderously furious, and Donne was summarily fired, arrested and thrown into the Fleet prison.

As the marriage was legal, Donne was released from prison, but had to leave London with his reputation ruined. He and Anne moved to the countryside, where he scraped a meagre living as a lawyer. The couple were married for 16 years. Anne died five days after giving birth to their 12th child. Donne mourned Anne deeply and wrote of his love and loss in his *17th Holy Sonnet*.

FROM POVERTY TO PROMINENCE

As a young man, Donne had inherited a considerable amount of money, but he had spent it on women, literature, lavish pastimes and travel. In the early 1600s, he and Anne lived in a state of constant financial insecurity and poverty. James's enthusiastic patronage of the arts made poetry fashionable, however, and Donne was able to use his talents to seek sponsorship and investment from wealthy friends and benefactors. Through his efforts, the family were able to move back into London and he was elected to Parliament in 1614, where he attracted the attention of the king.

Having converted to the Anglican Church, Donne soon became noted for his eloquent sermons and religious poems. One hundred and sixty of his sermons have survived, including a collection he wrote and published a month after a bout of near fatal illness in 1623 that features his famous *Meditation XVII,* which contains the well-known phrases 'No man is an Iland' (modernised as 'No man is an island') and 'for whom the bell tolls', and *Death's Duel*, his renowned final sermon that he wrote while dying in 1631 and rose from his sickbed to deliver before King Charles I. The act of preaching the sermon exhausted Donne and those who witnessed the eerie event claimed it was as if the poet knew he was delivering his own funeral homily.



© Matthew Black (Wikimedia Commons)

The John Donne Memorial. The first public memorial to the poet, the bronze bust was installed in the garden to the south of St Paul's Cathedral in London in 2012. Below the bust is an inscription with the text, 'Hence is't, that I am carried towards the West, / This day, when my Soul's form bends to the East.', an extract from Donne's poem "Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward". It was on this journey that Donne decided to enter the Church (the East symbolising the Holy Land and the Church). It was a turning point in the poet's life and a fairly extreme change for a writer whose work had been largely concerned with love, sensuality and eroticism until that point.

"THE SUN RISING"

Busy old fool, unruly Sun,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windows and through curtains call on us?
Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?
Saucy pedantic wretch, go chide
Late school-boys, and sour 'prentices,
Go tell court-huntsmen that the King will ride,
Call country ants to harvest offices;
Love, all alike, no season knows, nor clime,
Nor hours, days, months, which are the rags of time.

Thy beams, so reverend and strong
Why shouldst thou think?
I could eclipse and cloud them with a wink,
But that I would not lose her sight so long:
If her eyes have not blinded thine,
Look, and tomorrow late tell me,
Whether both the Indias of spice and mine
Be where thou left'st them, or lie here with me.
Ask for those kings whom thou saw'st yesterday,
And thou shalt hear, 'All here in one bed lay.'

She's all States, and all Princes I;
Nothing else is.
Princes do but play us; compared to this,
All honour's mimic; all wealth alchemy.
Thou, Sun, art half as happy as we,
In that the world's contracted thus;
Thine age asks ease, and since thy duties be
To warm the world, that's done in warming us.
Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere;
This bed thy centre is, these walls thy sphere.

GLOSSARY

saucy (line 5): cheeky, disrespectful, shameless, overfamiliar

pedantic (line 5): fussy, exacting, overly critical, fault-finding

chide (line 5): scold, berate, chastise, criticise

clime (line 9): a particular region, defined by its weather or climate

reverend (line 11): sacred, hallowed, revered

mimic (line 24): make-believe, fake

alchemy (line 24): illusory, magical, sorcery (transforming base metals into gold)

art (line 25): archaic second person singular present tense of 'be' (i.e. 'are')

ANALYSIS

In keeping with the style of metaphysical poetry, many of Donne's poems feature abrupt explosive openings. "The Sun Rising" is no exception and it opens with the speaker exclaiming at and berating the sun as a 'Busy old fool' (line 1). The outburst is designed to capture the feeling of being suddenly and unwelcomely blinded and to capture the attention of the reader at the same time, drawing them in to the verse. Having pulled us into the moment, the speaker compares the wonder and strength of his love for the person lying in the bed next to him with the power and force of the sun.

'WHAT LIGHT THROUGH YONDER WINDOW BREAKS?'

As well as subverting or challenging the usual idea of the sun as all-powerful and the majestic centre of the universe, the speaker uses the intrusion of the sun to contrast the world of the lovers lying together with the world outside their window. The speaker employs a series of provocative exaggerations to argue that the feelings he has for his lover are more important than the sun and its duties, and the mundane busyness of the world outside. He uses this argument to maintain that there is nothing more important than the two lovers and so their bed is, effectively, the centre of the universe.

In this way, the speaker upends the usual notion of two people being relatively insignificant when confronted with the grandeur and immense scale of the world and universe by prioritising or emphasising the subjective (personal) experience of being alive over the objective (external) experience.

The poem concludes with the speaker commanding the sun to forget everything else and shine on the lovers, suggesting that the source of his hostility to the sun is the realisation that sunrise means that he must leave the company of his lover and their bed.

© Raphael Perez

STRUCTURE

"The Sun Rising" consists of three regular stanzas that are each ten lines long. In each stanza, lines one, five, and six are metered in iambic tetrameter, line two is in dimeter, and lines three, four, and seven through to ten are metered in pentameter. The rhyme scheme is ABBACDCDEE. It is worth noting the pairs of lines in which the iambic foot becomes a trochee — in lines 1 and 2, 4 and 5, for instance — as this makes the tone more forceful and challenging.

© Junus Karimow

CLOSE READING

GO AWAY AND LEAVE US ALONE!

The first stanza develops the idea introduced in the first line, with the speaker scolding the sun for waking him and his lover. The speaker's disdain for the sun, evident in the descriptions 'Busy old fool' (line 1), 'unruly' (line 1) and '[s]aucy pedantic wretch' (line 5), builds up to his questioning of its purpose. The speaker wonders whether 'lovers' seasons' (line 4) must abide by the rhythms of life seemingly dictated by the revolutions of the earth around the sun, introducing the possibility of lovers inhabiting a world different from that of everyday life.

The speaker further distinguishes between the realm of love and the external world by commanding the sun rather to leave the lovers and go and wake '[l]ate school-boys and sour 'prentices' (line 6), 'court-huntsmen' (line 7) and 'country ants' (line 8) instead. The choice of listing these four kinds of beings appears deliberate. Two of the three people mentioned — schoolboys and young interns (apprentices) — would not have been considered significant or important members of society. Court huntsmen were more important but appear to have been included as a reference to the King going riding, which was a frivolous leisurely pastime. The inclusion of 'country ants' (line 8) — country bumpkins, yokels, or farm labourers — at the end of the list seems to emphasise this point. These lines suggest that the speaker wants to portray the sun and its duties as trivial. This notion appears to be confirmed and extended in the concluding lines of the stanza, in which the speaker asserts that the timeless realm of love is superior to the mundane world governed by the movement of the sun, with its units of time that are mere 'rags' (line 10) in comparison to the immutability of love.

© Gustav Klimt (Belvedere Gallery, Vienna, Austria) (Wikimedia Commons)

WHAT AUTHORITY DO YOU HAVE, ANYWAY?

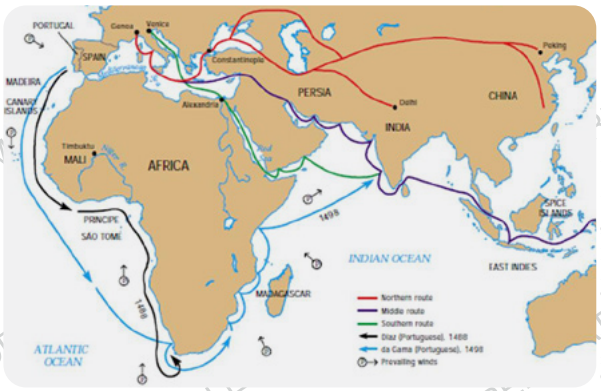
In the second stanza, the reasons for the speaker's hostility towards the sun become clear. The rising of the sun means that he must leave the company of his lover. Disgruntled, he questions whether the sun has any authority to bid him leave the bed since he can make its beams disappear by simply closing his eyelids with a 'wink' (line 13). His references to natural phenomena that can appear to overpower the sun, — 'eclipse[s]' (line 13) and 'cloud[s]' (line 13) — reinforce his suggestion that the power of the sun has limits. The thought of closing his eyes seems to fill the speaker with anguish, though, as it would mean being unable to see his lover, and he cannot bear to tear his eyes away from her even just to 'wink' (line 13).

The speaker develops the idea of the intensity felt when looking at a lover and uses it to further undermine the power of the sun in the next line. The speaker demonstrates the strength of the connection he feels when looking into the eyes of his lover by suggesting that the sun itself could be 'blinded' (line 15) if it did so — a reversal of the typical experience that diminishes the sun, and simultaneously illustrates the force of the speaker's feelings through his belief in the intensity of his lover's gaze.

The speaker appears emboldened by his developing argument and dares the sun to go off around the world and come back at sunset tomorrow, suggesting that it will return to find the lovers still in bed. Furthermore, he insists that the returning sun will realise that the priceless magnificence and treasure of the love the speaker has is worth more than the riches of the nations and kings over whom the sun has shone that day. The speaker likens his lover to 'the Indias of spice' (line 17) because the **spice trade** continued to be a source of immense wealth for those who controlled it during the Renaissance. The speaker declares that his possession of this resplendent treasure through love will make him appear like a king to the sun. He concludes that all the kings the sun has seen 'yesterday' (line 19) will then '[a]ll here in one bed lie' (line 20), which reinforces the idea that true love is worth more than all the riches of the thrones of the earth combined.

THE SPICE MUST FLOW

The **spice trade** dominated global trade during the Renaissance. In fact, for around 3 000 years, the trade in spices, such as pepper, nutmeg, saffron, frankincense, ginger, turmeric, cardamom and cinnamon, was an important industry that brought tremendous prosperity and power to those in control of it. These spices were not just used for cooking, but also as medicines, perfumes, aphrodisiacs, and hallucinogens. At one time or another, almost every empire relied upon the wealth it generated, including the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the Romans, the tribes of Arabia, the Islamic Caliphates, and the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks. For thousands of years, the trade inspired explorations, triggered conflicts and shaped world events.



© Kervinsky Sainclair (Sutori.com)

Map of the major spice trade routes.


© ASbKo (Deviantart)

By the Renaissance, the maritime city-state republics of the Mediterranean like Venice and Genoa had become obscenely rich by holding a virtual monopoly on the trade with Europe. A good deal of the exploration in which European nations engaged between the 15th and 17th centuries was to find new trade routes or gain control of existing ones; for example, Vasco da Gama's circumnavigation of Africa and the Cape of Good Hope was undertaken to open a new route to the 'wealth of the Indies' and to provide Portugal with a share of the lucrative trade. Likewise, the Dutch started a colony in Table Bay in 1652 to support a new route to Indonesia, through which they took control of the highly profitable European opium trade.

The spice trade and its influence on world history continues to inspire artists, such as filmmaker James Cameron and author Frank Herbert. In a narrative not dissimilar to the activities of the English and Dutch East India Companies in the 1600s, the plot of Cameron's movie, *Avatar*, centres on a rare substance called unobtainium found in a far-flung location and the impact of its ruthless exploitation by a foreign corporation.


© Pascal Blanche

Melange, the rare substance in Herbert's novel *Dune*, is even nicknamed 'spice' and the story revolves around the intergalactic struggle for control of it. While many current commentators perceive the desert planet of Arrakis and the spice found there as a metaphor for the Arabian peninsula and the petroleum industry, the similarities between the geo-political and economic forces driving the world of *Dune* and early modern Europe suggest that Herbert was inspired by the events of the 16th and 17th centuries as well.

THE POWER OF LOVE

In the third stanza, the speaker develops the imagery of kingship and royalty. He declares to the sun that all of the nations of the world are contained in his lover, '[s]he's all [s]tates' (line 21), which makes him all of the world's princes, 'all princes I' (line 21). That being the case, the speaker concludes that there can be nothing else of importance in the world that is not contained within their love: '[n]othing else is' (line 22). It is an exaltation that captures the intense, heady, passionate feelings of two lovers who want nothing else but to lie in each other's embrace — a romantic notion that, to this day, is often expressed in the idea of having 'the whole world in your arms' when you hug the person you love.

The speaker emphasises the intensity of the couple's love by suggesting that, in comparison, other princes are pretenders who 'play' (line 23) at being like the couple and, likewise, that all 'honour' (line 24) or authority and dignity is also pretend or fake in comparison. He concludes by declaring that all other forms of wealth are merely 'alchemy' (line 24) or futile attempts to transform something mundane and trivial into something as valuable and precious as the unparalleled treasure of the love the couple share.

It is a simple leap from this exaggerated logic for the speaker to argue that the lovers' bed is, thus, the centre of the world. He contends that the sun should be at least 'half as happy' (line 25) as them since this 'contracted' (line 26) world (that has been shrunk to the size of the bed) means that the aged, elderly sun who wants 'ease' (line 27) or rest has much less work to do to warm the world. The **mood** of the poem appears to shift and soften at this point. The speaker is no longer criticising the unwelcome interference of the sun but taking


© Saraqui

In grammatical terms, the **mood** of a sentence or poem describes its purpose. There are four moods in English:

- Indicative — making statements of fact
- Imperative — issuing of instructions
- Interrogative— asking questions
- Subjunctive— making hypothetical or imaginary statements.

© James Avati

pity on it and offering it a chance to ease the burden of its 'duties' (line 27). He directs the sun to shine on their bed as it is now the 'centre' (line 30) of the solar system and, thus, the walls of the room are now the constraints or limits of its reach.

This conclusion completes the speaker's challenge or subversion of the usual idea of the sun as the all-powerful, majestic centre of the universe. The strength or force of the love the couple share has overpowered the sun, which has become their servant. Not only that, but the speaker has now reversed the situation. The rising of the sun no longer means that he must leave his lover's bed and begin his day. Instead, the sun must now remain where it is — in honour of the lovers — and abandon its 'duties' (line 27) of travelling across the world. This conclusion perhaps emphasises the speaker's disregard for the rest of the world when lying with his lover as, presumably, this would mean no sunrise or daytime for anyone else to enjoy and use.

LIFE GOES ON

Does Donne's use of hyperbole and exaggeration capture the intensity of feeling a person experiences when having to separate from the person he or she loves? Is his focus on the supremacy of a lover's personal, subjective experience over the impersonal, objective 'reality' of the external world an effective surprise? By the end of the poem, has the passion of his speaker persuaded you that there are moments when the timeless realm of love is indeed superior to the ordinary busyness of the everyday world? Even so, does Donne not subvert his own speaker at the same time by subtly emphasising that, no matter what it feels like or what a person desires, the truth is that the world will continue revolving around the sun, day will follow night, and life will go on without pause?

© Edward Hopper (Columbus Museum of Art) (Wikiart.org)

'THEN, WINDOW, LET DAY IN, AND LET LIFE OUT.'

The speaker in Donne's poem expresses a similar sentiment to Juliet in Act 3, Scene 5 of *Romeo and Juliet*. Having been married the day before, the young lovers have spent the night together but, as dawn breaks, Romeo must leave to go into exile or be executed for killing Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. Juliet is desperate for more time with her lover and so she protests that the sun has not yet risen.

'Yon light is not daylight; I know it, I.
It is some meteor that the sun exhaled,
To be to thee this night a torch-bearer,
And light thee on thy way to Mantua.
Therefore stay yet; thou needst not to be gone.'

© Thomas Francis Dicksee (Wikigallery.org)

QUESTIONS

1. What does the title tell us about the poem? (2)

2. Represent the rhyme scheme of the poem using uppercase letters, and comment on its effect on the poem. (4)

3. Choose a word from the poem that means:
(a) block
(b) domains (2)

4. Consider the ways in which Donne uses hyperbole in the poem. Choose two instances of this exaggeration and describe each one and its function in the poem. (4)

5. "The Sun Rising" is an example of the use of personification.
Explain this statement in your own words and quote from the poem to substantiate your response. (3)

[15]

THE VICTORIANS

INTRODUCTION TO THE VICTORIAN PERIOD

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.

© Franz Xaver Winterhalter (Royal Collection) (Wikimedia Commons)

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

RAPID URBANISATION

The urban population of Britain grew rapidly during this period. The Industrial Revolution continued apace and 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.

© Victorianlondon.org

Piccadilly Street in central London at the start of the 20th century. ***(The Premier Photographic View Album of London. (1907) Valentine & Sons, London)***

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. Fifty-five percent of children born in the East End of London died before they were five years old. High levels of unemployment and rampant crime were also common problems, particularly in London.

The abundance of unskilled labourers compounded the situation by keeping wages meagre. Sex work 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 ROPE BED

The Rope Bed or Twopenny Hangover (*pictured*) was described by George Orwell in his autobiographical novel *Down and Out in Paris and London* in 1933. 'At the Twopenny Hangover, the lodgers sit in a row on a bench; there is a rope in front of them, and they lean on this as though leaning over a fence. A man, humorously called the valet, cuts the rope at five in the morning. I have never been there myself, but Bozo had been there often. I asked him whether anyone could possibly sleep in such an attitude, and he said that it was more comfortable than it sounded—at any rate, better than bare floor.' Although not linked to the origin of the term 'hangover', the practice appears to have been started by English publicans and innkeepers in the 1800s, who started offering ropes to drunken patrons for them to lie over and sleep off the effects of the alcohol they had consumed. From there, these 'sleeping arrangements' spread to the doss houses in the slums of London.

© Victorianlondon.org

THE ORIGINAL SLASHER

'Jack the Ripper' is the grisly nickname of a notorious serial killer who murdered as many as 11 women in the East End slums of London in the autumn of 1888. The murderer slashed and mutilated his victims extensively. The murders shocked the city and everyone walked the streets in fear at night. Despite a massive police investigation, the identity of the killer was never discovered and he was never caught.

© David Palumbo

EVERYBODY SAY 'CHEESE'!

The 1880s and 90s were years of extraordinary innovation in photographic and camera technologies. As cameras became smaller, lighter and easier to use, photography became a popular amateur pastime. By 1895, the development of film and projector technology made creating movies possible. Today, it is hard to imagine the tremendous impact this swift change in visual culture had on individuals and societies during the Victorian era.

© Vintagephotos (Reddit.com)

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 an artistic movement and style, however, the Victorian era is often **difficult to categorise**. Victorian poets were the heirs to the Romantics, and their works often reflect similar concerns, such as their subjective experiences of the world, but they tried to avoid the florid and indulgent descriptions of the Romantics.

DIFFICULT TO CATEGORISE

As with many attempts to classify literature, the title and defining descriptions 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 onto it. Rather, identify the commonalities that are present 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.

© Victorianlondon.org

A selection of book covers from titles published between 1820 and 1914.

© Dedree A. Drees

The Victorian poets inherited the sense of scepticism about their world and society that had been passed down from the Reformation and the Enlightenment eras 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 contested area was the consequences of the Industrial Revolution (*see page 37 for further information*), 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 groups: a wealthy middle and upper class and a much 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 (Arnold, M. [1869] *Culture and Anarchy*, Chapter VI. *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*.)

By contrast, some poets recognised this tension but chose to look away. Many Victorian poets drew from classical and neoclassical literature and mythology, rather than 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 shift or transition in artistic values and style that would emerge as Modernism or the Modernist movement.

© Victorianlondon.org

'THE CENTRE CANNOT HOLD'

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

© National Portrait Gallery

'WHAT'S IN A NAME?'

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 eight novels and several volumes of poetry 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.

© Margaery (www.artmajeur.com)

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 pen name used by Mary Ann Evans, while the three Brontë sisters wrote under the names of Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell.

Talented siblings: Misters Ellis Bell, Currer Bell and Acton Bell: also known as Emily, Charlotte and Anne Brontë. Each sister wrote in secret but discussed their work around the dinner table in the evening. Between them, the sisters published more than 60 poems and eight novels, including* Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Agnes Grey *and* The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which are now considered masterpieces of English literature. Sadly, all three sisters died before the age of 40.

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 as this was when efforts to implement compulsory education for children gained significant momentum as a reaction to the practice of child labour. 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.

A reaction against this strict morality found expression in an artistic genre called the **Gothic**. Gothicism started as an offshoot of Romanticism in the early 1800s and the artistic style remained popular well into the mid-to-late 19th century and what is considered the Victorian era. Indeed, many notable Romantic artists and writers, such as William Blake, explored both artistic styles. Gothic works are sometimes described as scary ghost stories, but there is much more to them than that. While the realistic works of Dickens and Eliot (Evans) draw a firm boundary between right and wrong, Gothic works often cross or question this boundary. One example of this 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.

'PLEASE, SIR, I WANT SOME MORE'

An illustration of what is possibly the most famous scene in **Charles Dickens**'s 1838 novel, *Oliver Twist*, in which the orphan Oliver asks for an extra bowl of gruel to save one of his young companions from starvation and is caned and locked in solitary confinement with nothing but cold water for doing so. Based on the grim realities and suffering Dickens witnessed in London, the novel became a powerful social commentary on the poverty, injustice and exploitation of children happening in the city.

© Harold Copping (Wikimedia Commons)

The term '**moral tale**' is derived from the term 'morality tale', but they have slightly different meanings. Morality tales were allegories, often commissioned by the church, written during the 15th and 16th centuries in which 'good' battled 'evil' and won. By contrast, moral tales seek to instil prescriptive moral behaviours in their readers while entertaining them with vivid, emotional storytelling. Typically, the moral values and behaviours being championed in the tales reflect those of the period or era in which they are written; for instance, the Victorians valued hard work and perseverance, and so the novels of the era often reward the characters who display these values.

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:

"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.

© Dana Hauser

MONSTROUS MACHINES AND 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 Shakespearean or English 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 a response to the many disruptive and challenging **technological change**s — some very negative — brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation.

© Magnus Gjoen

WHAT DID THE VICTORIANS EVER DO FOR US?

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

- camera (1838)
- typewriter (1873)
- telephone (1876)
- electric lightbulb (1879)
- internal combustion engine/cars (1885)
- gramophone (1887)
- wireless radio (1895)

© Museum for Communication, Nürnberg, Germany

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830 — 1894)

© British Museum, London (Wikipedia)

One of the most important female poets of the 19th century, Rossetti was hugely influential in the areas of children's poetry, devotional verse and fantasy. She was the youngest child of an exceptionally artistic Italian family living in London: her father was a successful poet; her brother was a highly influential ***Pre-Raphaelite*** *painter, and her two other siblings were both writers.*

'WE FEW, WE HAPPY FEW, WE BAND OF BROTHERS'

Founded in 1848 by William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Everett Millais, the Pre-Raphaelites or **Pre-Raphaelite** Brotherhood was an influential group of experimental, *avant-garde* artists who wanted to 'revitalise' the art world. Members of the Brotherhood opposed the mainstream styles of art that were immensely popular in the mid-19th century.

The Pre-Raphaelites rejected what they considered the 'mechanistic' approach to art adopted by the Late Renaissance artists who came after Raphael and Michelangelo, and which was being promoted by the Royal Academy of Arts in London at the time. Also known as 'mannerist', this style of art emphasises innovation and artifice — elongated forms, precarious poses, irrational settings and overly theatrical lighting — instead of the balanced, proportional and natural representations favoured by the High Renaissance masters like Raphael (hence the name of the group).

© Tate Gallery, London (Wikipedia)

Painted in 1852,* Our English Coasts *by William Holman Hunt expresses a common theme in Pre-Raphaelite art: the detailed observation of the natural world in a spirit of quasi-religious devotion to truth.

© Tate Gallery, London (Wikipedia)

Painted in 1852,* Ophelia *by John Everett Millais depicts the young woman singing to herself before she drowns in a river, having been driven mad by Hamlet, as described in Act IV, Scene VII of Shakespeare's famous play. The painting is admired for its accurate depiction of a natural landscape and its ethereal beauty and has influenced many artists since.

The Pre-Raphaelites also rejected the hugely popular 'genre painting' style — paintings that depict everyday ordinary scenes — as they considered these trivial, uninspiring and frivolous subjects to choose. Instead, the Pre-Raphaelites believed in using art to uplift, inspire and transport audiences beyond the mundane by choosing serious, noble, idealistic, visionary and romantic subjects, such as religion and transfiguration, heroism and sacrifice, death and love, and by applying maximum realism to their works. Known as 'The Four Declarations', the beliefs of the Brotherhood were:

- Have something genuine to say.
- Express your idea(s) well by studying nature attentively.
- Be direct, serious and heartfelt (not conventional/technically skilled but empty).
- Produce thoroughly good works of art.

After facing heavy opposition initially, the Pre-Raphaelites became highly influential, with a second phase of the movement from around 1860, in particular, inspiring many notable artists and making a major contribution to the rise of the Symbolist movement and its focus on representing absolute truths and ideals symbolically. Several poets, including Rossetti, were associated with the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement, and their work shares some of the characteristics of the art of the Brotherhood.

© Tate Gallery, London (Wikipedia)

Inspired by the biblical Song of Solomon,* The Beloved *was painted by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1865. It celebrates female beauty and sexual love by capturing the moment a bride lifts her veil to reveal her loveliness to her husband for the first time. 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth: for thy love is better than wine' is one of the biblical verses inscribed on the frame of the work.

A PRECOCIOUS TALENT

Rossetti was a precocious and talented child. By the age of 12 she was already composing her own poetry, which her grandfather printed for her on his private press. A few years later, she contributed seven poems for publication in the Pre-Raphaelite journal ***The Germ***, under the pseudonym of Ellen Alleyne.

The Germ, *thoughts towards nature in art and literature* was a periodical established by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to disseminate their ideas. Its title refers to the Pre-Raphaelite belief in the importance of nature (a germ being a seed) and of the human imagination, as implied by the phrase 'the germ of an idea'. The Brotherhood hoped that the magazine would be a seed from which new creative ideas would grow. It was subtitled 'thoughts towards nature in art and literature' to emphasise the editors' belief that poetry and art should be closely intertwined.

© National Portrait Gallery, London (Wikimedia Commons)

Members of the Rossetti Family, (from left) Dante, Christina, Frances and William, photographed by Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson) in 1863.

The Rossetti family faced financial crisis when her father, **Gabriele Rossetti**'s physical and mental health failed. Rossetti herself experienced depression and illness during this period and suffered a nervous breakdown at the age of 14. As Rossetti was a deeply devoted Anglican, the family's difficulties only served to strengthen her religious faith. In 1850, she broke off her engagement to fellow Pre-Raphaelite artist **James Collinson** when he converted to Roman Catholicism, and she later rejected a proposal from Charles Bagot Cayley in 1864 for similar religious reasons.

Rossetti spent most of her life as a companion to her mother and was devoted to her religion and the writing of poetry. In 1871, she was struck by Grave's disease, an autoimmune disorder that threatened her life and left her physically disfigured. Following her illness, she concentrated on religious and devotional poetry and prose, continuing to write and publish until her death from breast cancer in 1894.

Rossetti's father, **Gabriele Rossetti**, was an Italian nobleman, poet, constitutionalist, scholar and the founder of a secret society called the 'Carbonari', which was dedicated to unifying Italy into a single country and installing a constitutional democracy. His poetry was patriotic and openly supported Italian revolutionary nationalism, which forced him into political exile in England in 1821. Pictured is the monument erected in his honour in his birthplace of Vasto in Sicily.

© FabioYoung (Wikimedia Commons)

Much of Rossetti's poetry is quite melancholic in mood (the overall feeling or emotional landscape of a poem, created by diction, subject and tone) and tone (the poet's attitude towards the speaker and subject matter). Common themes to which she often returned were the transience or impermanence of the world and the desperate passion of ill-fated love.

© Rossetti Archive (Wikimedia Commons)

GENDER, DESIRE AND REDEMPTION

Over the course of her lifetime, Rossetti published an impressive collection of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, firmly establishing herself as one of the most influential poets of her era. While her early work often imitated that of the poets she most admired, she later began to experiment with various verse forms.

"What are heavy?" – Christina Rossetti

What are heavy? Sea-sand and sorrow;
What are brief? Today and tomorrow;
What are frail? Spring blossoms and youth;
What are deep? The ocean and truth.

She received widespread critical praise when her first collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems,* was published in 1862. The poem from which this collection takes its title is perhaps her most famous work and is a commentary on Victorian gender roles, sexual desire and redemption. *Goblin Market and Other Poems* was followed in 1866 by *The Prince's Progress and Other Poems*, and most of her best work comes from these two collections.

Like Rossetti, **James Collinson** was a devoutly religious person. A convert to Catholicism, Collinson reverted to high Anglicanism in order to marry Rossetti, but his conscience forced his return to Catholicism and so she ended her engagement to him. He was also a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood but resigned from the group after one of John Everett Millais's paintings was accused of being blasphemous. He eventually married in 1858 and returned to painting afterwards. Interestingly, he chose more secular subjects during this time, such as *To Let* (*pictured*) and *For Sale*, both of which light-heartedly depict pretty women in situations that suggest moral temptation.

© Philadelphia Museum of Art (Wikimedia Commons)

ICON OF SUPPRESSED FEMALE GENIUS

Though Rossetti's popularity waned in the early 20th century — as the Modernist movement became more established — interest in her work was revived in the 1970s, particularly amongst feminist scholars, who considered her an icon of suppressed female genius.

Freudian scholars have explored themes of religious and sexual repression in her works, while others have recognised her technical mastery. Rossetti's quiet spirituality and humility concealed a passionate and intense nature, and many enthusiasts claim that much of the success of her poetry lies in her ability to reconcile these seemingly contradictory aspects of her personality through her verse.

"REMEMBER"

Remember me when I am gone
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

GLOSSARY
away,
vestige (line 12): fragment, relic, trace, residue

ANALYSIS

As its title suggests, "Remember" explores how we mourn and commemorate a loved one after they have died. It was written by Rossetti when she was 19 years old, but not published until 13 years later, when it appeared in her first collection, Goblin Market and Other Poems. *In the poem, the speaker begins by entreating her beloved to remember her after she has died. Several seemingly ordinary, yet intimate moments are described by the speaker that capture the nature of their relationship and highlight what will be lost. Ultimately, though, the speaker appears to undermine her request to be remembered and grants her beloved permission to forget her, if doing so will make him happier, as that is what she wishes for him.*


© Kaura

STRUCTURE

"Remember" is a fourteen-line sonnet, written in iambic pentameter, with the rhyme scheme ABBA ABBA CDD ECE. It is considered an outstanding expression of technical expertise, and all the more remarkable for having been composed by a teenager. It follows the structure of a Petrarchan or Italian sonnet, opening with an octave of eight lines that 'sets the scene' or describes the situation for the reader (the moments the lovers will not be able to share after the speaker dies and that require remembering), followed by a sestet of six lines that introduces an unexpected or subversive twist (granting permission to forget her after all). There is also the noticeable shift in tone and direction, the volta, that is signified by the word '[y]et' (line 9) at the beginning of the sestet.

CLOSE READING

NO MORE KISSES OR HUGS

The poem opens with a summarising statement of the speaker's intention: 'Remember **me** when I am gone away' (line 1). It is written in the imperative mood as the speaker is issuing an instruction or request to **an unnamed 'you'** (line 3). The speaker clarifies that she wants to be remembered after she has died. She emphasises the distance that will be between them by expanding 'gone away' (line 1) to '[g]one far away' (line 2) and says she will have entered 'the silent land' (line 2), which seems to be a euphemism for the afterlife. Perhaps the place is 'silent' (line 2) because it is a peaceful place of divine contemplation or perhaps it is because it is barren and devoid of noisy life or perhaps it is simply because they will not be able to speak to each other and communicate. It could also be an allusion to the common expression 'as silent as the grave'.

© Danica Thurber

In the next line, the speaker appears to confirm that she will be dead by saying that they will no longer be able to touch and 'hold […] hand[s]' (line 3). As well as suggesting that they will not be able to hold each other after the speaker leaves, this line also implies that the other person will not be able to accompany the speaker on her journey. This observation is also the first suggestion that the person being addressed by the speaker is her lover as he is used to holding her by the hand.

The use of personal pronouns, such as '**me**' (line 1), 'I' (line 1) and 'you' (line 3), heightens the intimate tone of the poem and makes it read like a private letter of farewell.

© Maryann Inanu

In the fourth line, the speaker describes how she will be unable to 'stay' (line 4) after she has 'half turn[ed] to go' (line 4). The line captures the inevitability and finality of the speaker's death. Once she has begun to die or 'turn' (line 4) away from her lover, she will be unable to turn back and 'stay' (line 4). It also evokes another intimate moment that lovers share: the moment a lover breaks off from holding hands or out of an embrace and begins to walk away, but then turns back, either for one last kiss or to say something poignant or just to hold the other person one last time. By describing this moment — the reluctance two lovers have when it is time to separate — the speaker captures the depth and intensity of their love and, in doing so, highlights how much will be lost after she has died.

The poem is an example of the use of apostrophe as it is addressed to **an unnamed 'you'**. Apostrophe is used to draw the attention of the reader to an important or significant entity that is either not present or unable to respond, for example, an inanimate object, such as a work of art, a cell phone or even a bar of chocolate, or an abstract idea, such as love, death, beauty or time. Apostrophe allows a speaker to express his or her internal thoughts and feelings to someone or something that is unable to respond and, in this way, share these with the reader. In this instance, apostrophe is being used to address a beloved who isn't physically present with the speaker.

NO MORE FUTURE PLANS

In the fifth line, the speaker repeats the request she made at the start: '[r]emember me' (line 5). She asks to be remembered daily or 'day by day' (line 5) and confirms that this will be 'when' (line 5) they have 'no more' (line 5) time or 'day[s]' (line 5) together, after she has died. The speaker also asks her lover to remember her at those moments when he would have told her about his plans for their 'future' (line 6). The fact that the other person had 'plann[e]d' (line 6) a future for them emphasises the strength of their bond and the magnitude of what will be missing when she dies: all the 'future' (line 6) 'day[s]' (line 5) that they will not get to share. Again, this description of another seemingly common and playful intimate moment — two lovers discussing their future plans — is elevated and transformed by the speaker into a profound, heart-breaking expression of what is lost when the person you love dies.

© Linda Branch Dunn

In the seventh line, a note of urgency and perhaps even desperation seems to creep into the speaker's injunction to her beloved. She asks '[o]nly' (line 7) to be remembered, which implies that she wants nothing more than that, and hints that there will be nothing more that can be done anyway. Her request is accentuated by the use of caesura. The semicolon after the phrase '[o]nly remember me' (line 7) creates a pause that emphasises her appeal by separating it out from the thoughts that precede and follow it. The semicolon also separates the words 'me' (line 7) and 'you' (line 7), alluding to the distance between the speaker and her lover and the living and the dead. The speaker confirms that there will be nothing more to be done after she has died by reminding her lover that it will be too 'late' (line 8) then for 'pray[ing]' (line 8) or seeking 'counsel' (line 8). Such activities are only useful while she is alive. Again, this observation presents her looming death as unavoidable, and as a reality to which she appears to be reconciled.

A DYING WISH

© Elloumi Mourad

At this point in the poem, there is a volta — a noticeable shift in the speaker's reasoning and attitude. It is introduced by the word '[y]et' (line 9), which alerts us to the fact that the speaker is experiencing a change of heart or a different set of feelings and thoughts. She acknowledges that her lover might 'forget' (line 9) about her on occasion and 'for a while' (line 9). The replacing of the verb 'remember' (line 7) with the verb 'forget' (line 9) creates a sharp contrast that emphasises the shift in the speaker's reasoning. In spite of her previous exhortations to be remembered all the time, the speaker is now accepting that the ongoing demands of living will distract her lover from mourning her every now and then.

The speaker's attitude appears to have softened and become more realistic. She recognises that her lover will be unable to mourn her all the time and is likely to 'forget' (line 9) on occasion, but notes that he will 'afterwards remember' (line 10) and, thus, will not be able to forget her entirely. Perhaps it is the realisation that she will never be forgotten completely that offers her some measure of consolation? In any event, she appears able to console her lover at this point. She tells him he should 'not grieve' (line 10) or feel guilty and upset if he does forget her from time to time. The speaker explains this apparent contradiction by arguing that she would rather her beloved 'forget' (line 13) and 'smile' (line 13) than 'remember' (line 14) and be 'sad' (line 14). She wishes to spare her lover the pain of grief if it becomes unbearable.

By the end of the poem, the speaker appears to have shifted from the selfishness of her initial admonitions to be remembered and mourned to the selflessness of choosing to be forgotten rather than burden her grieving lover with the agony of his memories of her. She explains that this is her final wish. She hopes that her illness or the 'corruption' (line 11) that has afflicted her body and the 'darkness' (line 11) that will envelop her in death will 'leave' (line 11) behind a trace or 'vestige' (line 12) of her intention or wish — 'the thoughts once she had' (line 12) — to spare her lover some of the cruel anguish of grief.

By focusing on her dying wish, the speaker reinforces how soon she believes she will die. Her imminent demise adds intensity and poignancy to the verse as it invites us to share her last days with her. By sacrificing her desire to be remembered to spare her lover further pain, the speaker also expresses the depth and intensity of the love she has for the other person. Has the speaker reconciled herself to her destiny by the end of the poem? Does the renouncing of her need to be remembered — a somewhat ironic conclusion for a poem titled "Remember" — suggest that she has surrendered to her fate? Is she consoled by the thought that we are kept alive in the memories of those who love us?

© Danica Thurber

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the mood of the poem in the first quatrain. Provide evidence from the poem to support your answer. (2)

2. How does line 9 signify a shift or departure from the previous lines of verse? (2)

3. Identify an instance of enjambment in the poem and comment on its effectiveness. (2)

4. Describe how the tone of the poem changes. Provide evidence from the poem to support your answer. (4)

5. Consider the following poem "When I am dead, my dearest" also by Rossetti, which addresses the same themes of grief and death as "Remember". In a well-structured paragraph, compare and contrast the perspectives and attitudes of the speakers in the two poems with regard to mourning for a deceased loved one. Provide evidence in the form of quotations from both poems to support your answer. (5)

"WHEN I AM DEAD, MY DEAREST" — CHRISTINA ROSSETTI

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

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

[15]

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 refer to 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, questioning which 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 that Modernism is the culmination of 300 years of cultural development initiated by the Renaissance.

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.

© Tate Gallery, London (Wikipedia)

Painted in 1923,* On White II *is widely considered as one of the greatest masterpieces by the famous Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky, who is credited with creating the first fully abstract painting. In On White II, 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.

1900: THE BEGINNING OF THE MODERN AGE

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.

The influence of Modernism wasn't limited to art, however; for instance, Modernist architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and **Le Corbusier** were changing the way buildings were being designed and important Modernist intellectuals, such as **Sigmund Freud**, who revolutionised the way we think about the mind, and **Karl Marx**, who suggested a radically new political and economic structure for society, were fundamentally changing the way people saw themselves and the world around them.

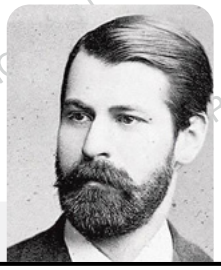
© Museum of Modern Art, New York City (Wikimedia Commons)

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

The Villa Savoye in Paris has become an icon of modernist architecture for its simple, clean and elegant lines and unfussy ribbon of glass windows around its façade. It was designed and built in 1928 by French architect **Le Corbusier**, who promoted architecture that was 'functional', 'pure', and free of any decoration or historical associations and who coined the famous slogan: 'a house is a machine for living in'.

© Valueyou (Wikipedia)

Sigmund Freud was the founder of psychoanalysis, a form of talk therapy in which therapists help their patients explore how their unconscious minds are influencing their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Freud developed a wide range of theories, models and techniques that have saturated contemporary Western thought — including the concepts of the id, ego and superego, the unconscious mind, the death drive, the libido, the Oedipus complex, penis envy, and dream analysis — all of which have been celebrated, debated and criticised ever since.



© Freud.org.uk

'The more perfect a person is on the outside, the more demons they have on the inside.'

Karl Marx developed a series of theories about society, economics and politics that has had a profound impact on world politics and intellectual thought. His most famous works are the 1848 pamphlet *The Communist Manifesto* and a three-volume series of books published between 1867 and 1883, entitled *Das Kapital*.

Writing as the working classes of Europe were rebelling and protesting against their lack of economic rights and political power, Marx proposed that capitalism encouraged those who had money (capital) to exploit workers in order to create a profit. He argued that 'profit' was the 'surplus value' created when workers were underpaid for their efforts or labour. He maintained that capitalists — the wealthy — were able to underpay workers because they could use their money to manipulate the government or ruling regime to protect them. Marx proposed replacing this system with one based on common (communism) or social (socialism) ownership rather than private ownership — a system in which the factories are owned by 'the people' and the profits they make are shared equally among everyone. He is considered one of the most influential figures in human history and is credited with being one of principal founders of the modern social sciences.

© International Institute of Social History

'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.'

LITERARY PIONEERS

Ezra Pound's call to *Make It New* in 1934 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 T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce.

The term Modernism brings together a number of disparate sub-movements from around the world, from the free forms of the Beat poets in **America** 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 literary 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.

BRITISH AND AMERICAN MODERNISM

Modernism was slightly different 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 completely 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 Western artistic movement to develop on that continent.

'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*

A WRITER'S WRITER

Virginia Woolf is considered one of the most important modernist authors and public intellectuals of the 20th century. She was a prolific writer and published eight novels, a body of autobiographical work and more than 500 essays and reviews. Her writing is notable for its lyricism, stylistic virtuosity and for being highly experimental: she was one of the pioneers of the use of 'stream of consciousness' as a narrative device and is renowned for using the vibrant internal worlds of the characters in her novels to refract, dissolve and transform an otherwise frequently uneventful and commonplace external narrative. She struggled with mental illness and displayed symptoms that would be diagnosed as bipolar disorder today, although there was no effective treatment in her day. The sea and water are recurring motifs in her work and, ultimately, she drowned herself in 1941, at the age of 59. Many authors have stated that their work has been influenced by her, including Margaret Atwood, Michael Cunningham, Gabriel García Márquez and Toni Morrison.

© George Charles Beresford (Wikimedia Commons)

'Growing up is losing some illusions, in order to acquire others.'

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 created by war, revolutions and imperialism in the early years of the 1900s.

The key event of this time period was, of course, World War I (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.

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.

© National Museum for 20th Century Art, Spain (Wikimedia Commons)

Guernica ***is a famous anti-war painting by Pablo Picasso depicting the suffering of people and animals whose lives were wrenched apart 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.***

DADAISM

Dadaism is an artistic movement in modern art that started during World War One. It favoured reacting against the standards of society and Dadaists considered their purpose to be to ridicule the absurdity of existence and the meaninglessness of the modern world. Dadaism was relatively short-lived; it peaked between 1916 and 1922, but it heavily influenced the artistic movements that followed, including Surrealism, Pop art and Punk rock.

Famous examples of Dadaist art include Marcel Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (a pencilled moustache on a postcard of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*) (*right*) and Hannah Höch's collage *Cut with a Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany* (*below right*).

One of the founders of the movement was Tristan Tzara, a Romanian poet. In 1917, he wrote the *Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love*, a document that sets out the aims and beliefs of the movement. In Section Eight of the manifesto, Tzara outlines his instructions for people to produce their own Dadaist poems, which are as follows:

- Take a newspaper.
- Take a pair of scissors.
- Choose an article as long as you are planning to make your poem.
- Cut out the article.
- Then cut out each of the words that make up this article and put them in a bag.
- Shake it gently.
- Then take out the scraps one after the other in the order in which they left the bag.
- Copy conscientiously.
- The poem will be like you.
- And here are you, a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar.

© Marcel Duchamp (1919) (Wikimedia Commons)

© The National Gallery, Berlin (Wikimedia Commons)

© themarginalian.org

© themarginalian.org

noisenumber-13 (above left) *and* sound-no-5 (above right) *by E. E. Cummings (1925).*

SYLVIA PLATH (1932 — 1963)

© Everett Collection

The poet, novelist and short-story writer, Sylvia Plath is one of the most admired post-war writers of the 20th century. She is noted for her ***confessional poetry*** *and the searing, unflinching honesty and power of her verse, which explores her personal experiences as a woman, mother, daughter and wife in a way that has resonated with readers since the 1950s. Intelligent and imaginative, Plath was a formidable writer and a successful academic, but only published one collection of verse and one novel before her tragic death in 1963, at the age of 30 years old; nonetheless, several anthologies of poems, short-stories and a book for children have been discovered and published to great acclaim after her death, adding to her legacy and reputation. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1982, making her the first poet to receive the honour posthumously.*

Confessional poetry is a style of poetry that emerged in America during the late 1950s and early 1960s. It is candid, personal verse that focuses on powerful moments of individual experience that were often related to subjects that were considered taboo at the time, such as mental illness, sexuality and suicide. Confessional poets also often related their personal experiences to broader social concerns; for example, writing to expose the dishonesty of the images of idealised domesticity promoted at the time by revealing the unhappiness in their own homes. Prominent confessional poets, other than Plath, include Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and Allen Ginsberg.

The image of the 'domestic goddess' was common and popular in the 1950s and 1960s, but realities like the widespread consumption of Diazepam/Valium — or 'Mother's Little Helper' as the pills were known — suggest otherwise (for example, records show that more than 60 million Diazepam prescriptions were written and more than 2 billion tablets were consumed in America in 1968 alone).

© Electrolux (Wikimedia Commons)

DADDY ISSUES

Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1932. Her father, Otto, had left his home in Germany in September 1900, at the age of 15. He was a writer, biologist and academic. At the time of her birth, he was teaching at Boston University as a Professor of Biology and of German and was also a respected **entomologist**, with specific expertise in honeybees. He met and married Plath's mother, Aurelia, in January 1932 and Plath was born in October that year.

Plath's father's death from diabetes, 10 days after her eighth birthday, was a critical event in her life and became a recurring theme in her poetry. Some of her most vivid verse, including the well-known poem "Daddy", explores her troubled relationship with her authoritarian father and her feelings of confusion and betrayal when he died. She once wrote that her first nine years, 'sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle— beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth'.

Plath showed promise as an artist and poet from a young age. Her first poem was published in the Boston *Herald* newspaper when she was eight and she won an award for her paintings in a national competition at the age of 15. She continued to write prolifically throughout her childhood, publishing many poems and 50 short stories in regional magazines and newspapers by the time she left home to attend college at the age of 18. Plath is reported to have had an **IQ** score of 160, which places her intelligence in the top 0.03 per cent of the global population.

Entomologist: a scientist who studies insects. Pictured is entomologist Nancy Miorelli who tweets pictures of herself with bugs on her face using the hashtag #FaceBug to counter common fears and misconceptions about the creatures.

© Nancy Miorelli

An intelligence quotient (**IQ**) is a total score derived from a set of standardised tests or subtests designed to assess human intelligence. There are a variety of tests available, but the most widely used is the one proposed by psychologist David Wechsler in 1939. The Wechsler tests assess the following skills or abilities: verbal comprehension, working memory, perceptual reasoning and organisation, and processing speed. IQ tests are not assessments for which you can study to improve your score but are designed to assess your innate ability to use logic to solve problems, recognise patterns, and to make rapid connections between different points of information. The average IQ score for a human is between 85 and 115 and approximately 70 per cent of the global population test within this range. Plath's score of 160 is classified as 'exceptionally gifted'. IQ tests have attracted some criticism over the years for only evaluating a narrow set of abilities and excluding attributes such as emotional and social skills.

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Plath won a scholarship to attend Smith College, Massachusetts, in 1950, where she excelled academically. She edited the newspaper of the College, *The Smith Review,* and won a fiction contest held by *Mademoiselle* magazine (*pictured right*), which resulted in her being awarded the coveted and prestigious position of Guest Editor for the magazine and spending a month at its offices in New York City in 1953. Unfortunately, the experience was not what she had hoped it would be — she felt anxious and disorientated and struggled to be excited by the work, the fashion industry and the big-city lifestyle — and many of the events that took place during that time were later used as inspiration for her semi-autobiographical novel about mental illness, *The Bell Jar*.

© Street and Smith (Wikipedia)

It was during her undergraduate years that Plath began to suffer the symptoms of severe depression that would ultimately lead to her death. In one of her journal entries, she described her condition in a way that would be diagnosed as bipolar disorder today: 'It is as if my life [is] magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative—whichever is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it'. At the time, however, there were no effective therapies for manic depression and so she was treated with **electroconvulsive therapy**. In January 1955, Plath submitted her thesis, *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoyevsky's Novels*, and in June, she graduated from Smith *summa cum laude* (in the top one per cent of her class). She also won a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge University in England.

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) induces a seizure in a patient by applying between 70 and 120 volts to the side of his or her head. While ECT has been shown to be able to end severe depression in more than 50 per cent of patients, relapse rates are also high and up to 40 per cent of patients relapse within six months of treatment, especially without the follow-up use of antidepressants.

'I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want. I can never train myself in all the skills I want. And why do I want? I want to live and feel all the shades, tones and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life. And I am horribly limited.'

- The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath

PASSIONATE POETS

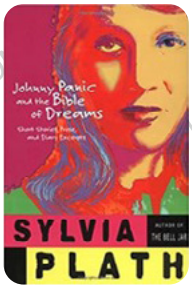
While studying in Britain, Plath met and married fellow poet, Ted Hughes. They had a whirlwind romance, during which they kept writing poems to each other. She described Hughes as a 'singer, story-teller, lion and world-wanderer' with 'a voice like the thunder of God'. Shortly after they married, the couple returned to America and Plath returned to Smith College to teach. A year later, they moved to Boston, and a year after that, they set off travelling across the United States and Canada. They stayed at several artists colonies, and it was during this time that Plath claims she learned 'to be true to [her] own weirdness', although she still agonised about writing deeply personal and private material.

At the end of 1959, Plath and Hughes moved back to London. Their first daughter, Frieda, was born the next year, the same year that Plath published her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus*. She fell pregnant again in 1961, but it ended in miscarriage. Plath later told her therapist that Hughes had beaten her two days before the miscarriage. Their second child, Nicholas, was born in 1962 and the couple moved to a small town in Devon. Assia and David Wevill rented their London flat and, soon afterwards, Hughes began an affair with Assia. In July 1962, Plath discovered the affair, and she and Hughes were separated two months later.

A CREATIVE BURST

After separating from Hughes, Plath rented a small flat in London for herself and the two children, a few streets away from the flat she owned with Hughes. Plath chose the flat because the poet William Butler Yeats had once lived there. She experienced a great burst of creativity during this time, finishing her novel and writing most of the poems on which her reputation now rests — at least 26 of the poems in her posthumous collection, *Ariel*, were written during these final months of her life. In 1963, Plath published ***The Bell Jar***, using the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas'.

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams is a collection of short stories by Plath. It was posthumously published in 1977 as a collection of thirteen short stories, including the title story. Her prose reflects the same themes and images as her verse and this collection is said to showcase her talent and genius as a story writer.



Plath's depression also returned during this time. She was deeply distressed by Hughes's affair and their separation. The winter of 1962 was one of the coldest in 100 years in London and the flat was inadequately insulated. She also had their two small children to look after on her own. She was struggling with insomnia and lost 9 kilograms of weight. She described the quality of her despair as 'owl's talons clenching [her] heart'. On the morning of February 11, 1963, she suffocated herself with gas and was found dead with her head in the oven, having sealed the rooms between her and her sleeping children with tape, towels and cloths. She was 30 years old.

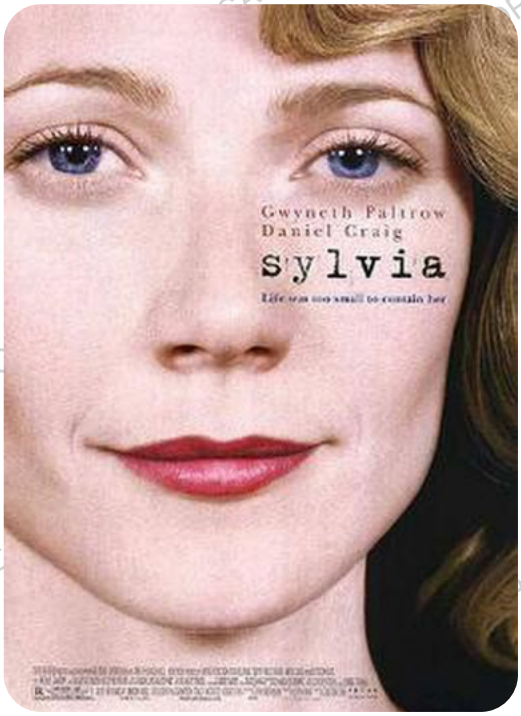
What is today Plath's most popular volume of poetry, *Ariel*, was only published after her death. Another volume titled *Collected Poems* was also published posthumously in 1981, under the guidance and editorship of Hughes.

The Bell Jar is an unnerving work that describes a young woman's mental breakdown and institutionalisation. The novel starkly expresses a sense of alienation and self-destruction that has resonated with many readers since it was first published in 1963. The novel is semi-autobiographical and is based on Plath's own experiences with severe depression — or what may have been bipolar disorder — and her first attempt to commit suicide in 1953. Anxious about publishing such a personal account of her experiences, Plath published the novel under the pseudonym 'Victoria Lucas'. Early working titles of the novel included *Diary of a Suicide* and *The Girl in the Mirror*. Plath committed suicide a month after the novel was published. It was published in her name for the first time in 1967.

Many commentators consider the novel to be feminist and it is a significant part of the reason that Plath has become a feminist icon in the decades since her death. Readers point to the limited, and limiting, choices available to the protagonist, Esther Greenwood, and how these reflect the patriarchal traditions of American society in the 1950s. Faced with few career options and routes to financial success, together with the pressures of sex and marriage, Esther envies the freedom that men have. The novel is also a damning account of societal and medical attitudes towards female mental health in the 1950s.

© moulinrouge17 (Deviantart)

Plath is portrayed by the actress Gwyneth Paltrow in the 2003 biopic, S*ylvia*. Frieda Hughes, now a poet and painter, who was two years old when her mother died, was angered by the making of entertainment featuring her parents' lives. She accused the 'peanut-crunching' public (a reference to her mother's poem "Lady Lazarus") of wanting to be titillated by the family's tragedies. Frieda reacted to the situation the year *Sylvia* was released by writing the poem "My Mother". The following excerpts are taken from the poem:



© BBC Films/UK Film Council (Wikimedia Commons)

[…]

Now they want to make a film
For anyone lacking the ability
To imagine the body, head in oven,
Orphaning children.

[…]

[T]hey think
I should give them my mother's words
To fill the mouth of their monster,
Their Sylvia Suicide Doll
Who will walk and talk
And die at will,
And die, and die
And forever be dying.

"MIRROR"

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful–
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises towards her day after day, like a terrible fish.

GLOSSARY

preconceptions (line 1): ideas or opinions formed beforehand, bias; prejudices

unmisted (line 3): free from mist, unclouded, made clear

reaches (line 11): full extent or range, scope, territory

agitation (line 14): state of anxiety or nervous excitement, shaking

ANALYSIS

"Mirror" is celebrated as a powerful, insightful meditation on ageing and death. Plath wrote the poem in 1961, shortly after having given birth to her first child, Frieda, and perhaps it was this life-changing event that prompted her to explore the subject. Certainly, being a first-time parent often provokes powerful thoughts and emotions regarding the transient nature of life and human mortality. Plath regularly expressed her fear of ageing in her journals and once described feeling 'infinitely sad at the thought of all this time melting farther and farther away from me as I grow older'. Nonetheless, it is a universal theme and few of us can claim to be wholly unconcerned about becoming older and dying. As its title suggests, the poem is written from the perspective of a personified mirror, which describes the nature of its existence and that of its owner, a woman who grows older under what it considers to be its dutiful, impassive and objective gaze. In two brief stanzas, the poem manages to examine the essence of reality, the nature of representation and appearances, and the search for identity and a deeper sense of self.

© Pablo Picasso (Museum of Modern Art, New York) (Wikimedia Commons)

STRUCTURE

© Cynthia Sheppard

The poem comprises two stanzas of nine lines each. Modernist in style, it is written in free verse. It has no set rhyme scheme and has an irregular meter, with the lengths of lines varying and no repeating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Through the use of enjambment, internal and half rhymes and repetitive phrases, however, Plath creates a natural, elegant sense of rhythm within the verse. In the second line, for example, there is an internal rhyme created by the arrangement of the words 'see' (line 2) and 'immediately' (line 2), as well as an instance of enjambment that lends the verse a smooth tempo. The use of repetitive phrases, such as 'over and over' (line 9) and 'day after day' (line 18), also gives the poem a sense of rhythm and cohesion.

TITLE

© Rafal Olbinski

The title of the poem is both illuminating and intriguing. By identifying the subject of the poem, Plath avoids making the poem a gimmick, a riddle to be solved, which would arguably distract the reader from the message of the poem. The title is also surprising because it suggests that the poem refers to an object, a mirror, and yet the first line subverts those expectations by revealing that, more than simply being about a mirror, it is written from the perspective of a mirror. The title is also intriguing because it prompts us to consider the role mirrors play in our lives, our relationship to the mirrors around us, and even what it means to reflect or represent or even imitate something.

CLOSE READING

I AM

The poem begins with the rather cheekily portentous statement: 'I am' (line 1). Perhaps this is an allusion to the Hebrew name of God in the Bible, Yahweh, which is usually translated as 'I am' or 'I will be'. It could also be a reference to the famous maxim by French philosopher and mathematician, René Descartes, 'cogito ergo sum' or 'I think, therefore I am', who argued that being capable of any form of thought was proof of existing. In any event, the mirror makes a bold claim to existence.

© DubbedEmotions (Deviantart)

Having established that it exists, the mirror describes itself as 'silver' (line 1), which is a reference to the colour that has been synonymous with mirrors since Justus von Liebig (yes, it is his real name) developed a process for applying a thin layer of metallic silver to one side of a pane of clear glass in 1835. Perhaps the mirror is also suggesting that it believes itself to be valuable and important since silver is considered a precious metal. The mirror also describes itself as 'exact' (line 1), which suggests that it reflects accurately and precisely, but could imply that the mirror is 'exacting' — demanding or punishing — as well.

IMPARTIAL AND INSENSITIVE

Having described its physical properties, the mirror states that it has no 'preconceptions' (line 1). This description would appear to confirm its earlier claim to accuracy because it suggests that the mirror is free from prejudice and bias and does not form opinions or assumptions beforehand. By making this statement and highlighting its impartiality, the mirror is perhaps also emphasising that it is different from human beings in this regard as they are very capable of unfounded bigotry and bias. Its claim to objectivity and neutrality is supported by the unemotional, matter of fact, almost disinterested tone of the speaker in the first line of the poem.

© eychanchan (Deviantart)

The mirror substantiates its claim to being free from 'preconceptions' (line 1) in the next two lines. It explains its process of reflection as one of 'immediately' (line 2) 'swallow[ing]' (line 2) whatever it sees, '[j]ust as it is' (line 3). This description creates a sense of speed and directness, both by the use of the word 'immediately' (line 2) and the reference to the act of swallowing, which is typically a swift movement. In other words, reflection happens at once and without time to pause or hesitate. The alliteration of 'see' (line 2) and 'swallow' (line 2), the repetition of 'I' (line 2) and the internal rhyme all support the sense of swiftness of action and the absence of hesitation.

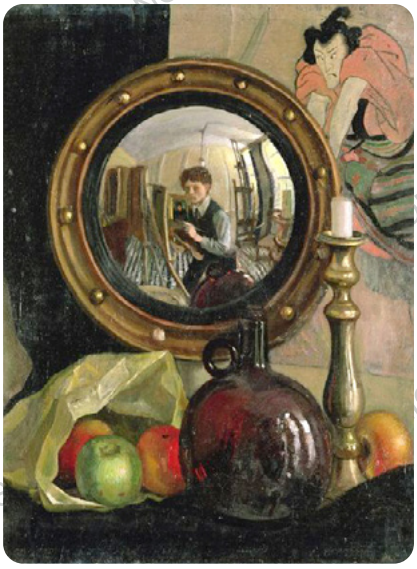
It is interesting to note the use of the verb 'swallow' (line 2). It presents the surface of the mirror as a figurative mouth that consumes or devours whatever appears before it. It is a powerful piece of imagery that gives the mirror the agency of a living creature, which challenges its claim to impartiality and subtly subverts the idea that reflecting something is a passive act. The image of the mirror as a mouth not only lends a sense of danger and threat to the act of contemplating one's reflection (are we food for the mirror?), but it also suggests how something needs to be consumed and digested, internalised and assimilated (reflected on) before it can be displayed (reflected back).

The fact that the mirror does not pause or hesitate before reflecting whatever appears in front of it allows it to claim it presents its subject 'as it is' (line 3), 'unmisted by love or dislike' (line 3). Since it has no time to interpret what it 'see[s]' (line 2), the mirror maintains that the representation is impartial and accurate. It characterises the nature of its impartiality by stating that it is 'unmisted' (line 3) or not clouded by 'love and dislike' (line 3). It is an interesting qualification that suggests the mirror believes human beings are unable to be impartial because their feelings or emotions 'mist' (line 3) or obscure what

they 'see' (line 2). It is also a fitting description from the perspective of a mirror as the one significant threat to its ability to reflect accurately is if its surface becomes covered with steam or moisture and mists or fogs up. It is with a slight sense of arrogance or pride perhaps that the mirror implies that being clouded by emotion is the natural state for human beings.

Having identified human beings as emotionally clouded, the mirror seems aware that this could be because they wish to be sensitive to the feelings of others at times. As a result, it appears keen to counter the criticism that might be levelled at it for causing someone distress by reflecting them in a harsh or callous manner. The mirror is swift to clarify and defend its intentions. It is 'not cruel' (line 4), 'only truthful' (line 4), the implication being that it is incapable of acting with bad intentions and, anyway, that honesty is more valuable than sensitivity. The delicious irony is that this is the same argument that is often presented by human beings when they hurt another's feelings. The poet is also making a reference to the difficult and delicate skill often required to balance truth and kindness. For all its merits, the mirror appears aware that it is incapable of doing this.

© Francesco Galante



© Mark Gertler (Leeds Art Gallery) (Wikimedia Commons)

DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR

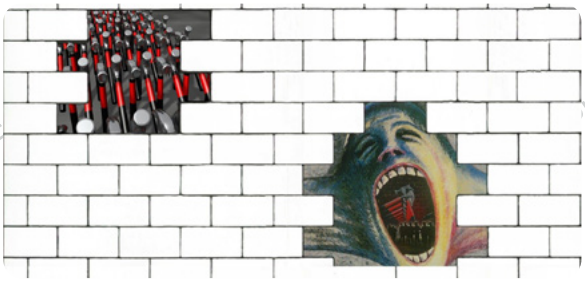
Having established its impartiality, the mirror explores its superiority. It likens itself to the 'eye' (line 5) of a 'little god' (little 5). It also considers itself a minor deity that is 'four-cornered' (line 5), which both describes its physical shape and alludes to its omnipresent or far-reaching nature (encompassing the four corners of the world). It is a revealing claim to power and status. The mirror evidently considers itself superior to human beings. This calls into question the disinterested, neutral attitude of the mirror in the opening lines. It also supports the idea that the mirror has more impact and influence on the world around it than it first claimed. By describing itself as an 'eye' (line 5), the mirror has inverted its previous role of reflecting the world around it passively and internally, instead revealing itself to be looking out at the world around it actively.

This new active, involved role is confirmed by the mirror in the next line. It describes how it spends its time 'meditat[ing]' (line 6) on the 'opposite wall' (line 6). It is a compelling description that subverts our usual notion of a passive mirror mounted on a wall. The use of the verb 'meditate' (line 6) not only implies that the mirror is actively looking out on (and aware of) the wall opposite, but it also lends the mirror the same silent, still, calm of a person sitting in timeless meditation. This comparison develops the sense the mirror has of being a sage-like, wise, immortal deity.

THE PINK WALL

In the next three lines, the mirror describes the nature of its relationship with the 'wall' (line 6), which it has 'looked at' (line 7) for 'so long' (line 7) that it now considers it 'a part of [its] heart' (line 8). It is a tender moment. The reference to the mirror's 'heart' (line 8), the 'long' (line 7) length of time it has stared, and the enjambment of lines 7 and 8 create the sense of a lover gazing tenderly at the object of their desire. It is also a surprising moment. The mirror that has insisted on its unemotional impartiality — 'unmisted by love or dislike' (line 3 — until this point, suddenly reveals it has a 'heart' (line 8) and feelings. Moreover, it has the strong, intense feelings of a lover. It is perhaps telling that the mirror has not developed such feelings for a person, but a '**wall**' (line 6), especially as walls are typically symbols of restriction and obstacle, representing the boundaries or barriers we erect between ourselves and the world around us. Although perhaps it is simply a case of opposites attract?

Walls are common symbols in literature and art. Written in 1939, the short story *The Wall* by Jean-Paul Sartre tells the story of a man captured by the fascists during the Spanish Civil War and awaiting his execution at the hands of a firing squad. The titular wall symbolises death for the prisoner as it is the one in front of which he will be shot. In Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, the wall also symbolises death as it is where the bodies of executed rebels are displayed. Much like the frontier wall built by imperial China to keep the Mongols outside the kingdom, and the border wall proposed by former President Trump to keep the Mexicans outside America, *The Wall* in the dystopian novel by John Lanchester symbolises security, power, exclusion and rejection. In the 1979 rock opera by the band Pink Floyd, *The Wall* (*pictured*), the eponymous wall symbolises the self-isolating barriers people erect in their psyches to defend themselves against hurt and rejection. This latter concept is also the subject of the poem "Walls" by South African poet Oswald Mtshali.



© Pink Floyd (Harvest/EMI)

© Julie Mehretu

The mirror describes the wall as 'pink' (line 7) and as having 'speckles' (line 7). In a literal sense, the 'speckles' (line 7) appear to be a reference to the discolouration that occurs to paint over time. In a more figurative sense, the allusion to the 'speckles' (line 7) suggests that the mirror has studied the wall closely enough to perceive the flecks and spots on it in the same way that a person might regard the freckles or blemishes on the skin of a loved one. The colour of the wall appears to be symbolic as well because 'pink' (line 7) is traditionally associated with love and femininity. Perhaps the mirror considers itself masculine? Certainly, it claims traditionally masculine traits such as being unemotional and impassive. Associated with love, the colour pink underlines the feelings the mirror has for the wall and perhaps suggests the wall feels the same way. Some commentators have suggested that the colour indicates that the mirror should be considered a symbolic representation of the poet herself — housed as it is within a room or home with pink walls. Others consider the relationship between the mirror and the wall to be a symbolic representation of the poet's marriage. In any case, it should be noted that the relationship the mirror has with the wall also expresses an act of perception or interpretation. Contrary to its claims in the opening lines of the poem, the mirror is not impassively reflecting the wall in this instance; instead it has examined the wall and assessed it and, as a result, developed feelings for it.

Subverting the calm consistency created by the verb 'meditate' (line 6), the mirror reveals that its relationship with the wall is inconstant or unsettled and 'flickers' (line 8). It is another appropriate word for a mirror to use as it refers to a light that wavers unsteadily and an absence of light would trouble a mirror as it would render it useless. The word is also used to describe sudden and short-lived feelings — a flicker of a smile, for example — and perhaps the mirror is describing how the repeated 'separat[ions]' (line 9) feel: one moment the mirror feels connected and happy, the next disconnected and sad. In this way, is the mirror experiencing something all too familiar to human beings? Is this an allusion to the fickle nature of feelings and love?

© Elfhen (Deviantart)

The mirror explains that it is repeatedly 'separate[d]' (line 9) from the wall by 'darkness' (line 9) and '[f]aces' (line 9). In a literal sense, the mirror is referring to how the dark of night-time and the absence of light prevent it from reflecting the wall, together with how people obscure its view of the wall when they stand in front of it to look at their '[f]aces' (line 9). By referring to the way the interruptions separate 'us' (line 9), the mirror expresses a bond and unity between it and the wall that transforms them from being two inanimate objects into a loving couple. Combined with the '[b]ut' (line 8), which indicates that the happiness or love between the mirror and wall is being thwarted somehow, and the phrase 'over and over' (line 9), which sounds like a lamentation, the mirror appears to be saddened by the separations from its beloved.

THE WOMAN AND THE LAKE

A shift in the outlook and reasoning in the poem is heralded by the start of a new stanza and highlighted by the word '[n]ow' (line 10). Our perspective changes and the room with the pink wall disappears as the mirror describes itself as a 'lake' (line 10). It is another powerful image as lakes are symbolic of reflection, self-contemplation and revelation. As large bodies of water, lakes are associated with our deepest feelings and emotions as well. Moreover, as reflective surfaces, lakes are also associated with our unconscious mind, our memories and hidden desires. Lakes were also symbolic of death among the ancient Romans, who believed that Lake Avernus was crossed to reach the entrance to the underworld. By comparing itself to a lake, the mirror has gained depth and dimension.

© Caravaggio (National Gallery of Art, Rome) (Wikimedia Commons)

The mirror introduces a 'woman' (line 10), who scrutinises her reflection to discover what she 'really is' (line 11). The mirror describes the woman as 'bend[ing]' (line 10) over it, which creates the image of the woman on the shore of a lake, leaning over to see her reflection in the water. It also conveys a sense of the woman leaning towards and looming over the mirror, suggesting that the mirror finds the woman's presence an invasion of its space or even intimidating. This impression is developed in the following line because the mirror portrays the woman as examining its depths, its extremities or 'reaches' (line 11). The woman appears to be studying her reflection closely and intensely and perhaps from several angles. Yet the mirror likens the experience to being probed and prodded.

It is significant that the mirror believes the woman is looking at herself to discover what she 'really is' (line 11). Not only is the mirror making yet another act of interpretation, this time of the woman's motivations, but it is also suggesting that the woman is trying to find something deeper — her true identity or sense of self — by examining her reflection. The mirror's interpretation transforms the seemingly ordinary scene and encourages the reader to examine the relationship between inner and outer, internal and external, essence and appearance. It is also telling that the mirror says the woman is searching for 'what' (line 11) and not 'who' she really is. Is the woman an object from the perspective of the subjective experience of the mirror?

DECEPTION AND MISINTERPRETATION

The woman appears to be dissatisfied with her reflection because she 'turns' (line 12) away from the mirror and towards the 'candles' (line 12) or the 'moon' (line 12). Rather contemptuously, the mirror considers the candles and moon 'liars' (line 12), which is presumably a reference to the way the softer or weaker light from those sources can be deceptive and make a person look more attractive. The mirror seems to disapprove of the woman's desire to improve her reflection. Does the mirror believe the woman should be satisfied with its 'truthful' and 'exact' (line 1) representation of her, even if it is not what she wants to see? Does its nature and purpose prevent the mirror from understanding that external appearances might not reflect the full truth of something?

© Guy Rose (Wikiart)

Even though the woman has turned away and thus rejected its reflection of her, the mirror is undeterred. It still reflects her 'back' (line 13) 'faithfully' (line 13) as she walks away. It is an ambiguous line, however, as the statement made by the mirror — 'I see her back' (line 13) — could be interpreted as the mirror returning the woman's gaze steadily, like a devoted and loyal **servant**. This understanding is supported by the mirror's description of being 'reward[ed]' (line 14) for its services in the next line. Whether the woman catches a glimpse of herself as she walks away or holds a candle up to her reflection in the mirror, it seems clear that she is upset by what she sees. Her hands start shaking in 'agitation' (line 14) and her eyes fill with 'tears' (line 14). In another moment of delicious irony, the mirror misinterprets her response as an expression of joy or happiness. Not only is the mirror actively interpreting the world around it, but it is also misunderstanding it as well. The dramatic irony of this moment also provides a compelling commentary on how easy it is to misinterpret the behaviour of another if we have not taken the time to ascertain their interior feelings and motivations.

© Pretty-As-A-Picture/nirinni (Deviantart)

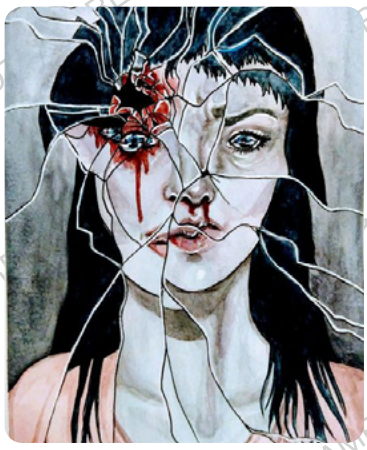
The mirror compounds its mistake by proudly claiming it is 'important' (line 15) to the woman. The mirror does seem to matter a great deal to the woman — she returns to it '[e]ach morning' (line 16) — but perhaps not in the way it imagines. It is also significant that the boundaries between the mirror and the woman are being blurred as the mirror describes the relationship between them. Perhaps this is symbolic of the relationship we all have with our physical appearances? The mirror notes how the woman 'comes and goes' (line 15); she leaves but returns. This observation creates the impression that the woman feels compelled to return to her reflection, no matter how much she dislikes it. Is the woman the servant of the mirror and its power of reflection? The woman appears to need the mirror as much as, or even more than the mirror needs the woman.

In portraying the mirror as a faithful **servant**, perhaps the poem is alluding to the famous magic mirror in the fairy tale, *Snow White*. In the story, the evil Queen looks at her reflection and asks, 'Magic mirror on the wall, who is the fairest one of all?' The mirror replies, 'Thou, O Queen, art the fairest in the land' and she is satisfied until one day, the mirror identifies her stepdaughter, Snow White, as 'the fairest'. The Queen flies into a jealous rage and repeatedly attempts to have Snow White murdered. In the fairy tale, the mirror symbolises the perils of vanity and pride, of course, but the tale is layered with meaning, and it also examines the nature of beauty, the challenges of ageing, the effect of the male gaze and the detrimental way women are encouraged to compare themselves and compete.

© foxlover35 (Deviantart)

FEARS OF AGEING AND DYING

The mirror describes how the woman visits it every morning, replacing the 'darkness' (line 16) of separation with her 'face' (line 16). The seeming intimacy and even tenderness of the description — reminiscent of waking up and seeing the face of a loved one — is shattered by the deadpan violence of the observation of the mirror that the woman has 'drowned' (line 17) a 'young girl' (line 17) in its surface. The mirror explains that the young girl has been replaced by an 'old woman' (line 17). The explanation reveals that the woman has gazed at her reflection in the mirror since she was a girl. Alluding to its depths as a lake, the mirror suggests that it holds the memories of the young girl like a submerged body. Yet, instead of the hidden body reappearing on the surface of the lake, an old woman '[r]ises' (line 18) out of the water 'day after day' (line 18). It is a revelation that helps explain the woman's distress and behaviour. The beauty of her youth appears to have faded with age. Unable to accept this fact, she compulsively returns to the mirror that once displayed her youthful loveliness in the vain hopes of finding it reflected there again.



© Becky Coates

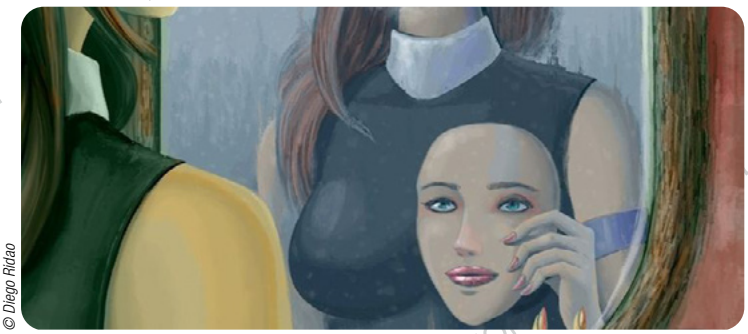
The mirror compares the woman's reaction to seeing her aged reflection to her catching sight of a monstrosity or 'terrible fish' (line 18) swimming up from the depths of the lake. It is a striking image that communicates how alien, unfamiliar and repulsive she finds her appearance. It not only captures how aghast the woman is at the sight of herself, but simultaneously conveys the intensity of her inability to reconcile herself to ageing.

The final two lines convey the message of the poem so abruptly and pointedly that they leave the reader in a similar state to the woman, somewhat horrified and breathless. The vivid imagery of the dead girl sinking to the depths of the lake and the wizened old crone rising out of the water to the surface challenge the reader to consider the realities of growing old and how it must feel to have aged to the point of being repulsed by your appearance. This reality is perhaps particularly challenging for women, who are judged and valued on their appearance more than men because of the different mating priorities of the two genders. It is perhaps all too easy to feel a loss of self-esteem and worth as part of the experience of growing old in a society that values and celebrates youth and beauty almost exclusively, even more so if you have become accustomed to your beauty winning you attention and admiration. Is the poem really about the mirror or about the woman who studies her reflection in it?

APPEARANCES AND REALITY

In addition to exploring our fears of ageing and, ultimately, dying through the woman's obsession with her external countenance, the poem uses the relationship between the woman and the mirror to examine the relationship between appearances and reality. The mirror argues that it is 'truthful' (line 4) and 'exact' (line 1). In an echo of the belief, '**the camera cannot lie**', the mirror argues that it presents a 'faithful' (line 13) representation of whatever it 'sees' (line 2). Superficially, this argument appears valid and yet the poem skilfully interrogates and questions this truism. By describing its relationship with the pink wall and the woman, the mirror reveals that it does not just 'swallow' (line 2) the world around it but interprets what it sees. The act of interpretation is shown to be an act of **distortion**. The mirror believes the woman is happy and 'reward[ing]' (line 14) it with adulation for its service. Yet the woman's 'tears' (line 14) and 'agitation' (line 14) are more likely an expression of distress and grief. In this way, we are encouraged to consider how the way we interpret the world around us distorts what we see. The way the mirror perceives the woman, and the woman perceives her reflection also explores the relationship between subjective and objective experience. Is it possible to separate the objective factual reality of something from its subjective, emotional and cognitive impact?

Plath committed suicide two years after "Mirror" was written. Critics have since suggested that the poem contains much that is autobiographical, and that the poet was exploring the dichotomy between our inner selves and our external appearance because she herself presented a polite, demure and graceful façade and yet her writing reveals a raging, explosive, passionate inner self. It is perhaps telling that the poem implies that there is something important about the woman that cannot be found in a mirror: 'what she really is' (line 11). From this perspective, perhaps the 'terrible fish' (line 18) is symbolic of our shadow selves, the unloved parts of our psyches that we consider too ugly to show others and try to repress.



© Diego Ridao

The saying, '**the camera cannot lie**', originated in the mid-1800s when printed photographs started becoming widely available to the public. Many of the people who had their portraits taken were shocked at the results and unwilling to believe that they looked the way the photograph portrayed them. They were unable to reconcile the subjective image they held of themselves with the objective image presented in the photograph. As a result, the phrase became a stock response among photographers. It may quite possibly have been used ironically as well because even then the effects of lighting, angle and posture were widely known.

© George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, New York)

Digitally altered photographs may be commonplace today, but they are nothing new. The ability to modify camera images is as old as photography itself—only the methods have changed; for example,* Man on Rooftop with Eleven Men in Formation on His Shoulders *(pictured) by an unknown photographer in the early 1930s is an obviously manipulated or fake photo.

Part of the fun of a house of mirrors or hall of mirrors at an amusement park is the **distortion** created by the mirrors. By curving the mirrors in different ways, the attraction presents participants with unusual and confusing reflections of themselves, some humorous and others frightening.

© Gaius Cornelius (Wikipedia)

QUESTIONS

1. Suggest an alternative title for the poem, drawing on evidence from the text to substantiate your response. (2)

2. Describe the tone of the speaker in the first five lines of the poem, drawing on evidence from the text to support your answer. (2)

3. Comment on the effect of using the word 'rewards' (line 14) in this context? (2)

4. Identify an instance of metaphor in the poem and comment on its effectiveness. (2)

5. In your own words, explain the symbolism of the 'terrible fish' (line 18). (2)

6. Consider the following poem, "A Hand-Mirror" by American Modernist poet Walt Whitman. Both "Mirror" and "A Hand-Mirror" examine the theme of appearance versus reality and the fear of ageing. In a well-structured paragraph, compare the way the two poems convey their respective messages. Provide evidence in the form of quotations from both poems to support your answer. (5)

"A HAND-MIRROR" – WALT WHITMAN

Hold it up sternly—see this it sends back, (who is it? is it you?)
Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth,
No more a flashing eye, no more a sonorous voice or springy step,
Now some slave's eye, voice, hands, step,
A drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, venerealee's flesh,
Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and cankerous,
Joints rheumatic, bowels clogged with abomination,
Blood circulating dark and poisonous streams,
Words babble, hearing and touch callous,
No brain, no heart left—no magnetism of sex;
Such, from one look in this looking-glass ere you go hence,
Such a result so soon—and from such a beginning!

GLOSSARY

sonorous (line 3): deep, rich sound

venerealee (line 5): person who has a venereal disease

cankerous (line 6): ulcerated, festering, suffering from sores

rheumatic (line 7): inflamed and stiff, affected by rheumatism, arthritis

abomination (line 7): something that causes disgust or loathing

[15]

AFRICAN POETRY

INTRODUCTION TO AFRICAN POETRY

African poetry is verse written by people born in Africa. Obviously, the size of the African continent and the wide diversity of peoples, cultures and languages spread across its 55 countries means that this grouping is more disparate, less interrelated and less unified than other artistic groupings. Moreover, what constitutes poetry in Africa and how best to categorise the different poetic traditions and time periods continues to be debated academically. Nonetheless, to quote G E de Villiers, the poems in this section are 'firmly rooted in African soil' in one way or another. The styles, themes and subjects of these poems are wide-ranging and often universal, but the voices of the poets and the insights they offer emerge from an unmistakably African context.

© Marsha Hatcher

TRADITIONAL AFRICAN POETRY

Prior to the arrival of European settlers, poetry flourished in the royal courts of the traditional kingdoms of Africa. It was oral and largely focused on praising a ruler or event publicly, for example there are, the elaborate praise poems of the **Zulu** or Sotho in southern Africa, the poems of the official singers of the ruler of the Bornu Empire in Nigeria, the royal praises of the Hausa Emirs in Chad and Ghana, and the eulogies addressed to rulers in the various kingdoms of the Congo. Epic oral poems that lasted for hours were commonly performed by wandering or freelance poets to both entertain and communicate important historical and cultural narratives to the court or villagers and patrons.

Unfortunately, pre-colonial African poetry does not have an extensive written history because it was transmitted orally from generation to generation and these links were disrupted or broken by the Atlantic Slave Trade and during the colonial period. Even the poetry that was recorded from these traditions has lost much of its richness, subtlety of expression, humour and cultural significance through being translated into English and other Westernised languages and through being separated from the social setting in which it was performed. Moreover, as early European philologists and collectors of African poetry discovered, the nature of oral poetry lends itself to improvisation, customisation and adaptation, as opposed to performing poems in a consistent or standardised manner each time.

© David Conrad

Tayiru Banbera, a freelance West African bard performing his version of the "Epic of Bambara Segu". Composed by the Bambara people in the 19th century, the epic poem reflects on political and military events that occurred during the reigns of three rulers of the second dynasty of the Segu Bambara State.

In the **Zulu** and other Bantu kingdoms of southern Africa, a professional *imbongi* or praise poet held an official position at court. The *imbongi*'s profession was to record the praise names, the victories, and the glorious qualities of the chief and his ancestors, and to recite these in lengthy high-sounding verse on occasions which called for public adulation of the ruler and his people. The poet had two duties: to remember the appropriate eulogies and to express them with fitting emotional and dramatic force. The lofty strain and rhythmic energy of these Zulu eulogies and the impressiveness of their delivery can be imagined from the following few lines, translated from the praises of a Zulu king, which glorify the swiftness and completeness of his victory over the foe:

Faster-than-the-sun-before-it-has-risen!
When it rose the blood of men had already been shed.
The Bush, 'the Buck-catcher', caught the men of Sekwayo.
He made men swim who had forgotten how,
Yes! even in the pools!–
The tobacco fields rotted even to pulp!
The wrapping-mats were finished at Banganomo;
At (the kraal) of Kuvukuneni,
At that at Mdiweni, even Vimbemsheni,
At that at Bukledeni,
At that at Panyekweni

© Jeff Opland

Poet David Livingstone Phakamile Yali-Manisi (pictured) was a Thembu imbongi, the most powerful exponent of the art of praise poetry in the Xhosa language until his death in 1999.

The following poem, titled "Prayer to the Young Moon" from the book *Specimens of Bushman folklore* (1911), collected by W.H.I. Bleek and L.C. Lloyd, is an example of the oral poetry of the Khoe, Tuu, or Kx'a-speaking peoples (Khoisan) of Southern Africa. Among the oldest hunter-gatherer societies on earth, the Khoisan appear to have composed poetry that reflected their close ties to the natural world and its rhythms. This particular poem was sung to a new moon for good fortune the night before a day to be spent hunting. Even in translation, the repetition that features in the poem conveys some of the musical, hymn-like qualities of the original.

Young Moon!
Hail, Young Moon!
Hail, hail,
Young Moon!
Young Moon! speak to me!
Hail, hail,
Young Moon! Tell me of something.
Hail, hail!
When the sun rises,
Thou must speak to me,
That I may eat something.
Thou must speak to me about a little thing,
That I may eat.
Hail, hail,
Young Moon!

© Gavin Jantjes

Scan this QR code to watch a collaborative piece between the composer Franco Prinsloo, the South African Vox Chamber choir and visual artist Sonya Rademeyer that interprets the poem as a remembrance of a pre-colonial southern Africa and as a prayer for forgiveness for the intergenerational trauma caused by colonisation. It is narrated by South African poet Diana Ferrus.

"I AM AN AFRICAN"

Scan the QR code to watch Pretoria-based poet and writer Puno Selesho perform her poem "I am an African". The poem explores identity in the modern African context and, in particular, how the complex social and political legacies of South Africa have led to a diverse range of identities. Selesho challenges the idea that there are specific ways of being African and urges everyone to take pride in who they are.

COLONIAL AFRICAN POETRY

© Heritage Pictures Collection (Getty Images)

A delegation from the Kingdom of Dahomey (in present-day Benin) in 1893.

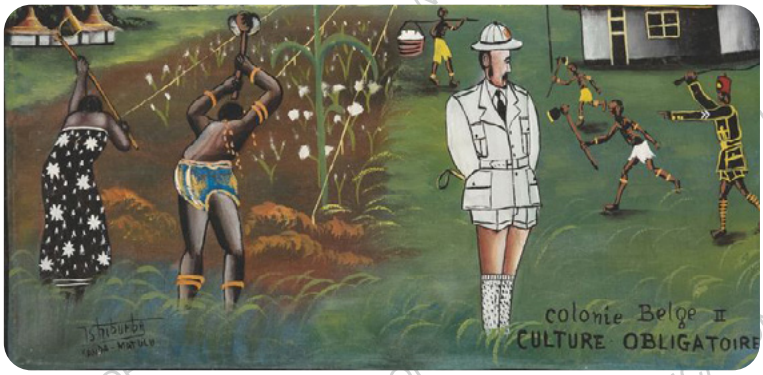
For the purposes of this resource, the 'colonial' period includes poets born between the mid-1800s and the early-1900s, a time during which many African kingdoms were subjugated and absorbed into the colonies and protectorates of the imperialist European nations. It should be noted that the poet classified as 'colonial' in this edition was born in South Africa, which technically became independent in 1910, a few years after the poet was born. In spite of this, however, the British retained vestiges of colonial rule and wielded indirect colonial power in South Africa until the passing of the Status of the Union Act in 1934.

DISRUPTION AND DEVASTATION

Colonialism disrupted and devastated Africa and its peoples culturally and socially, as well as economically and politically. While European nations had been establishing ports and outposts in Africa since the Portuguese first arrived in the 1480s, these were almost exclusively coastal settlements focused on trade and diplomacy. This situation changed dramatically in the 1880s, when seven European nations began an aggressive period of invasion and annexation of the continent known as the 'Scramble for Africa'. From 1881 until 1914, the European nations raced against each other to conquer and claim large tracts of land for the natural resources these contained. During this violent 33-year period, the colonising powers showed little to no regard for the kingdoms and peoples inhabiting the continent, using whatever combination of force and manipulation they felt would be most expedient. The colonisers attacked and butchered Africans without restraint and sowed division and greed to destabilise communities where resistance was met, paying no heed to the human misery and traumatising effects of their brutal campaigns.

© Yinka Shonibare

In spite of the fact that the majority of these strange new 'African nations' managed to regroup and unite against the alien invaders to win back their freedom and sovereignty between 1914 and 1975, the effects of this cruel and ruthless period are still felt today, and the dark shadow of colonialism continues to shape the continent and its peoples. After plundering the plentiful natural resources of the continent and converting its peoples into cheap labour as slaves, the wealthy, developed nations of modern Europe can indeed be described as being 'what they are today because of what Africa is not'.



© Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu

A NEW LITERARY CANON

As well as being subjugated and displaced, the communities of Africa had their cultural practices repressed by the arrogant European invaders, who imposed their 'Western' cultures instead and assimilated the local inhabitants through processes of 're-education'. This process stripped the indigenous communities of their belief systems and identities and sense of belonging, replacing these with European languages, customs, belief systems and Eurocentric perspectives. As a result, African communities were psychologically displaced as well and made outsiders in their homelands and places of birth. The process was a culture shock to most Africans and created a crisis of identity that, in many respects, continues to reverberate today.

© Yinka Shonibare

'The night of the sword and the bullet was followed by the morning of the chalk and the blackboard'. - Ngugi wa Thiong'o

In the aftermath of the devastation, a new **literary canon** — colonial literature — was formed as Africans began to adopt and express themselves using European languages and literary traditions and European settlers began to write about their colonial experiences. In South Africa during this period, for example, Tengo Jabavu launched the first African newspaper *Imvo Zabantsundu (African Opinion)* in 1884, which published poetry and fiction by local writers in both Xhosa and English, as well as uncensored news. Some of the first poems written in English by black South Africans appeared in the newspaper in the 1890s and it became an important literary outlet for Africans, encouraging many writers to author works in indigenous languages as well as English.

A **literary canon** is a body of books, narratives and other texts considered to be the most important and influential of a particular time period or place. The term 'canon' is derived from the Greek word 'kanon', which was a cane or measuring rod used by architects to make straight lines. Over time, the term evolved to refer to 'setting the standard'. A literary canon is, essentially, an exclusive list of the most definitive or influential works — the 'classics's — of a particular people, time or place. In other words, texts that are of a high quality or highly representative of a time or place. Once a work is included in a particular literary canon, it becomes part of the standards by which all other works from a time or place are judged. A literary canon is meant to be the set of works you should read to appreciate and become familiar with the writers from a particular time period or place. Who gets to decide which works become part of a canon? Well, now, that is a good question.

© SA History.org.za

At the same time, Olive Schreiner (*pictured left*), the daughter of missionary settlers from Europe, began writing poetry and prose about the country, including "The Cry of South Africa" in 1900, a lamentation about the lives lost during the Second Boer War, and *The Story of an African Farm* in 1883, which many consider to be the first 'South African' novel. A few years later, black South African writers like Sol Plaatje would begin to add to the canon with works like *Native Life in South Africa*, published in 1916, which is a powerful denunciation of the Native Land Act of 1913 and the policies that led to it, and his pioneering novel, *Mhudi*, which was written in 1920 and published in 1930. An epic work of historical fiction, *Mhudi* is lauded as the first full-length work of fiction written in English by a black South African. The expressive, experimental novel includes text written in the poetic form, such as the following extract:

"SWEET MHUDI AND I" — SOL T PLAATJE

— extract from *Mhudi*

I long for the solitude of the woods,
Far away from the quarrels of men,
Their intrigues and vicissitudes;
Away, where the air was clean,
And the morning dew
Made all things new;
Where nobody was by
Save Mhudi and I.

To me speak not of the comforts of home,
Tell me but where the antelopes roam;
Give me my hunting sticks and snares,
In the gloaming of the wilderness;
Give me the palmy days of our early felicity
Away from the hurly-burly of your city
And we'll be young again–Aye:
Sweet Mhudi and I.

GLOSSARY

vicissitudes (line 3): changes of circumstance or future

gloaming (line 12): twilight, dusk

palmy (line 13): happy, fortunate, glorious

felicity (line 13): rapture, bliss, euphoria, intense joy

hurly-burly (line 14): bustle, busyness, chaos, disorder

WILLIAM PLOMER (1903 — 1973)

William Charles Franklin Plomer was a poet, novelist, dramatist and campaigner for racial equality. He was born in 1903 in Polokwane, Limpopo, and spent his youth between England and South Africa. Although he left South Africa when he was only 26-years-old, he had already shaken and enraged the white South African community by publishing Turbott Wolfe, *a novel that exposed its cruel and complacent racism with subtle, yet piercing artistry. Although Plomer was a lyrical and meditative poet of distinction, he is best known for the incisive wit and technical virtuosity of his satirical verse. He was also a 'poet's poet' and celebrated by his peers. He was E. M. Forster's 'favourite contemporary poet', W. H. Auden extolled his 'first-class visual imagination', and Stephen Spender described some of his verse as being 'among the best English poems written in the present century'.*

FROM SOUTH AFRICA TO ENGLAND

© National Portrait Gallery, London

Plomer's British father had arrived in South Africa as a young man in search of adventure in the 1890s and soon found it as a trooper in the failed Jameson Raid in 1895. It is likely that he then fought in the Second Boer War (or Anglo-Boer War) in 1899 and, afterwards, he started working for the colonial government as an 'Inspector of Native Affairs' in the town of Polokwane in Limpopo province. William was born there in 1903. He contracted malaria shortly after his birth and almost died. Taking the advice of the family doctor that William needed a 'better climate', his parents returned to England with him.

The family's return to England set up a pattern of living between England and South Africa that continued throughout Plomer's youth. At the age of five, his parents left him to board at a school in England and he later recalled his feelings of alienation and isolation during that time and his sense of being a 'loner'. He was much happier when he returned to join his parents in South Africa in 1912 and attended St John's College in Johannesburg.

When the First World War broke out in 1914, the family went back to England and Plomer attended Rugby School in Warwickshire. When the war ended in 1918, the family came back to South Africa and Plomer returned to St John's College to finish his studies, winning the Form V prizes for Latin and French in 1920. He later claimed he enjoyed the liberal environment at the school and the fact that he was left alone to pursue his interests, which, by this time, were changing; he had wanted to become a painter, but the influence of innovative writers like Marcel Proust was swaying him towards becoming a writer.

FROM THE EASTERN CAPE TO KWAZULU-NATAL

At the age of 17, Plomer turned down his father's offer of an Oxford University education and left Johannesburg to become an apprentice on a sheep farm in the remote Molteno district in the Eastern Cape. High up in the Stormberg Mountains, Molteno is known for its vast panoramic views of craggy peaks and high Karoo plains. Some commentators suggest that it was during this time that Plomer developed the deep appreciation of the South African landscape that appears in his early works.

Plomer was certainly taken with the landscape of KwaZulu-Natal. His father wrote and asked Plomer to help him set up and run a trading store in Entumeni, just outside the Zulu capital of **Eshowe**, and Plomer recalled afterwards, 'Zululand! That was a word to quicken my interest and raising my eyes from [the letter from my father] to the bare and ochreous mountain over against the house at [Molteno], I seemed to see a softer, warmer landscape of sub-tropical verdure springing from a more generous soil than that of what **Pringle** had called 'Stormberg's rugged fells'.

The Zululand landscape appears to have met the expectations of the teenage Plomer as he described how the place 'bewitched' his father and him when they took over the store: 'Open, fertile, and undulating, with clusters of dome-shaped African woven huts, with groves and thickets and streams and patches of cultivated land here and there, it was haunted by distinguished birds — toucans, hoopoes, hummingbirds — and by small mammals like the galago. From the very first we were pleased with the climate, which never ran to extremes. Almost perpetual sunshine one took for granted, but at the end of a hot summer's day, a dense, refreshing mist would sometimes rush upon us from the south and steep everything in an opaque and silvery silence'. Plomer also wrote about how much he enjoyed the physical beauty of the young Zulu men and women who visited the store, and the company of a dignified old Zulu man who addressed him as 'umtwana ka Kwini Victoli' (child of Queen Victoria).

© Jacob Hendrik Pierneef

'**Eshowe**, by the way, is a word of three syllables, with each 'e' as in 'end' and the accented 'o' as in 'show'. The name is onomatopoeic, to evoke the sound of a wind among leaves. A conspiracy of leaves, whispering, sighing, and muttering.'

— *The Autobiography of William Plomer* (1975)

Thomas **Pringle** is sometimes called 'the father of English South African poetry' as he was the first poet and author to describe the scenery, native peoples, and living conditions in the country in English. He arrived in the Cape in 1802, with a party of Scottish Settlers who had been granted land in the Baviaans River Valley. He was not a farmer, though, and so opened a school and two newspapers in Cape Town. All three endeavours were suppressed by the colonial government, however, because Pringle openly criticised the regime and was an abolitionist (anti-slavery). He returned to London and committed himself to the abolitionist movement, becoming Secretary of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1827. The efforts of Pringle and the Society came to fruition in 1834 when the British Parliament made slavery illegal, although he himself died a few weeks before the legislation was enacted.

TURBOTT WOLFE: A LITERARY SENSATION

Daily life in Entumeni was also the inspiration for Plomer's first novel, *Turbott Wolfe*, which he wrote in 1924, at the age of 21. The novel ignited a firestorm of controversy when it appeared in South Africa two years later in 1926. The protagonist of the novel, Turbott Wolfe, is a British trader who opens a general store in Lembuland. He befriends many of his black customers but has less luck ingratiating himself with the bigoted whites who have lived in the area for generations.

© David Goldblatt

Turbott Wolfe was considered scandalous for portraying, and challenging, the complacent superiority and racism of white South Africans at the time. African characters were shown as beautiful and dignified, while many of the Europeans characters were depicted as the vicious specimens of an 'obscene' civilisation. Moreover, through the exploits of Turbott and his friends, miscegenation and interracial relationships are presented as the key to the future of South Africa; for example, Turbott develops a deep bond with a young Zulu girl and an Afrikaner woman marries a Zulu man.

As critic Robin Hallet has noted, what made it worse for white South Africans was that these ideas were 'presented not in crude propagandist terms but with precise and subtle artistry'. After reading it, one Durban newspaper editor was seen with 'his jaws chattering together with rage', while in the mild but damning reproof of another local paper, *Turbott Wolfe* was dismissed as 'not cricket'. In his autobiography, Plomer observed that the novel 'had rubbed the open wound of South African racialism'. South African poet, Roy Campbell, hailed Plomer in his poem "The Wayzgoose":

'Plomer, 'twas you, who though a boy in age,
Awoke a sleepy continent to rage,
Who dared alone to thrash a craven race
And hold a mirror to its dirty face.'

The success and notoriety of *Turbott Wolfe* made Plomer a literary celebrity and brought to an end his time in Entumeni.

VOORSLAG: A NOBLE ENDEAVOUR

© Rare Paper

Shortly after the publication of *Turbott Wolfe*, Plomer moved to the town of Sezela on the South Coast of Natal. He and Roy Campbell had become friends and decided to start a literary journal together. They called the publication *Voorslag* (*Whiplash*) as a symbolic reference to their intent to 'sting the mental hindquarters of the bovine citizenry of the Union' by promoting the work of local writers and the idea of a racially equal South Africa. It was the first modern small magazine in South Africa and was subtitled *A Magazine of South African Life and Art*. Another writer, Laurens van der Post, was invited to join them as the Afrikaans correspondent of the magazine.

It was a period of intense creativity and intellectual activity for both Plomer and Campbell, but it was short-lived. The publication failed to secure a wide readership among a largely outraged white South African public and, by the third issue, the writers had fallen out with the financial sponsor and proprietor of *Voorslag,* Lewis Reynolds, who opposed criticism of the colonial system.

In addition to a number of book reviews, Plomer's two main original contributions to the magazine were a short story titled *Portraits in the Nude* and a satirical poem called "The Strandlopers". Described as frank, sensitive and humane, *Portraits in the Nude* presents a series of incidents in the life of an Afrikaner farming family, including the father appearing naked at *nagmaal* (communion) in a religious frenzy, the sons beating up a black servant, the wife having an affair, and the governess dancing naked in front of a mirror.

The following year, Plomer published a collection of short stories titled *I Speak of Africa*. It included the story *Ula Masondo*, a deeply empathic account of the impact a spell of life in Johannesburg has on a young Zulu migrant worker. The collection did nothing to change negative opinion of Plomer among white South Africans and, in particular, awaiting Afrikaner critics and readers alike dismissed the sentiment of both his books as offensive.

After resigning from *Voorslag*, Plomer became a correspondent for the *Natal Witness* newspaper for a brief time, but he and Van der Post jumped at the invitation to board a vessel heading for Japan and set sail from Durban in September 1926.

© Ejor (Getty Images)

© University of KwaZulu-Natal Press

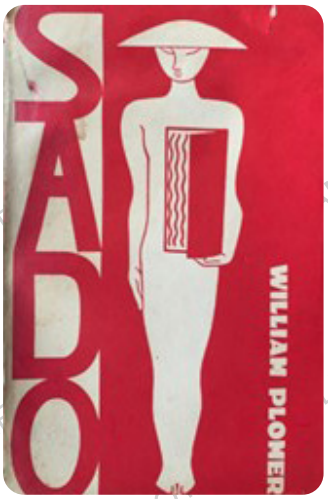
'Self-assertion more often than not is vulgar, but a live and vulgar dog who keeps on barking is better than a dead lion, however dignified.'

- Selected Prose

THIRTY YEARS LATER

Plomer never lived in South Africa again, but he visited once more when he was invited to address a conference at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1956. When the conference ended, he revisited Entumeni and found it 'greatly changed and improved' in the thirty years since he had left. 'It was a strange, disconcerting experience,' he wrote. 'I could not imagine how we ever went there or stayed as long as we did.' Generally, however, he was appalled and saddened by Apartheid South Africa, the stark contrast between the lives of its wealthy and poor inhabitants and the police violence he witnessed. As he had warned white South Africans in *Voorslag*, some years before, 'It will be necessary to learn to recognise every man's human qualities as a contribution to the building up of an indestructible future, to judge every man by the colour of his soul and not by the colour of his skin. Otherwise, the coloured races of the world will rise and take by force what is denied them now by a comparatively few muddleheaded money-grubbers'.

Soon after he had left South Africa in 1926, Plomer's poetry had ceased to refer to the country that had influenced him so deeply as a young man. Yet his visit in 1956 changed that and he wrote four poems in a burst of creativity, including "The Taste of the Fruit", which revealed how the beauty of the country had impressed him anew and stimulated his imagination. According to one of his biographers, he began describing himself as 'a returning exile', although what he called 'the dryness and the staring sun' made him long for English clouds again.



© Graham Thomas

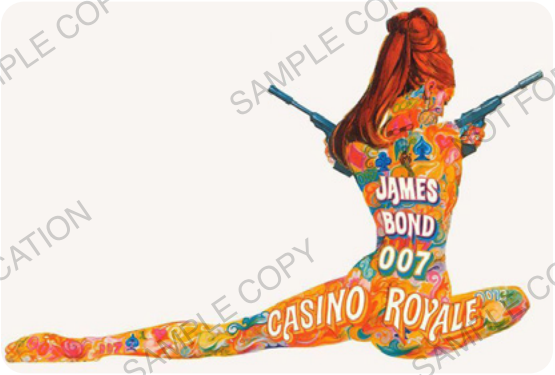
© National Portrait Gallery, London

LITERARY AND PUBLISHING PROMINENCE

After living in Japan until 1929 and then travelling through Korea, China, the Soviet Union, Poland, Germany, and Belgium, Plomer eventually settled back in England. Through his friendship with his publishers, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Plomer entered London literary circles and became friends with many of the 'Thirties poets' and the 'Bloomsbury Group'. In 1940, he published a collection of verse titled *Selected Poems*, which included "Namaqualand after Rain", "Scorpion", "Ula Masondo's Dream", along with his poem criticising the wanton greed and 'free cruelty' of the gold rush in "Johannesburg".

Plomer rose to literary and publishing prominence in England in the 1930s. He published three novels, *Sado* in 1931, *The Case is Altered* in 1932 and *The Invaders* in 1934, along with four volumes of verse, *The Family Tree* in 1929, *The Fivefold Screen* in 1932, *Visiting the Caves* in 1936 and *Selected Poems* in 1940, and a collection of short stories, *The Child of Queen Victoria*, in 1933, as well as writing three biographies. He became a literary editor for Faber and Faber publishers and was a reader and literary adviser to Jonathan Cape publishers from 1937 to 1973.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, Plomer enlisted in the Royal Navy Intelligence Division and served until the war ended in 1945. After the war, he returned to his position at Jonathan Cape publishers, where he recognised the potential of Ian Fleming's *James Bond* series. He edited the first novel, *Casino Royale*, as well as several others, and Fleming dedicated his third novel, *Goldfinger*, to Plomer.



His career brought him into contact with numerous writers and literary groups, including the Royal Society of Literature, to which he was elected as a fellow in 1951, the Society of Authors, and the Poetry Society, which he also served as president from 1968 to 1971. He was also the recipient of several honours, including an honorary doctorate from the University of Durham, the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1963, and he was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1968.


A *Mushroom* the table, and on it were spread,
A *Water-dock leaf*, which their table-cloth made;
The viands were various, to each of their taste,
And the *Bee* brought the honey to sweeten the feast.

© Baldwin Library

Plomer's last work, a collection of children's poems entitled ***The Butterfly Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast***, won the prestigious 1973 Whitbread Award in its category of fiction. He died in England in September 1973 at the age of 69.

In 1976, South African writer Nadine Gordimer named a South African literary prize, the *Mofolo-Plomer Prize* in honour of Plomer and South African author Thomas Mofolo. Gordimer also wrote in her introduction to a 2003 edition of *Turbott Wolfe* that the work should be regarded as part of the 'canon of renegade colonialist literature'.

***The Butterfly Ball and the Grasshopper's Feast** is loosely based on the poem with the same name, written by William Roscoe in 1802. Plomer's version still tells the story of a party for insects and other small animals, but greatly expands the original verse and provides a good deal more detail on the animals' preparations for the party. Pictured is a page from the first illustrated version, which was published in 1860.*

"NAMAQUALAND AFTER RAIN"

Again the veld revives,
Imbued with lyric rains,
And sap re-sweetening dry stalks
Perfumes the quickening plains;

Small roots explode in strings of stars,
Each bulb gives up its dream,
Honey drips from orchid throats,
Jewels each raceme;

The desert sighs at dawn–
As in another hemisphere
The temple lotus breaks her buds
On the attentive air–

A frou-frou of new flowers,
Puff of unruffling petals,
While rods of sunlight strike pure streams
From rocks beveined with metals;

Far in the gaunt karroo
The winter earth denudes,
Ironstone caves give back the burr
Of lambs in multitudes;

Grass waves again where drought
Bleached every upland kraal,
A peach-tree shoots along the wind
Pink volleys through a broken wall,

And willows growing round the dam
May now be seen
With all their traceries of twigs
Just hesitating to be green,

Soon to be hung with colonies
All swaying with the leaves
Of pendent wicker love-nests
The pretty loxia weaves.

GLOSSARY

veld (line 1): flat, rural land covered in grass and small trees (scrub)

Imbued (line 2): saturated, impregnated, soaked

quickening (line 4): awakening, reviving, resuscitatingsuspended

raceme (line 8): cluster of flowers arranged along a stem

frou-frou (line 13): showy or frilly ornamentation, rustling, especially of women's skirts

beveined (line 16): marked with veins

gaunt (line 17): lean, haggard, scrawny, thin, angular or bony

denudes (line 18): strips, deprives, lays bare, exposes

burr (line 19): the sound of the lambs

multitudes (line 20): large number of people, animals or things

kraal (line 22): enclosure for cattle or livestock within a village

traceries (line 27): delicate branching patterns, outlines

pendent (line 31): hanging, dangling, suspended

loxia (line 32): Black-headed Weaver (small bird with yellow and black colouring)

ANALYSIS

"Namaqualand after Rain" is a loving celebration of the beauty and rejuvenating powers of nature. In the poem, the dramatic annual transformation of the arid semi-desert of Namaqualand into a magnificent, vibrant carpet of wild flowers is used as a reminder that life finds a way to survive and renew itself, even in the harshest conditions. The verse also demonstrates Plomer's keen appreciation of the nature and wildlife of South Africa.

© Source

STRUCTURE

"Namaqualand after Rain" has a regular and predictable structure. It consists of eight stanzas, each of which is a quatrain or four lines long, and it features the rhyme scheme ABCB, DEFE. The rhymes in five of the eight stanzas are perfect or exact, for example, 'rains' (line 2) and 'plains' (line 4), with the rhymes in the other three stanzas being half rhymes, such as 'kraal' (line 22) and 'wall' (line 24).

The metrical pattern of the stanzas is known as hymn or hymnal since the lines of the poem generally alternate between iambic trimeter (three iambic units or six syllables) and iambic tetrameter (four iambic units or eight syllables). Apart from the notable exceptions, lines that feature either seven or four syllables, this meter lends the verse a melodic, buoyant rhythm that would seem appropriate for a poem celebrating the period of rebirth and renewal signified by the arrival of spring. Using a hymnal meter, which derives its name from compositions of praise and worship, would also seem a fitting choice to express wonder and joy at the rejuvenating powers of nature.

© Anne Krojer

Punctuation is used to support the imagery and pace of the verse throughout the poem. The dashes at the end of lines 9 and 12 in the third stanza break the steady rhythm created by the commas and semi-colons in the first two stanzas — a rhythm that resumes in the fourth and fifth stanzas before the use of enjambment requires different punctuation in the final stanzas and the poem bounds joyfully towards its conclusion.

The poet also uses a variety of sound devices to support the imagery and pace of the verse throughout the poem. The instances of consonance, for example, 'frou-frou' (line 13) and 'flowers' (line 13), and assonance, for example, '[p]uff' (line 14) and 'unruff' (line 14), and alliteration, for example, 'sunlight' (line 15), 'strike' (line 15) and 'streams' (line 15), capture and emphasise the movement and energy beginning to burst forth across the landscape.

TITLE

The title of the poem locates it in space and time. It confirms that it is set in southern Africa since **Namaqualand** is the name of the arid western coastal region that runs from the northern Cape Province to Namibia. The title also establishes the time as towards the end of winter as the rain typically falls there in July and August. The title also prepares the expectations of the reader as rain is symbolic of rebirth and the end of a period of drought, especially as this region is celebrated because the normally dry landscape is transformed into a magnificent, vibrant carpet of wild flowers after the winter rains.

CLOSE READING

THE VELD REVIVES

The poem opens dramatically with the word '[a]gain' (line 1), emphasising that the event it is about to describe has happened before. The use of the word 'veld' (line 1) to describe the land confirms the expectation created by the title of the poem that it is describing events in southern Africa. The use of the word 'revives' (line 1) is significant because it emphasises that this event is a repetition and that the land is being brought back to life or consciousness.

In the second line of the poem, the arrival of the 'rains' (line 2) is confirmed. The rainfall is described as 'lyric' (line 2) and 'imbu[ing]' (line 2) the veld. It is a captivating description. The word 'lyric' (line 2) suggests something light, flowing and sweet, as well as melodic, and conjures images of clear, flowing water nurturing everything on which

© Michael Durst

Namaqualand is named after the Nama or Namaqua, a Khoikhoi people who were the first inhabitants of the region.

it gracefully falls. The word '[i]mbued' (line 2) means permeated, saturated and filled, and so emphasises how the rain has permeated or soaked into the soil and suggests how it has taken over and changed the atmosphere.

© Jacob Hendrik Pierneef

The third and fourth lines of the poem highlight that it is a time of resuscitation and growth. '[S]ap' (line 3) is flowing through the 'stalks' (line 3) of the plants and the 'plains' (line 4) are 'quickening' (line 4). The imagery is exciting and suggestive of blood coursing in veins since 'sap' (line 3) is the fluid that circulates in the vascular system of a plant and the word 'quickening' (line 4) literally refers to the time when a pregnant woman starts to feel her baby moving in her womb. These lines suggest that the landscape feels alive and pregnant with possibility. It is also significant that the 'sap' (line 3) is 're-sweetening' (line 3) the stems of the plants because it transports dissolved glucose or sugar around the plants to be used to fuel their growth. In the final line of the first stanza, the smell of the sap is described as 'perfum[ing]' (line 4) the veld. The allusion is evocative, making the scene more vivid by engaging the reader's sense of smell and making it delightfully pleasant because it is filled with sweet perfume.

A FRENZY OF GROWTH

In the second stanza, the perspective shifts from the wide panorama of the 'quickening plains' (line 4) to gaze at '[s]mall roots' (line 5) and individual 'bulb[s]' (line 6). Studied closely, the 'roots' (line 5) are 'explod[ing]' (line 5) and resemble 'strings of stars' (line 5). The verb 'explode' (line 5) captures the intensity of the burst of activity and the way the roots are spreading out in every direction. The delicate description 'strings of stars' (line 5) suggests that the roots are thin and possibly glistening with water droplets from the rain. It perhaps conjures up the image of strings of twinkling fairy lights, which are festive decorations and emblematic of times of joy and happiness. It may also be an allusion to the slender indigenous South African trailing plants, the 'String-of-hearts' (*Ceropegia woodii*) and the 'String-of-pearls' (*Curio rowleyanus*). At the same time, the 'bulb[s]' (line 6) are described as 'giving up' (line 6) their 'dream[s]' (line 6). It is a vulnerable image that suggests that the 'bulb[s]' (line 6) are flowering reluctantly or meekly since 'giving up' (line 6) implies that what is being revealed or shared is being done unwillingly or with a sense of surrender and defeat. Perhaps the image suggests the dormant bulbs in the ground have been asleep and 'dream[ing]' (line 6) contentedly and are resentful of having to awaken and rise. Or perhaps it alludes to how precious each bulb considers its flower by comparing the act of flowering to sharing its inner self with the world.

© Keyin Johannesson

The imagery in lines 7 and 8 is sensual, opulent and almost decadent. '[O]rchid[s]' (line 7) are depicted as 'drip[ping]' '[h]oney' (line 7) that look like precious gems or '[j]ewels' (line 8) on to the 'raceme[s]' (line 8) or clusters of flowers below them. The image transforms the sticky, sugary sap, called honeydew, that leaks from the blossoming flowers and leaves of orchids into a blanket of glinting, glistening, honey-coloured, jewel-like droplets. As well as alluding to the abundance and wealth of nature in spring, the image has very suggestive, almost sexual connotations. Orchids are prized for their extraordinary, exotic beauty and fragrances and are associated with love, sexuality, fertility and sensual luxury. The sexually suggestive shape of the orchid flower led to them being used as aphrodisiacs and to enhance fertility in certain cultures. By referring to the labellum and petals of the flowers as 'throats' (line 7), the poem highlights this connection. It is perhaps fitting as spring is a time commonly associated with reproduction and birth, and flower nectar — used by bees to make honey — derives its name from the ancient Greek word for the drink of the gods, which was believed to rejuvenate and bestow immortality.

AWAKENING AND REBIRTH

At the start of the third stanza, the perspective of the poem zooms out to encompass the entire 'desert' (line 9), which is described as 'sigh[ing]' (line 9) at the arrival of 'dawn' (line 9). The personification of the 'desert' (line 9) exhaling and emitting a deep murmur creates a powerful image that reinforces the idea of the landscape being awake and alive. It is an ambiguous image, though, because a 'sigh' (line 9) can express relief or tiredness or sadness or a deep yearning for something unattainable or lost. In the context of the poem, it could make sense that the desert is sighing with relief that the rains have arrived. Or it could be saddened

© Tina Bluefield

that the rains have arrived because they threaten its existence as a desert? Perhaps the desert is fatigued by the idea of having to absorb another day of hot sun. Yet, taking into consideration the celebratory theme of the poem thus far and the fact that 'dawn' (line 9) is a symbol of hope, rebirth, awakening and resurrection, it would appear to be a 'sigh' (line 9) of relief. It is also significant that the line does not end in a comma, but with a dash. Is the punctuation being used to emphasise the line itself, by indicating a pause or break in the poem, or to show that the following line adds additional information? In the case of the latter use, it would suggest that the arrival of spring feels like waking up on the opposite side of the world to the desert, which could also be a reference to the opposite seasons experienced in the northern and southern 'hemisphere[s]' (line 10).

Whether it is the 'desert' (line 9) or the 'temple lotus' (line 11) that feels transported to another 'hemisphere' (line 10), the lotus is described as 'break[ing]' (line 11) or opening her '**buds**' (line 11) and the morning air is depicted as 'attentive' (line 12). In a more literal sense, these lines present the graceful, delicate image of a lotus flower opening to greet the dawn. By referring to the flower as 'her' (line 11), its soft, delicate, feminine nature is accentuated. The adjective 'attentive' (line 12) creates a sense of alert expectancy as the 'air' (line 12) takes on the role of a considerate servant, hovering around the flower with watchful diligence. The 'temple' (line 11) reference, traditionally a place of silent sanctuary, lends the scene an atmosphere of calm serenity as well.

There are many allusions to the sacred and spiritual in the stanza, which suggest that it is offering a figurative interpretation too. As noted previously, the 'dawn' (line 9) is a symbol of awakening and resurrection, and 'temple' (line 11) is a direct reference to a place of spiritual worship, of course. The lotus flower itself is also associated with the sacred and spiritual and is often planted in temple ponds. The flower is considered a symbol of rebirth and awakening or enlightenment because of its unusual life cycle. With its roots deep in the mud, it submerges into the water every night and then miraculously re-emerges and re-blooms the next morning, strikingly beautiful and sparklingly clean.

Budbreak occurs when new **buds** begin to open. Buds may open to become leaves, flowers or twigs, but timing is everything when it comes to budbreak. Open too soon and tender shoots freeze. Open too late and there is not enough time for flowers, fruit or other new growth to mature.

© Gabriela Valencia

EVERYTHING FEELS ALIVE

The fourth stanza further develops the sense of renewal and rebirth. The poem returns to exploring the now 'sunli[t]' (line 15) landscape and every aspect of it seems to be bursting with energy, activity and aliveness. The flowers are 'new' (line 13) and are swaying or rustling, making a 'frou-frou' (line 13) sound similar to that made by the skirts of a group of women as they walk gaily down the street. Other flowers are busily 'unruffling' (line 14) or smoothing out their 'petals' (line 14), preening themselves in a manner that is similar to the way women might adjust and smooth out their skirts and outfits when they first arrive. The feisty 'sunlight' (line 15) is 'strik[ing]' (line 15) or forcibly hitting the water with its 'rods' (line 15). The water itself is 'pure' (line 15) and probably new or freshly fallen rain and flowing along in 'streams' (line 15). Even the comparison of the streaks of 'metals' (line 16) in the 'rocks' (line 16) to 'veins' (line 16) brings the stones and boulders to life.

© Alphanso Blake

In four short lines, this compelling stanza uses vibrant imagery and sound devices such as consonance, assonance and alliteration, to create the impression of unspoiled nature and renewed, energetic life bursting forth everywhere you look.

THE DENUDED KAROO

Attention shifts to the 'karroo' (line 17) or semi-desert in the distance in the fifth stanza. The contrast between it and the landscape in the previous stanza is striking. The semi-desert is 'gaunt' (line 17) and 'denude[d]' (line 18) or stripped bare. The 'earth' (line 18) there is still in 'winter' (line 18). The adjective 'gaunt' (line 17) is particularly evocative as it evokes the image of a haggard, exhausted person as well as emphasising how barren and desolate the land is. It suggests that surviving the winter months has been similar to taking an arduous, exhausting journey.

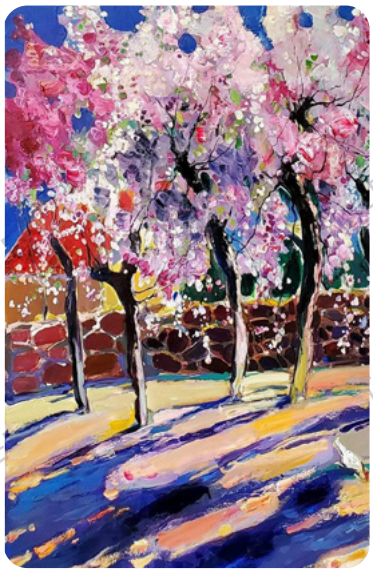
The description of the 'karroo' (line 17) is followed by an intriguing two lines in which the '[i]ronstone' (line 19) or dark grey-blue '**caves**' (line 19) in the semi-desert are described as returning or shedding 'multitudes' (line 20) or masses of the '**burr**' (line 19) of 'lambs' (line 20). The meaning of these lines could be literal and a description of how thousands of the fern-like shrubs called *Sheep's Burr* are sprouting around the edges of the caves. This interpretation would fit with the theme of renewal and rebirth and the lines would be emphasising that new life is growing even in the semi-desert at the

edges of the landscape. Yet the image of 'multitudes' (line 20) of 'lambs' (line 20) is also interesting. It is worth noting that an arid or semi-desert climate suits sheep farming and, indeed, there are hundreds of sheep farms in the Karoo area. There is also archaeological evidence that the Khoi herded flocks of sheep into the Karoo caves at night. Nonetheless, the lamb is a powerful symbol in itself. Customarily born in spring, lambs are symbols of fertility, birth and new life. As young animals with a meek temperament, lambs are also associated with virtue and innocence. Lambs were also used as sacrifices in the ancient world because they were highly valuable and deemed innocent or pure enough to satisfy the gods. Hence the use of the term 'sacrificial lamb' to describe someone metaphorically 'slain' for the common good, and the adoption by Christians of the lamb as a symbol of Jesus's purity and the way he was sacrificed on behalf of humanity.

Dark grey-blue ironstone **caves** are an iconic feature of the Karoo and surrounding areas, known for their glinting iron ore walls, spectacular formations and incredible 30 000-year-old rock art. South Africa is home to hundreds of cave systems, from kilometre-long tunnels within Table Mountain to the sacred pilgrimage site of the Motouleng Caves near Clarens. Archaeological evidence shows that our ancestors were living in the 140-metre Wonderwerk Cave near Kuruman in the northern Cape more than 2 million years ago. The largest and perhaps most famous caves in South Africa are the four-kilometre limestone Cango Caves (*pictured*) near the Karoo town of Oudtshoorn.

© John Charalambous (Wikimedia Commons)

A **burr** is a spiky seed or fruit that latches or hooks on to passing creatures. Many plants produce burrs to propagate and spread their seeds, using the passing animals as 'lifts' or transport to another location. The thick wool worn by sheep makes an ideal material for burrs and some of the plants that produce burrs are known simply as Sheep's Burrs. Burrs also function as symbols of reproduction and new life.



© Mher Chatinyan

THE BLEACHED KRAALS

The poem returns to the activity of the reviving 'veld' (line 1), where the '[g]rass' (line 21) is 'wav[ing]' (line 21) and bringing back life and colour to the '[b]leached' (line 22) kraals or livestock farms. The verb 'wav[ing]' (line 21) alludes to the way the ripples created by the wind moving through the pastures look like waves on an ocean and even suggests the grass is signalling a happy greeting. It was 'drought' (line 21) that '[b]leached' (line 22) or removed the colour from the kraals in the 'upland' (line 22) or among the hills.

The focus shifts to the 'kraal[s]' (line 22) and a peach tree is described as 'shoot[ing]' (line 23) or pushing its '[p]ink' (line 24) blossoms through a 'broken' (line 24) wall. The wind that was blowing through the grass is also gusting through the kraals and helping the tree 'volley' (line 24) or project a large number of its blossoms through the crack in the wall. The forceful, martial verbs 'shoot' (line 23) and 'volley' (line 24) conjure images of the blossoms flying through the air like pink missiles or bullets, and then cascading to the ground like coral-coloured rounds of artillery. Peach trees blossom early in the spring and so are considered symbols of rebirth and fertility, especially in China and Japan. The imagery in this stanza seems to attest to nature's powers of regeneration and the certainty of new life, which will return even after a '[b]leach[ing]' (line 22) drought and in places where man has built.

WILLOWS AND WEAVERBIRDS

The poem switches its attention to the 'dam' (line 25) at the kraal and its 'hesitating' (line 28) weeping 'willow' (line 25) trees. The branches of the trees are described as wearing 'traceries' (line 27) or delicate patterns of 'twigs' (line 27) that are briefly 'hesitating' (line 28) or pausing before becoming 'green' (line 28) with leaves. It appears significant that the willows are described as 'hesitating' (line 28) when everything around them is teeming with activity, especially since they are also among the first trees to grow leaves in the spring. Are the trees pausing to gather their strength or being indecisive or even expressing a reluctance to break open their buds and sprout leaves?

© R B Davis

The poem concludes by looking forward to the near future, when 'swaying' (line 30) bird nests will '[s]oon' (line 29) adorn the branches of the willow trees. The birds are identified as 'loxia' (line 32), also known as Black-headed Weavers, and described as 'pretty' (line 32), a reference to their striking yellow and black plumage. The nests they weave look like 'wicker' (line 31) and are described as 'colonies' (line 29) of 'love-nests' (line 31), which alludes to their purpose as places where the birds will breed and multiply their population. By focusing on 'love' (line 31) and reproduction and the birth of new birdlife, the optimistic imagery in the final stanza combines to reinforce the hopeful message of the poem that life is a cycle of birth and death and natural regeneration. As the spectacular display of wild flowers in Namaqualand demonstrates, nature will burst forth with joyous new life — no matter how arid or dry and 'denud[ing]' (line 18) the winter has been.

QUESTIONS

1. What effect is created by beginning the poem with the word '[a]gain' (line 1)? (1)

2. Identify and interpret the two figures of speech present in line 6. (4)

3. Identify the figure of speech in lines 13 and 14 and comment on its effectiveness in the context of the poem. (2)

4. Identify, explain, and comment upon the effectiveness of the figure of speech used in line 24. (3)

5. Consider the following poem "To Daffodils" by Robert Herrick. Both "Namaqualand after Rain" and "To Daffodils" explore the symbolism of flowers. In a well-structured paragraph, compare and contrast how each poem uses imagery and diction to convey its respective themes. Provide evidence in the form of quotations from both poems to support your answer. (5)

"TO DAFFODILS" — ROBERT HERRICK

Fair Daffodils, we weep to see
You haste away so soon;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attain'd his noon.
Stay, stay,
Until the hasting day
Has run
But to the even-song;
And, having pray'd together, we
Will go with you along.

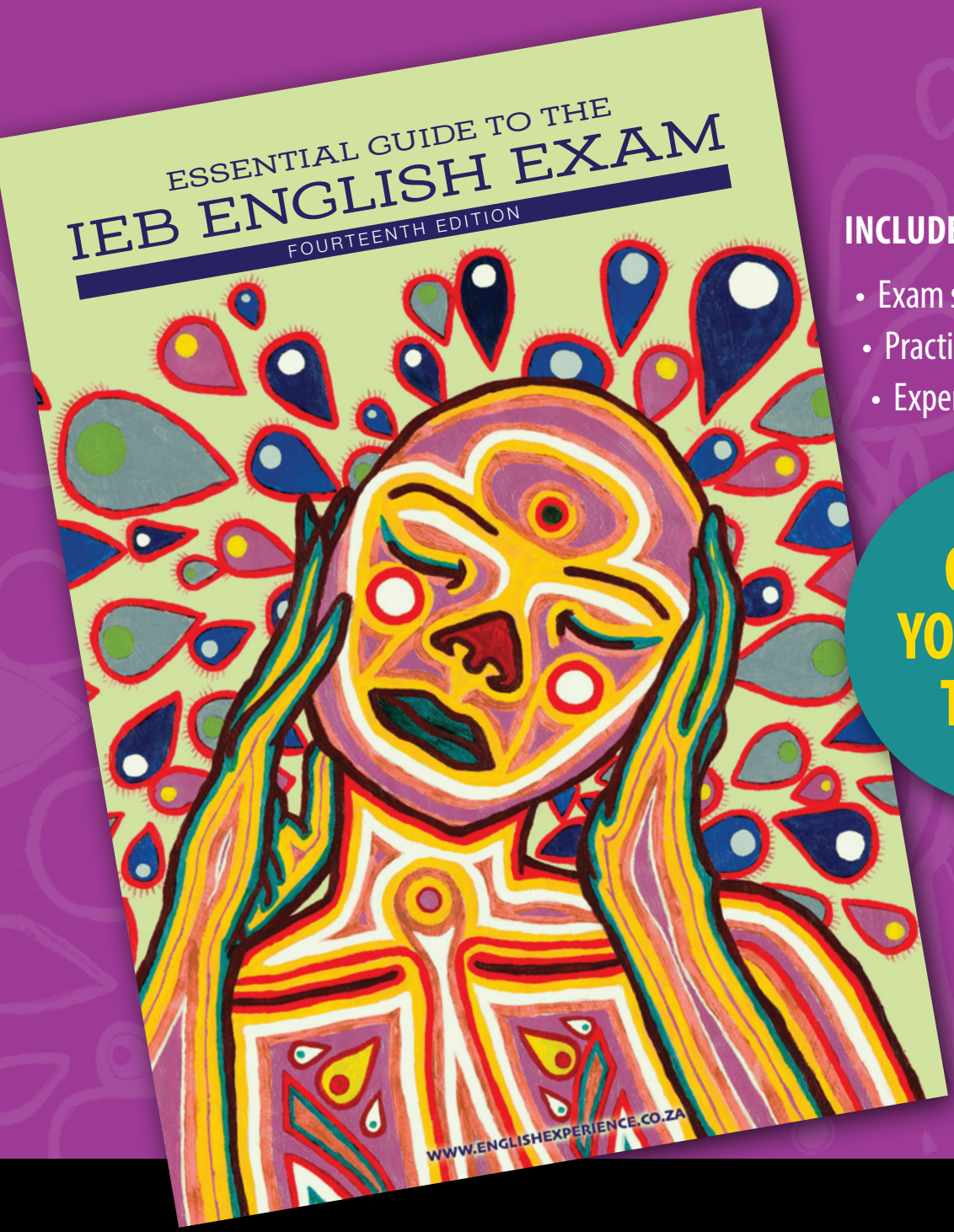
We have short time to stay, as you,
We have as short a spring;
As quick a growth to meet decay,
As you, or anything.
We die
As your hours do, and dry
Away,
Like to the summer's rain;
Or as the pearls of morning's dew,
Ne'er to be found again.

GLOSSARY

even-song (line 8): church service held at sunset, focused on singing psalms

[15]

Prepared for Matric English finals?



INCLUDED IN THIS GUIDE:

- Exam structure analysis
- Practice questions
- Expert tips and strategies

ORDER YOUR COPY TODAY!

FIND OUT MORE:

Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702
info@englishexperience.co.za
www.englishexperience.co.za

the English experience