Poetry Analysis

IGCSEs and A Levels: Student resource

Introduction

Understanding poems involves peeling back the multiple layers of meanings and feelings that the poet has tried to compress into the literary form of poetry. Remember though, that your interpretation of a poem can be different from someone else's interpretation, or even the poet's intentions. As individual as we are, with different life experiences, our perspectives and commentaries are equally valid if properly justified. A successful analysis of poetry includes understanding, interpretation, and articulate commentary.

Listen to almost any song, or read the lyrics to most songs, and you can hear or see a poetic form. It is likely that the songs you listen to will also mean something to you – they make you happy, sad, moody, reflective, or full of energy.



List five of your favourite songs. State:

- What each song is about;
- Why you like the song;
- How the song makes you feel;
- Your favourite line from the song.

So, if you listen to music or even if you write your own songs or poetry, then you already have an appreciation for poetry. However, you might not enjoy poetry, or may think that some poetry will be too hard to understand.

In the examinations, you will need to write about the poems that you have studied. To do this effectively, you really need to understand the poems. This understanding includes knowing what the poem is about, as well as why and how the poem was written. Writing about a poem also requires that you can effectively communicate the poem's language, structure, style and tone.

Analyse it

crumpled paper, crumpled thoughts
there's no chance i'll do this right!
learn rhyme, rhythm, metre, foot
analyse it through the night.

internet help, books ajar
clarity is not in sight
find purpose, then, reach the bar
analyse it till first light

eke it out, measure for measure.
personify the poem's leisure of taking my head, my heart, my soul,
of keeping me working to find meaning, to find purpose
to create a wreck from my efforts
as I carve an answer to what exists.
well, now I'm done,
So
Analyse THIS! SamE ©2010

Shakespeare uses words
Which I cannot understand
His stuff bores me stiff. MaE ©2010

William Butler Yeats
Leads me gently in my dreams
To his bee-loud glade. *MaE® 2010*

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What is poetry? What are poems?

Poetry is a specific literary form of conveying language in a compact form. As it is usually so dense with words, to amplify the poet's purpose and meaning, poetry can sometimes be hard to understand. Yet poetry is written to entertain, to remember, to evoke emotions and feelings, just like prose or drama. Poetry can also tell stories, or teach (think of nursery rhymes or the alphabet rhyme). Poetry can come in a variety of forms; some poems are highly structured and governed by specific rules, whilst others are free verse, or blank verse, structured only by the poet's imagination. You should know the main forms of poems listed here:

ballad* – a narrative poem that often has a repeated refrain.
ballade – a poem of three stanzas, usually with seven or eight lines; all stanzas end with the same one line refrain and no more than three recurrent rhymes.
blank verse* – a poem written in unrhymed iambic pentameter (lines of five two-syllable feet)[Shakespeare wrote mostly in blank verse].
burlesque – a poem that pokes fun at a serious literary work.
canzone – 'song' in Italian, this is an Italian lyric poem usually with five or six stanzas.
cinquain* – a poem with five lines. One word for the title; two words on Line 2 to describe; three action words on Line 3; four words that form a phrase on Line 4; Line 5 is a synonym of Line 1.
classicism – Greek and Roman influenced poetry that stresses beauty, balance, reason and orderly form.
couplet* – two lines of verse that have the same rhythm and metre, usually rhymed.
dramatic monologue – a poem in which the speaker addresses a silent listener.
elegy – a poem of lament for someone who died.
epic* – a long narrative poem that usually tells the story of a heroic deed.
epigram – a short witty poem, sometimes satiric, often written as a couplet or quatrain.
epitaph - a brief poem in memory of someone who has died, usually on a tombstone.
free verse* – a poem with no fixed metrical pattern, rhymed or unrhymed, noted for its nonconformity to poetic structures.
haiku* – a three line, one stanza poem, consisting of five, seven and five syllables. Usually about nature.
idyll – a pastoral poem, usually portraying the ideal, picturesque aspects of country life.
limerick – a humorous poem of five lines, with a strong rhythmic pattern and an AABBA rhyme. Lines 1, 2, and 5 are two or three syllables longer than the other two lines.
lyric* – a songlike poem that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet.
narrative – a poem that tells a story.
ode* – a lyric poem, usually quite lengthy, with a serious subject, elevated style and formal stanza pattern.
pastoral* – a poem that idealizes rural and country life.
petrarchan – a sonnet (14 lines) with an abbaabba octave which introduces the theme or question; the sestet if cddcee or cdecde responds to the octave.
quatrain* – a poem or stanza that has four lines. Lines 2 and 4 rhyme and have a similar number of syllables.
rhyme – a poem that has repetitive sounds, and usually has rhyming words at the end of the line.
rhyme royal* – rhyming stanza with seven lines of iambic pentameter (introduced by Chaucer).
senryu* – a Japanese poem similar to a haiku, often humorous or satirical, on humans rather than nature.
sestina* – a poem with a fixed form of 6 six-line stanzas and a three-line closing stanza. The end words of the first stanza are repeated as end words in the other stanzas.
sonnet* – a lyric poem consisting of 14 lines, with a fixed rhyme scheme.
tanka* – Japanese poem of five lines, with five, seven, five, seven, seven syllables on the lines respectively.
villanelle* – a 19-line poem with five tercets (3-line stanzas) and a quatrain. Very structured with only two rhymes and repeating two of the lines.

**At the very least, you should know what these poem forms are, and if you have examples from your syllabus, make sure you can identify them by the correct name and structure.*

What a load of mess
If it weren't for these exams
I'd be at the mall!
MaE ©2010

Senryu, from the mouth of a teenager

How to approach a poem

1. ***Read the title*** – answer the following questions in note form next to the title or on a separate piece of paper with the title written down:
   a) What's your first impression of the title?
   b) What do you think the poem will be about?
   c) How does the poem sound to you, from the title – boring, interesting, worrying, no thoughts at all?

2. ***Read the poem through once*** – read it slowly, preferably out loud, and in a normal speaking voice, not a sing-song voice. Answer the following questions in note form under the heading First Impressions:
   a) What are your first impressions?
   b) What is the poem about, what is the gist of the poem?
   c) Can you see any themes in the poem?

3. ***Underline unfamiliar words or phrases*** – look them up in a dictionary and jot the meanings down. If you have trouble understanding a line, write it in your own words, next to the line of the poem. Better still, rewrite the whole poem in your own words (you can also use the poet's words if you understand them and they sound better in context). Don't miss out the poet's words when you paraphrase him/her, or you might change the whole meaning of the line or poem.

4. ***Make inferences about the poet*** – if you have access to background notes about the poet, read them now. This might help you answer the following questions, which are more specific to each poem that you have to read for the examinations. Jot down your answers to the following:
   a) Who is the speaker in the poem? (remember that the poet might not be the speaker)
   b) To whom is the speaker talking?
   c) What do you think is happening/has happened?
   d) How do you think the speaker feels?
   e) What do you think is the poet's attitude toward the subject matter of the poem?

Now look at structure and language

5. ***What is the setting of the poem?*** To answer this, work out from reading the poem or find out from research, when the poem was set, i.e. the time and place that the poem refers to and/or was written. Jot this information down.

If the setting is concrete, it describes the real-world; if it is abstract, it could be symbolic or representative of something else, or the poem's main theme.

What is the genre? Answer this question by considering the poem's form, such as haiku, sonnet, or free verse, for example. Depending on the poem's form, there will be different structures and attributes that help the poet achieve his or her purpose.

What is the structure? This becomes technical, and you can think of it as deconstructing the poem. Look at the structure of the poem and describe it in the following terms:

a) *rhyme scheme* – the pattern of rhyming lines in a poem. Uses alphabet letters to denote same rhymes or new rhymes, e.g. abba
b) *metre* – the pattern of syllable sounds in a line. Describing the metre includes the number of syllables, duration of syllables, and stressed or unstressed syllables. The stressed/unstressed syllables are grouped into feet e.g. one unstressed following by a stressed syllable is called an iamb.
c) *stanza* – a group of lines in a poem, sometimes called a verse. Stanzas can have very structured length and form or be free verse.
d) *Thematic structure (plot)* – how the presentation of material, argument, inner conflict is presented (like a plot in fiction). This can be presentation of a problem in the first two stanzas, concrete examples, followed by resolution. There can be ambiguity, conflict, retrospective ideas as well.
e) *Sounds* – poems are filled with sounds, deliberately injected by the poet. Look for alliteration, assonance, consonance, repetition, rhyme and rhythm.
f) *Transitions* – these are changes in a poem, shown as new stanzas, transition words, change in diction, different speakers, or unusual punctuation. Transitions in poems can indicate attitudes, themes or the poet's deliberate shifts.

6. What figurative language is used? Figurative language is used to describe in a non-literal way. Figurative words compare in a more abstract and imaginative way than literal words (these are without embellishment or deeper interpretation). The most common forms of figurative language (also known as figures of speech) are:

Simile – this is comparing two things, using the words 'like', 'as', 'seems', or 'similar'.

Metaphor – this compares two dissimilar things, but does not use 'like' or 'as'.

Personification – the technique of giving human attributes and qualities to abstract or inanimate objects.

Hyperbole – exaggeration, used for comic or serious effect.

Apostrophe – generally capitalized, this is a direct address to an absent or imaginary person, thing or abstraction.

Onomatopoeia – a word that sounds like the word it describes.

Oxymoron – a statement with two contradictory terms.

Find and underline examples of figurative language in every poem.

7. How is language used? The way the poet uses language can also give clues to help you analyse the poem better. So consider:

Connotative words and phrases – literal meanings of words are denotative, but connotative words have other meanings that may be figurative, colloquial, puns, or less specific or direct than the actual written word. Connotative words imply different meanings, feelings, symbols, and themes. Learn to recognize these words; underline them in the poems and explain their meanings.

Voice or tone of words – think about someone's tone of voice when they speak to you. For example, the tone could be angry, sad, happy, excited. Now answer the following questions about the tone of a poem:

a) What is the tone (voice) of the poem?
b) What was the poet's attitude towards the material; what was the speaker's attitude?

8. ***Reread the title*** – is your understanding of the poem the same as your first impression? If it has changed, write down your new thoughts. Answer the following questions now, based on a deeper understanding of the poem:

a) What is the poem about? What is/are the theme(s)?
b) Why did the poet write the poem?
c) Who does the poet/speaker feel?
d) How does the poet use structure to amplify the poem?
e) How does the poet use language to amplify the poem?

Analysis example: Search For My Tongue, by Sujata Bhatt

First impressions…about language, lost her voice. Deeper meaning – about culture conflict

You ask me what I mean
by saying I have lost my tongue.
I ask you, what would you do
if you had two tongues in your mouth,
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,
and could not really know the other,
the foreign tongue.
You could not use them both together
even if you thought that way.
And if you lived in a place you had to
speak a foreign tongue,
your mother tongue would rot,
rot and die in your mouth
until you had to spit it out.
I thought I spit it out
but overnight while I dream,

almost angry

Alliteration. Hard 't' sound difficult. Symbolizes perceived difficulties of speaking two tongues

repeated word – all about language and physical organ, i.e. the tongue

Repeated word 'rot' – symbolize decay and death of language

મને હતું કે આબ્બી જીભ આબ્બી ભાષા
(munay hutoo kay aakhee jeebh aakhee bhasha)
મેં થૂંકી નાબી છે
(may thoonky nakhi chay)
પરંતુ રાત્રે સ્વપ્નાંમાં મ[illegible] ભાષા પાછી આવે છે
(parantoo rattray svupnama [illegible]hasha pachi aavay chay)
ફુલની જેમ મારી ભાષા મારી [illegible]
(foolnee jaim mari bhasha [illegible]
મોઢામાં બીલે છે
(modhama kheelay chay)
ફુલની જેમ મારી ભાષા મા[illegible]
(fullnee jaim mari bhasha [illegible]
મોઢામાં પાકે છે
(modhama pakay chay)

This is all written in a different language, Gujarati, her mother tongue. Pronunciation underneath is for us, the reader. Underneath are her words, translated into English. Visual display of her language next to phonetics and then translation important structure, detail of the poem.

it grows back, a stump of a shoot
grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,
it ties the other tongue in knots,
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,
it pushes the other tongue aside.
Everytime I think I've forgotten,
I think I've lost the mother tongue,
it blossoms out of my mouth.

Repeated word 'grows'. Implies rebirth, renewal, strength.

Inferences about the poet/poem? Sujata is the speaker…this is very personal, real fear for her – wonders if she will lose her native tongue, her mother's tongue. Happened when she was in USA learning English. She speaks to us, and shows us she still has both languages. Writes in Gujarati and translates it for us, to show she is bilingual. Poet shows turmoil, conflict and fear at first, but then confidence in herself at the end.

First impressions? Poet sounds frustrated, afraid she will lose her native language, but her dreams strengthen her, allays fears.

Genre? Free verse, like a conversation she is having with the reader. Her thoughts are free flowing, as she explains her issue. Then uses vivid imagery of mother tongue as plant blossoming in last part. Effect – parallels the theme of language, reinforces the issue Sujata has about communicating in two languages.

Setting? Set in real-world, in Sujata's world, when she was studying English in American university. Going through so many changes, from India to the USA, that the poem represents fear of inner change, loss of her language, her cultural identity.

Structure? One stanza, but with transition of different language in the middle. Phonetics to benefit us, so that we can try to understand her mother tongue. No rhyme scheme, no metre, but 'tongue' repeated five times at the end of lines. Structure like talking to someone. Thematic structure shows doubt, fear, almost anger in first part. Then reveals mother tongue, and writes it, shows cultural differences with English. Final part translates, for our benefit, but also to show confidence in holding two tongues.

Fig. lang.? Metaphors – mother tongue rotting in mouth, like decaying food; growing as a bud and blossoming as a plant. Hyperbole – exaggerated rotting language in mouth; spitting it out. Imagery – fighting the languages, 'two tongues in the mouth', spit out, push…aside.

Tone? Mournful over loss of mother tongue; fear; conflict and anger; confident and triumphant when dreams are realized as true in real life.

This analysis is not complete, but should show you how to annotate and write notes on a poem.

Also available:

- Writing Poetry Essays: Student Resource
- Notes to accompany IGCSE poetry selection 2013 CIE examinations
- Notes to accompany A Level poetry selection 2013 CIE examinations

About the Author

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Teaching is what I do. I have taught in schools and tutored in Hong Kong, China, and in London, England. I have tutored in Florida and Arizona, USA, whilst also home educating my own children. Home education started with kindergarten grade. Now I have one child who has successfully completed 7 IGCSEs, 3 A Levels and 1 AS Level, and one child almost through Advanced Levels (International A Levels). After almost thirty years of teaching, I still love it, and I still challenge myself as an educator.

Though a British-qualified teacher, I have used a traditional American curriculum for all grades through 8th Grade. The choice to teach International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) subjects for Grades 9-10, and Advanced Level subjects (A Levels) for Grades 11-12 was to give opportunities to my children through international qualifications that are recognized in colleges and universities in the USA and UK (United Kingdom).

The information resources that I have built up, and continue to add to, have been for my own references. However, this information booklet may also be of some use to you, as you consider the possibilities of studying IGCSEs or A Levels using the Cambridge International Examination (CIE) syllabuses and examinations.

Good Luck!

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