

Collins

Cambridge IGCSE®

Literature in English

STUDENT'S BOOK

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Studying poetry

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This chapter explores in depth the key concepts of Literature in English in relation to poetry. You will learn how to develop and express your ideas about poetry texts. You will also be guided through planning, writing and evaluating example responses to exam-type questions.

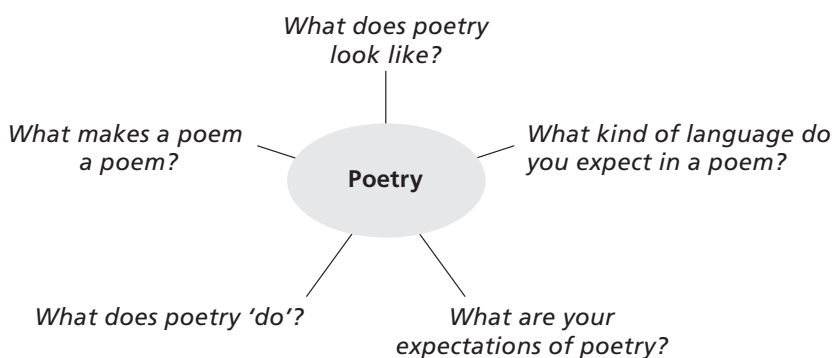
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What to expect when you read a poem

What should I expect when I read a poem?

Start thinking

- 1 Use the mind-map below to write down what you think about when you consider poetry.



Explore the skills

While you may have different ideas, many people's conception of poetry may be something like this famous piece from the 1590s:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

William Shakespeare, from 'Sonnet 18'

Key terms

pathetic fallacy: when human emotion is attributed to a natural scene, often the weather

archaic language: words no longer in everyday use, and which give the impression of coming from a historical time period

- 2 Look at the table below, showing classic features of poetry.

- a) Circle or highlight any of the features you can identify from the four lines of the Shakespeare sonnet above.

rhyme	onomatopoeia	archaic language	themes of death
themes of love	metaphor	repetition	rhyme scheme
alliteration	simile	pathetic fallacy	rhythm

- b) Compare these with the ideas you wrote down in your mind-map.
- c) Generally, what is your impression of this poem? Does it conform to or go against your impressions of what poetry is?

Develop the skills

Read the poem to the right, written in 1934.

- 3 a) Take a look at those classic features of poetry listed in the table on the previous page. Do any of those apply to this text?
- b) Do you think this is a poem? Why or why not?
- c) What makes Williams's text different from Shakespeare's?
- d) Write two to three sentences summarising this text. What is it 'about'?
- e) What makes 'This Is Just To Say' different in terms of form and organisation from just a note left on the kitchen counter?

Apply the skills

It may seem surprising but 'This Is Just To Say' is one of the most famous American poems of the 20th century. Williams was known for challenging ideas of classic poetry and sought to write poems about everyday life.

- 4 Reread 'This Is Just To Say'.
 - a) Circle or highlight the key adjectives in the last stanza. What **ideas** or **images** do they bring to mind?
 - b) Consider the phrase 'Forgive me' in the last stanza. Who is the speaker addressing here? Does the speaker *really* sound sorry? If the speaker was *really* sorry, what might they have said instead?
 - c) Why do you think the poet repeats the word 'so'? What effect does it have on the reader and on understanding the poem? Does it strike an apologetic **tone** or a triumphant **tone**?
- 5 Write a paragraph summarising your conclusions about 'This Is Just To Say'. How do the themes and ideas behind it make it a poem? Consider:
 - how the language used makes it a poem
 - how the structure and form make it a poem.

This Is Just To Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

William Carlos Williams

Check your progress:

- ▲ I can understand and identify features of poetry.
- ▲ I can clearly explain and analyse how a writer uses features of poetry to create meaning.

Exploring themes and ideas

What is poetry 'about'?

Start thinking

When reading a poem, one of the first things you should do is think: 'What is this poem about? What **themes, ideas or feelings** are being expressed here?' Poems can tackle any number of subjects: from love and hate, to life and death... even, to fruit in a fridge!

Looking at how themes, ideas or feelings are developed through a poem will give you a valuable sense of overview that can earn you high marks.

Often, the title of a poem is the first step towards understanding a poem's themes and ideas.

- 1 You are going to read a poem called 'When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer'.

Before you read the poem, think about what the title might tell you and what it might lead you to expect.

'When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer'

- a) Who might be the speaker in the poem? What might their attitude be to the 'Astronomer'?
- b) What does the term 'Learn'd' tell you? Is it in everyday usage?
- c) What sort of occasion do you imagine might be described?
- d) What sort of themes or ideas might this poem be about?

Explore the skills

Now read the poem, focusing your first reading on simply understanding what the poem is about and what ideas are introduced.

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
 When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
 When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
 Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Walt Whitman

- 2 How does the poem meet your expectations suggested by the title? What differences did you find with what you expected?

In this poem, the poet develops the themes of space and science. However, you need to say more than this when you outline a theme.

For example, you could say:

The poem explores the relationship of humanity to the stars, and whether you understand space better by measuring and making charts, or simply by observing and feeling part of a mystical universe.

- 3 What other themes can you identify in the poem?

As you look more closely at the poet's language and technique, you will see how the theme develops. Writers will often build a **semantic field** of associated words to develop a theme throughout a text.

- 4 Complete the table below to catalogue words in the poem that fit each semantic field.

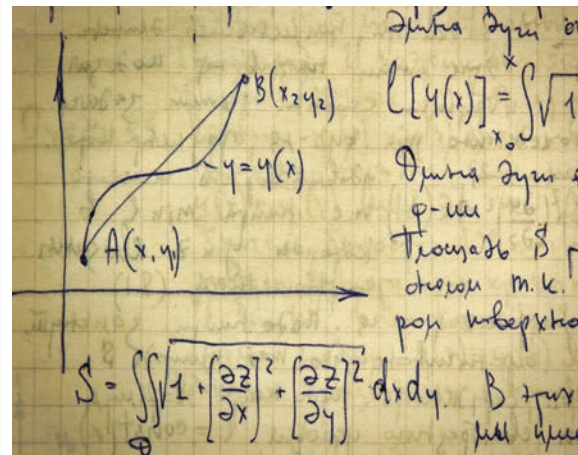
Maths, science and learning	Individual experiences, feelings, perceptions
'Learn'd'	'unaccountable'
'astronomer'	'tired and sick'

Key term

semantic field: a set of words or phrases that can be grouped by their meaning, linked to a particular subject, for example, 'battle', 'helmet', 'gun', 'enemy' are from the semantic field of war

Read this example of how the associated words from the semantic field of maths, science and learning build your understanding of the theme of humanity's relationship to the stars.

The poem opens with the speaker sitting in a lecture theatre listening to the learn'd astronomer as he lectures. The poet creates the speaker's experience of the precise, measured, orderly world of the expert through a listing of terms from the semantic field of maths, science and learning. He is shown 'proofs', 'figures... ranged in columns' and 'charts and diagrams to add, divide and measure them'. This suggests that the learn'd astronomer is very certain of his way of understanding the stars.



- 5 Now write a few sentences about the effect of the poet's use of the semantic field of individual experiences, feelings and perceptions.

Develop the skills

A theme will also be developed and explored through a range of poetic techniques.

- 6 Read the poem again, this time aloud, highlighting the following poetic techniques and making notes about how they affect the reader (what they make you think, feel or imagine).
- repetition of sentence starts (**anaphora**) in the first four lines
 - the effect of using a single sentence and how it develops, is punctuated and runs on (enjambment) later in the poem
 - the use of the passive voice and its effect in the first lines of the poem ('When I was shown...') compared with the active voice 'I wandered off' later in the poem
 - imagery, sounds and sensations.

For example:

The use of the passive voice in the lines, 'the figures, were ranged before me./When I was shown the charts', makes the reader experience the speaker's lack of engagement and sense of bombardment.

Key term

anaphora: the deliberate repetition of the first part of a sentence for effect

- 7 How does the language you identified relate to the poem's themes?
- 8 Consider the poem's final lines. What do you think they mean? How is the idea of learning different from the experience of learning presented earlier in the poem?

Extend your notes to include how you think the techniques develop your understanding of key **themes**.

Apply the skills

Read these two opening sentences, addressing the question 'How does Whitman present the theme of learning?'

Response A

He finds learning boring because he is told things in a boring, stuffy way. He's not interested.

Response B

The poet presents the theme of learning by introducing and developing the contrasting themes of active learning versus passive learning, suggesting in the poem his clear preference for the former.

Response A lacks specificity, direct links to the question and a comprehensive view of the poem. How does Response B improve on the first?

- 9 Using Response B above as a model, write a paragraph explaining how Whitman develops the key theme of science and/or passive learning in the first half of the poem.
- 10 Write another paragraph explaining how Whitman develops his theme in the second half of the poem towards the idea of mysticism and experiential learning.

Check your progress:

- ▲ I can understand some of the ways thoughts, feelings and ideas are portrayed and start to explore meaning.
- ▲ I can confidently analyse how thoughts, feelings and ideas are portrayed and explore deeper implicit meanings with sensitivity.

Exploring language

Why do poets use the language they do?

Start thinking

The word 'home' is a loaded word; that is, it is full of meaning and **connotations** that go beyond its dictionary definition. Just think about this: what's the difference between a house and a home?

When this teacher thought of home once – a lovely little city in the southern US called Charleston – these words sprung to mind.

Key term

connotations: suggested meanings or associated ideas

Where I come from
 The sunset hangs like a
 Pomegranate, ruby-red,
 In the starry-leaved sky.
 It soon ripens to an alabaster peach
 Pavilioned above the city's spires,
 Sharp and shadowed, swallowed up
 By the adjacent blackened harbour,
 The water slick and smooth to your caresses
 On a sultry summer's night.



- 1 a) When you think of home, what do you think of? Make a list of features, feelings and images.
- b) Now write your own poem about your hometown. Write at least 12 lines and use as many different poetic techniques as you can. It need not be flattering to your hometown.

Explore the skills

Poets choose their language with great care and, as attentive and perceptive readers, we need to be extremely sensitive to the meanings each word may carry or suggest.

Word choice – denotation and connotation

When considering word choice in a poem, start with the word's **denotation** (that is, its literal meaning or dictionary definition), then think about its associative **connotations**.

Consider the word 'fist'. A 'fist' **denotes** a hand tightened into a ball. However, it **connotes** ideas of violence, aggression and animosity. Are there any additional **connotations** you can think of linked with a 'fist'?

Language techniques

Authors choose their words carefully, but they develop their meaning by using a range of language techniques.

- 2** Match each language technique in the left-hand column with an appropriate example on the right.

Technique	Example
1. imagery	a. The sky <i>brooded</i> in dark-grey clouds, and <i>sighed</i> a heavy wind.
2. metaphor	b. <i>Alone together</i> , I kept myself away from myself.
3. simile	c. <i>pink-laced petals</i>
4. personification	d. <i>plumed, wispy orbs</i>
5. alliteration	e. The peony blooms <i>like feathery ash</i> .
6. consonance / assonance	f. If we never fail, we can never <i>succeed</i> .
7. opposition & contrast	g. <i>the starry-leaved sky</i>
8. oxymoron	h. the <i>brittle rattle</i> of <i>sleepless dreams</i>

- 3** Read through the examples below, which use a 'fist' as a subject.

- **imagery and alliteration:** The hard, flinty fist shook in anger.
 - **metaphor:** The fist – a hard, flinty rock – shook in anger.
 - **simile:** The hard, flinty, rock-like fist shook in anger.
- a) What impression do the adjectives 'hard' and 'flinty' add to the image of the 'fist'?
- b) How does the /f/ alliteration of 'flinty' and 'fist' add to the harsh image of the 'fist'?

- c) Which image of the fist do you prefer: the metaphor or the simile? Why? How are they similar? How are they different?
- d) How do these techniques develop further the connotations of a fist? Do they emphasise or change them in any way?



Develop the skills

Read the poem below.

The Fist

The **fist** clenched round my heart

loosens a little, and I gasp

brightness; but it tightens

again. When have I ever **not loved**

the **pain of love**? But this has moved

past love to mania. This has the strong

clench of the madman, this is

gripping the ledge of unreason, before

plunging howling into the abyss.

Hold hard then, heart. This way at least you live.

Derek Walcott

'fist' used here as a metaphor; suggests violence and tension

alliteration of //; mimics the release of tension around the heart; the 'fist' is relaxing – perhaps falling out of love?

'pain of love' = contrast / opposition. Usually love thought to be pleasant and joyful, not painful; narrator loves not love, but the pain it brings – why?

- 4 Reread the poem, this time aloud. What other words does the poet use to develop the denotations and connotations of 'fist' throughout the poem?
- 5 Read the annotations of the first stanza, then continue to read and annotate the word choices and language techniques you notice in the second stanza.
- 6 Now work closely on the poem to answer these questions:
 - a) How does the short, enjambed sentence, 'but it tightens / again' add tension to the first stanza?
 - b) The poet also develops a **semantic field** of insanity in the move from the first to the second stanza. What language demonstrates this theme?
 - c) Look up the word 'abyss'. What does it mean? How does it develop the ideas of violence or insanity set up earlier in the poem?

- 7 a) The entire poem is a **metaphor** – one object has been substituted for another. What is the ‘fist’ a metaphor for?
- b) What do you think the **images** of a fist and insanity have to do with love?
- 8 Read the poem again. What do you think the final line means? How does it relate to the connotations of a ‘fist’?

Apply the skills

Read the response below, which analyses how key techniques develop meaning and themes.

In the poem ‘The Fist’, the poet uses the metaphor of a fist to describe his feelings of being in love. The noun ‘fist’ has connotations of tension and aggression, which the poet introduces when he writes ‘The fist clenched around my heart’. Here, the poet compares the feelings of being in love to the violent act of a fist holding and squeezing his heart – the organ most associated with love. Initially this strikes the reader as a negative, sad, even depressing image; in fact, we feel a sense of relief when the grip ‘loosens a little’, the alliterative // sound mimicking the ‘loosening’ of tension here. However, we soon learn that the narrator ‘loved / the pain of love.’ The contradictory feelings of ‘pain’ and ‘love’ create an interesting irony here – the poet actually enjoys the aggressive ups and downs of falling and being in love. In the first stanza at least, the metaphor of a fist is used to represent the intense, forceful, even painful emotions that being in love makes him feel.

- 9 a) What key theme does this response focus on?
- b) What language techniques does this response identify?
- c) What does the response say about how each technique affects the reader?
- 10 Using the model above, write a second paragraph, which explains how the poet uses language techniques, such as semantic fields, imagery and metaphors, to develop the theme of love in the second and third stanzas.

Check your progress:

▲ I can identify the effect of language techniques and understand how they connect to the poet’s ideas.

▲ I can convincingly analyse the effects of language techniques and show a sophisticated understanding of how they create meaning.

Exploring form, sound, rhyme and rhythm

How do form and sound affect meaning?

Start thinking

The American Modernist poet Wallace Stevens wrote that:

'poetry is words; and that words, above everything else, are, in poetry, sounds.'

For Stevens, the *sound* of words in poetry was vital to understanding the *meaning* of the poem.

- 1 The following techniques focus mainly on the sound words create. Match each term with its appropriate definition.

Technique	Definition
alliteration	a. words that imitate or reflect sounds
consonance / assonance	b. repetition of the /s/ sound
sibilance	c. when words near each other begin with the same letter
onomatopoeia	d. the repetition of consonant / vowel sounds to create internal rhyme within phrases or sentences

- 2 Now, match the technique with an appropriate example.

Technique	Example
alliteration	a. The soft, sullen seas slowly churn.
consonance / assonance	b. The chirps and twits of goldfinches ring through the air.
sibilance	c. The dark night drew nigh.
onomatopoeia	d. The rustling curtain swirled, then came still.

Explore the skills

Sound – particularly techniques such as alliteration, assonance, sibilance and onomatopoeia – is vital to creating a rhythm or soundscape that helps the reader identify the themes, **tone** or **atmosphere** of the poem.



Key terms

tone: the voice, attitude or feeling created by the writer's language choices

atmosphere: the mood of a text

form: the type of poem, which may follow rules about a set number of lines, a set rhyme scheme, and a set metre or rhythm for each line

However, the sound of words isn't the *only* way rhythm is created. Often, the **form** in which a poet decides to set the poem greatly affects word choice and rhyme – and thus, meaning.

Key term

non-metrical: without a regular rhythm

- 3 Below are some key poetic forms. Match the form with an explanation of its specific features.

Poetic form	Definition
sonnet	a. a poem in which an imagined speaker addresses a silent listener
free verse	b. a six-line stanza, or the final six lines of a 14-line sonnet
dramatic monologue	c. a rhyming four-line stanza
quatrain	d. a 14-line poem, with a variable rhyme scheme, and which 'turns' in terms of tone, usually after the first eight lines
sestet	e. an eight-line stanza, or the first eight lines of a 14-line sonnet
ballad	f. non-metrical (1), non-rhyming lines that closely follow the natural rhythms of speech
octave	g. a popular narrative song passed down orally. It usually follows a form of rhymed (abcb) quatrains alternating four-stress and three-stress lines

- 4 Read through the three excerpts from poems below. Which is:
- a dramatic monologue: a poem that seems to be talking to someone else
 - a ballad: a poem that seems to begin telling a story
 - free verse: a poem that sounds like everyday speech?

This is a lifeskill, and I will learn
to go back to sleep without crying.
It is normal to find myself alone
at night. It is normal to call out
and for no one to come. I will adjust.

Sian Hughes, from 'Sleep Training'

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.
You turn your face, but does it bring your
heart?

Robert Browning, from 'Andrea Del Sarto'

"But they are dead; those two are dead!
Their spirits are in heaven!"
'Twas throwing words away; for still
The little Maid would have her will,
And said, "Nay, we are seven!"

William Wordsworth, from 'We are Seven'

Develop the skills

Students responding to poetry often identify key features of poetic form or a rhyme scheme, without explaining the relevance of those elements to the meaning of the poem. Whenever you're discussing poetic form or rhyme, you must demonstrate *why* it is relevant and *how* it is relevant.

- 5 Which of the responses below better develops *how* and *why* the poetic form is relevant?

A

The poem 'We are Seven' by Wordsworth is a ballad. It describes a conversation between the narrator and a little girl, 'the little maid', about death. She insists that she has seven siblings even though two of these are dead: 'And said, "Nay, we are seven!"'. This story makes the reader feel sad for the tragic loss, but happy that the girl gets on with her life. Moreover, the fact that the poet writes this as a ballad shows that he's creating a specific rhyme scheme – ABBA. This makes the poem flow better and helps the situation make sense.

B

In the opening lines to 'Andrea Del Sarto', the poet introduces the idea of a lover's 'quarrel' between the narrator and his wife, 'Lucrezia'. The poet writes the poem as a dramatic monologue, whereby the narrator speaks directly to us. His use of direct address and the second-personal pronoun 'you' places the reader directly into the poem; in essence, we become Lucrezia, sitting down to listen to the narrator wax on about his career. This immediately draws our sympathies to the narrator, who, as is common in Browning's poems, may not necessarily deserve them. For example, his use of imperatives – 'bear with me for once' and 'Sit down' – suggests a tone of control in his voice which is belied by the calm and colloquial nature of his language.

- 6 Reread the excerpt from 'Sleep Training'. This poem is in **free verse**. Using the following notes, write a paragraph like the better response above, explaining how the form informs meaning.

- **What's it about?** The 'sleep training' of the title is a technique used with babies who cry a lot in the night. The idea is that, by ignoring their screams, parents train their child to get themselves back to sleep without help. This poem seems to be spoken by a person who is suffering and cannot sleep, but who is determined to train herself to sleep again. Is the speaker an adult or a child?
- **Form:** free verse, following the patterns of natural speech. This makes the expression of the poem feel more personal.
- **Techniques:**
 - Lines of verse **run on** – look and see where this happens and which words are emphasised. How does this affect meaning?
 - **Repetition:** find examples of words or phrases that are repeated. What tone of voice or feeling is created through the repetition?

Apply the skills

Now practise those skills with another poem, one with a conventional form. Read the poem below.

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning; but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.

Thus in winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Edna St. Vincent Millay



- 7 a) What do you think the poem is about? What does it describe?
b) What **form** does this poem take? How do you know?
c) Identify and annotate the rhyme scheme. Where do you see a big change in the scheme? How might that change be relevant to **meaning as it** develops in the poem?
d) What is the poem's **tone** and **theme(s)**?
e) Identify and annotate key techniques including **metaphors, similes, imagery, alliteration** and **sibilance**. How do these techniques help inform the meaning?

- 8 Write a paragraph addressing this question:

How does the poet portray the loss and loneliness of the narrator?

Make reference to the poetic **form** as a means of understanding the theme of loneliness.

Check your progress:

▲ I can identify aspects of form, sound, rhyme and rhythm and explain their effects.

▲ I can sensitively analyse aspects of form, sound, rhyme and rhythm and confidently link them to key meaning.

Exploring structure in poetry

How does structure inform meaning?

Start thinking

Read the poem on the right aloud.

Even if you can't read it aloud, can you still *read* it? What does it say?

- 1 Write the poem out so that you can read it normally. How does this change its impact?

Explore the skills

The poem by e. e. cummings is an extreme example of how structure affects meaning. The way cummings has organised the poem quite literally makes it unreadable. However, that presentation – and even that inability to read to it – creates meaning.

- 2 The key theme is isolation and loneliness. But how does the poet express this idea?
 - a) What key **image** does cummings employ?
 - b) How does the poet use **enjambment** to emphasise these themes?
 - c) What number does the structure of the poem resemble? Why might that be important to the poem?
 - d) How does the inability to read the poem aloud reflect the key ideas within the poem?

Develop the skills

- 3 Look at these two responses on cummings's poem. Which do you think employs the term enjambment to the greatest effect? How and why do they do this?

A

In 'l(a', the poet uses enjambment after the close parenthesis – 's) / one' – in order to develop the theme of isolation. In doing so, the poet places prominence on the word 'one' within the larger word 'loneliness'. Here, 'one' emphasises the dramatic and intense sense of loneliness the narrator feels.

B

In 'l(a', the poet uses enjambment when he goes from one line to another while still in the same sentence. He does this throughout the entire poem, breaking up one word into different parts. This creates a sense of separation, which suggests he is apart from things. This affects the reader because we feel sad for him.

l(a
le
af
fa
ll
s)
one
l
iness
e. e. cummings



Key term

enjambment: the continuation of a sentence without a pause beyond the end of a letter, word, line, couplet or stanza

Read the poem below.

Quickdraw

I wear the two, the mobile and the landline phones,
like guns, slung from the pockets on my hips. I'm all
alone. You ring, quickdraw, your voice a pellet
in my ear, and hear me groan.

You've wounded me.

Next time, you speak after the tone. I twirl the phone,
then squeeze the trigger of my tongue, wide of the mark.

You choose your spot, then blast me

through the heart.

And this is love, high noon, calamity, hard liquor
in the old Last Chance saloon. I show the mobile
to the sheriff; in my boot, another one's

concealed. You text them both at once. I reel.

Down on my knees, I fumble for the phone,
read the silver bullets of your kiss. Take this ...
and this ... and this ... and this ...

Carol Ann Duffy

caesura

enjambment

- 4 What are the key themes developed in this text?
- 5 Notice where Duffy uses enjambment. How does the poet use each instance to create tension? How does this contribute to the meaning of the poem?
- 6 Notice where the author uses caesuras. What effect does this have on how you read the poem?
- 7 What is happening in the closing lines?

Apply the skills

- 8 Now write a paragraph on the use of caesura in 'Quickdraw', using one or two examples.

Key term

caesura: a pause at or near the middle of a poetic line

Check your progress:

▲ I can identify key features of structure and I understand how they can create meaning.

▲ I can confidently analyse how structural features create meaning.

Exploring setting in poetry

What is the importance of setting within a poem?

Start thinking

Places often inspire poets, either because they believe the place tells a unique story or because the beauty or significance of the place captures their imagination.

- 1 Which of these famous places that form the setting and subject of a poem do you recognise?



- 2 a) Can you think of a place that particularly inspired or moved you? Where was it and why did it inspire you?
- b) Write a short description (about 50 words) of that place – the sights you saw, the sounds you heard, the emotions you felt. What language – or even literary techniques – have you used to convey the emotional impact of that place?

Explore the skills

Setting can be concerned with time, place and **mood**. In poetry, the setting is often important to the way a poet introduces and develops key themes and ideas.

In many cases, the setting of a poem is the subject of the poem – that is, it is what the poem is about. However, poets often use setting metaphorically to introduce more complex ideas. In this sense, as a reader, you want to be aware of the ways in which poets may use setting to move from the concrete or **literal**, to the **metaphorical** or perhaps even symbolic.

Read the following poem written in 1803, and set on Westminster Bridge in London, near the Houses of Parliament.

Key terms

mood: the feeling or atmosphere of a piece of writing

literal: the usual, basic meaning of a word or image

metaphorical: symbolic or figurative meaning of a word or image

Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
 Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
 A sight so touching in its majesty:
 This City now doth, like a garment, wear
 The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
 Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
 Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
 All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
 Never did sun more beautifully steep
 In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
 Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
 The river glideth at his own sweet will:
 Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
 And all that mighty heart is lying still!

William Wordsworth



- 3** What is the initial mood of the setting? Is it calm, peaceful, chaotic or hectic? Pick out words, phrases or images that give you this impression.
- 4** a) Wordsworth was a poet who loved nature and the rural countryside. However, in this poem he is in the middle of a major city. What emotions and thoughts are produced by this particular setting?
- b) What language does he use to celebrate the city environment?
- c) What about the rural environment?
- d) Why do you think this city environment was so moving?
- 5** What techniques does the poet use to show his appreciation of the setting? What effect do these techniques have on the reader and your understanding of what the poem is about? Complete the table below.

Language / Image	Technique	Effect on the reader
'All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.'	imagery, adjectives	suggests a clean, pristine environment (ironic as it's a large city?)
'A sight so touching in its majesty'		suggests a sense of grandeur & magnificence
'The river glideth at his own sweet will'	personification	
'This City now doth, like a garment, wear / The beauty of the morning'		

Develop the skills

Read the following poem written in 1899 at a time of great change and industrialisation in Britain.

The Darkling Thrush

I leant upon a coppice gate

When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate

The weakening eye of day.

The tangled bine-stems scored the sky

Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted nigh
Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be

The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
The wind his death-lament.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth

Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among

The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
Of joy illimited;

An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,

In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings

Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,

That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

Thomas Hardy

a) The poet uses personification here. What effect might this have on how the reader sees the landscape?

b) What do you notice about the imagery highlighted in grey?

c) The landscape here symbolises the century that has passed. What might the symbolism express?

d) What does the metaphor of the 'germ' or seed represent for the future?

Glossary

fervourless: passionless, without strong feeling

illimited: infinite, without limit



- 6 What is the setting? Think about the time of day, the season, the weather and what can be seen.
- 7 What mood is created in the first two stanzas? Answer questions a)–d) annotated on the first two stanzas of the poem.
- 8 a) How does the mood change in the third and fourth stanzas?
b) How is the thrush and its song described?
c) What might be the significance of the beautiful song coming from the ageing bird in the gloomy landscape?
- 9 What might the ending of the poem suggest about hope?

Apply the skills

- 10 Which response below do you think more adequately addresses the effects of the setting on the poem 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge'? Explain why.

A

Wordsworth vividly conveys the setting in 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge' by comparing an urban landscape with a rural one. For example, the 'Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie / Open unto the fields, and to the sky.' Here, Wordsworth creates an image where the cityscape setting transitions seamlessly into the surrounding landscape, suggesting their equivalence in terms of beauty and inspiration; the fact that the city opens 'to the sky' moreover suggests to the reader that the city is a place of transcendence, or divine perfection.

B

Wordsworth shows that the city and nature are the same. Wordsworth loved nature and thought it more important, but here, he is in the city and says the city is just as good as nature. We see that the nature around the city is important, but so is the city itself. This proves then that Wordsworth thought the city setting as important as the natural setting.

- 13 Using the better example as a model, write a paragraph about the setting in 'The Darkling Thrush', and how it is used to represent the poet's thoughts and feelings.

Checklist for success

Make sure you include:

- ✓ key techniques you can identify
- ✓ effects on the reader.

Check your progress:

▲ I can understand the way a writer uses language to convey setting and show some understanding of implicit information, making reference to the text.

▲ I can very clearly understand the different ways a writer uses language to convey setting, including implicit information. I can include a range of well-selected references to the text and thoughtfully develop my response in detail.

Viewpoint and perspective

In what ways does viewpoint influence meaning?

Start thinking

Just as poets agonise over language choices, they also very carefully choose the **perspective** or **viewpoint** from which a poem is narrated.

- 1 In the table below, match each viewpoint with an appropriate example:

Viewpoint	Example
1. first person perspective: told from the point of view of 'I', 'me', 'we' and 'us'	a. You must change your life'
2. second person perspective: told from the point of view of 'you' and 'your'	b. 'It is an ancient mariner, / And he stoppeth one of three'
3. third person perspective: told from the point of view of 'he/she', 'they' and 'them'	c. 'I wondered lonely as a cloud'

Explore the skills

The speaker and narrative perspective the poet chooses will be crucial to understanding key **themes** introduced and developed throughout the poem.

Read the opening stanzas from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'. In this opening, the **third person speaker** tells the reader about an old sailor who stops a happy wedding guest ('one of three'), bewitches him with a crazed stare, and begins telling him a fantastical story. In this story he kills an albatross, whereupon his ship then gets lost at sea; his crewmates die, turn into ghosts and disappear; his ship sinks and he's rescued; and he becomes cursed to tell his tale throughout the lands forever as penance for his unprovoked crime against nature.



It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?

The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din.'

He holds him with his skinny hand,
'There was a ship,' quoth he.
'Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!'
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.

He holds him with his glittering eye—
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years' child:
The Mariner hath his will.

The Wedding-Guest sat on a stone:
He cannot choose but hear;
And thus spake on that ancient man,
The bright-eyed Mariner.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, from 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

Here, you hear the wedding guest speaking to the Ancient Mariner, having been grabbed by him. What does the wedding guest say to the old man?

What is the Ancient Mariner saying here? Does he take any notice of what the wedding guest says to him? Why or why not?

The wedding guest is speaking again. What impression of the Ancient Mariner does he have here?

How has the wedding guest's attitude towards the Ancient Mariner changed by this point?

What does this line suggest about the wedding guest? Is he able to resist listening to the Ancient Mariner's story? Why or why not?

2 This poem is told by a third-person, **omniscient** – or all-knowing and seeing – speaker. Rewrite this episode in a prose paragraph or a rhymed/unrhymed poem from the first person perspective of the wedding guest. Consider:

- What is your speaker doing just before meeting the Ancient Mariner?
- What does the Ancient Mariner look like to your speaker?
- How does your speaker react to the Mariner?

Make sure you use details from the original poem in your reconstructed perspective.

3 How has the altered perspective changed your understanding of the story?

Glossary

Eftsoons: soon afterwards

Develop the skills

Read the excerpts from the poems below.

The Chimney Sweeper (*Songs of Innocence*)

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry “weep! ‘weep! ‘weep! ‘weep!”
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There’s little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb’s back, was shaved, so I
said,

“Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your
head’s bare,

You know that the soot cannot spoil your white
hair.”

And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins & set them all free;
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they
run,

And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he’d be a good boy,
He’d have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy
& warm;

So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

William Blake

The Chimney Sweeper (*Songs of Experience*)

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying “weep! ‘weep!” in notes of woe!
“Where are thy father and mother? Say!”
“They are both gone up to the church to
pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil’d among the winter’s snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.

And because I am happy and dance and
sing,

They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his
Priest and King,

Who make up a heaven of our misery.”

William Blake



In these two poems, the first written in 1789 and the second in 1794, Blake uses the same poetic subject, but uses a slightly different perspective.

- 4 Which poem starts in a first person perspective and then 'switches' to third person, and which one starts in third person, but then 'switches' to first person?
- 5 Reread the 'The Chimney Sweeper' (*Innocence*). What do you learn about the speaker in the first stanza?
- 6 Reread the 'The Chimney Sweeper' (*Experience*). What do you learn about the speaker in this poem?
- 7 How are the two speakers different? How are they similar?

In Blake's day, children were often used for dirty and dangerous jobs such as chimney sweeping; this appalled Blake. As a result, he often used his poetry to give a voice to vulnerable people who were exploited by those in power.

- 8 What effect does the first person perspective in these poems have on you, as a reader? Why do you think Blake uses a third person perspective in *Experience*? Who do you think is talking to the young boy and listening to his story?

Apply the skills

- 9 In the following response, the writer notes that Blake's use of perspective in the two 'Chimney Sweeper' poems:

allows the reader to see the dire situation of child chimney sweepers from both the child's point of view as well as the concerned adult on the street.

Do you agree with this assessment? Write a paragraph, with reference to key quotations, explaining why or why not.

Check your progress:

▲ I can identify viewpoint in poetry and make inferences about its impact in a poem.

▲ I can confidently explore the effect of viewpoint and perspective in a poem.

Exploring speaker, voice and character in poetry

Who's speaking in a poem and why does it matter?

Start thinking

Read the poem below.

I'm nobody! Who are you?
 I'm nobody! Who are you?
 Are you – Nobody – too?
 Then there's a pair of us?
 Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!
 How dreary – to be – Somebody!
 How public – like a Frog –
 To tell one's name – the livelong June –
 To an admiring Bog!

Emily Dickinson



- 1 a) To whom is the **speaker** speaking in the poem?
- b) Who do you think 'they' are?
- c) Why do you think the speaker wants to be a 'Nobody'?
 What are the advantages? What are the disadvantages?

Explore the skills

Closely linked to perspective are the concepts of poetic voice, speaker and character.

Voice encompasses the speaker's **tone**, **diction** and rhythm. This should give you an impression of the speaker's character.

- 2 Which of the following adjectives would you use to describe the **character** of the speaker?

self-centred internal self-promoting isolated
 superficial private introverted extroverted

Key terms

speaker: the person in a poem who 'speaks' or describes the events

tone: the style and the opinions or ideas expressed in a piece of writing

diction: the speaker's style of expression and the wording or phrasing they use

- 3 Reread the poem aloud. Is the speaker being playful or serious? Which words or phrases suggest a playful tone? Which suggest a serious tone?
- 4 Consider the line: 'Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!'
 - a) Do the exclamations and hyphen emphasise the playfulness or the seriousness of the tone?
 - b) How does the hyphen change the rhythm of the phrase? If you take it away, does it change how you say the phrase – or how you interpret it?
- 5 How do you think the speaker voices the phrases 'Don't tell!' and 'you know!' Angrily? Flirtatiously? Quietly? Frantically?
- 6 Do you agree with this student who wrote that the speaker, 'rejects the idea of fame and notoriety, and enjoys her status as a "nobody", an invisible person'?
- 7 Write a paragraph explaining your impression of the speaker, of her voice and character and of what you think the speaker's intentions are in this poem.

Develop the skills

Below is another poem where **voice** is a key feature of the poem: Carol Ann Duffy's 'Mrs Faust'. First, read the summary of the story of Doctor Faust (sometimes Doctor Faustus).

Originally a German legend, the story of Dr Faust concerns a scholar who is successful, but largely dissatisfied with life. Using his interest in science and alchemy, Faust summons the Devil, and decides to sell his soul for unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures during his life. However, in the end, the Devil comes to collect his due and carries Faust down to Hell for all eternity.

In her poem, Duffy retells the well-known story of Dr Faust, but changes the perspective and the voice to tell the Faust story from Faust's wife's **point of view**.

- 8 Read the excerpt from the poem below, then answer the questions in the annotations.

Mrs Faust

First things first –
I married Faust.
We met as students,
shacked up, split up,
made up, hitched up,
got a mortgage on a house,

a) What impression of the speaker's character and of her relationship with Faust do you get at this point in the poem?

b) What impression of Faust does the speaker create by this point in the poem?

flourished academically,
 BA. MA. Ph.D. No kids.
 Two towed bathrobes. Hers. His.
 We worked. We saved.
 We moved again.
 Fast cars. A boat with sails.
 A second home in Wales.
 The latest toys –
 computers,
 mobile phones. Prospered.
 Moved again. Faust's face
 was clever, greedy, slightly mad.
 I was as bad.

I grew to love the lifestyle,
 not the life.
 He grew to love the kudos, not
 the wife.

[...]
 I felt, not jealousy,
 but the chronic irritation.
 I went to yoga, t'ai chi,
 Feng Shui, therapy, colonic
 irrigation.

[...]
 He wanted more.
 I came home late one winter's
 evening,
 hadn't eaten.
 Faust was upstairs in his study,
 in a meeting.

I smelled cigar smoke,
 hellish, oddly sexy, not allowed.
 I heard Faust and the other
 laugh aloud.

[...]
 As for me,
 I went my own sweet way,
 saw Rome in a day,
 spun gold from hay,
 had a facelift,

[...]
 went to China, Thailand, Africa,
 returned enlightened.
 Turned 40, celibate,
 teetotal, vegan,
 Buddhist, 41.
 Went blonde,
 redhead, brunette,
 went native, ape,
 berserk, bananas;
 went on the run, alone;
 went home.

[...]
 At this, I heard
 a serpent's hiss
 tasted evil, knew its smell,
 as scaly devil's hands
 poked up
 right through the terracotta
 Tuscan tiles
 at Faust's bare feet
 and dragged him, oddly
 smirking, there and then
 straight down to Hell.

Oh, well.
 Faust's will
 left everything –
 the yacht,
 the several houses,
 the Lear jet, the helipad,
 the loot, et cet, et cet,
 the lot –
 to me.

C'est la vie.
 [...]
 I keep Faust's secret still –

[...]
 [Faust] didn't have a soul to sell.

Carol Ann Duffy

c) By this point in the poem, does the speaker seem different from or similar to the character introduced in the opening of the poem?

d) By the end of the poem, what do you think Mrs Faust's opinion of Mr Faust is? Is she concerned with his fate? Why or why not?

- 9 What adjectives would you use to describe the speaker of the poem?

a. superficial b. considerate c. cynical
 d. loving e. doting f. manipulative
 g. indecisive h. vain i. selfless
 j. sincere k. materialistic l. unambitious

- 10 Following the example provided, use the table below to organise quotations around these key adjectival descriptions, as well as their effects.

Key adjectival description	Evidence	Effects
superficial	'Fast cars. A boat with sails. / A second home in Wales.'	Suggests to the reader that the speaker only likes luxurious, premier items.
cynical		
indecisive		She's had so many hairstyles and lifestyles – she's following fashionable 'trends' – that she's lost any true sense of self.
vain		

Apply the skills

- 11 Write a paragraph explaining why you think Duffy retells the Faust story from his wife's perspective.
- How is the story similar? How is it different?
 - What do you learn of Mrs Faust as a wife? As a person? As a narrator?

Check your progress:

- ▲ I can identify key features of voice and character and link them to meaning.
- ▲ I can confidently analyse how aspects of voice and character create tone and meaning.

Understanding context in poetry

What is context and how do I write about it?

Start thinking

- 1 Look at the picture below.



- a) What do you think is happening here?
- b) Why do you think Friedrich, the artist, painted it?
- c) What do you think it signifies, suggests or 'means'?

To many people looking at this painting, it probably 'means' nothing. It is just someone standing on a mountain looking at some clouds.

Often, to understand a piece of literature, just like a piece of art, we need **context** – that is, some background information that helps us understand how and why it was created.

Friedrich's 'Wanderer over a sea of fog' is considered a masterpiece of **Romanticism** – a style of art (in literature and painting alike) that values the role of the individual over society, the power of nature over technology, and the mystical influence of the imagination over the rational rules of science.

- 2 With that **context** in mind, consider these questions:
- Why does the painting's subject have his back turned to us? Why is he in such a beautiful, but remote environment? What might his standing over the fog represent?
 - How does this contextual information help you appreciate this painting better?

Key term

context: background to a text that aids in understanding the text

Explore the skills

Cultural information can help you make sense of a poem. Read the poem below.

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Gwendolyn Brooks



Brooks opens the poem here with an **epigraph** – information that prefaces the poem that is relevant to the poem's content. It provides some key context that helps the reader to understand the poem better.

'POOL PLAYERS' references the main subjects in the poem, a group of young men playing pool. 'SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL' lets the reader know that there are seven young men in this group, and that the name of the bar where they play pool is The Golden Shovel.

- 3
- Why is this contextualising information helpful to your understanding of the poem?
 - How does it help you understand the pool players' way of speaking, or dialect, in the poem?

Key term

epigraph: a short phrase at the beginning of a text that summarises the content or themes

- 4 a) Where do you see the number 'seven' play some importance in the poem?
- b) Where do you see language linked to pool playing?
- c) What impression of the young men do you get from this poem?
- d) Are they hard-working, studious types? Or are they irresponsible, cavalier rebellious types? What language suggests this?
- 5 The last lines of the poem – 'We / Die Soon.' may also read as an **epitaph** – that is, a memorial inscription often found on a grave or tombstone. How does Brooks' presentation of the language perhaps suggest this idea?

Key term

epitaph: a phrase written in memory of a person who has died

Develop the skills

- 6 Highlight and annotate instances of rhyme, alliteration and repetition. A student noted that these techniques give the poem a feeling of alternating dialogue, like people having a conversation. Do you agree?

Another piece of contextual information that might affect your understanding and response to the poem concerns the voice of the speaker(s). Phrases like 'We real cool' could be judged to be grammatically incorrect, with this reflecting negatively on the players. However, the missing verb from 'We real cool' (rather than 'We **are** real cool') is a feature of a language dialect spoken by some African-American communities.

- 7 a) How does this contextual information affect your response to the poem and its meaning?
- b) Do you think the poem might be suggesting that some African-Americans had limited opportunities due to a racist society?

Finally, this additional biographical and historical context might influence your understanding of the poem: Brooks, an African American, wrote this poem in 1960 when jazz was a popular form of music and the fight for civil rights for Black Americans was growing.

- 8 Can you hear the ways in which Brooks gives this poem a musical quality?
- 9 Given the ending of the poem, do you think Brooks is celebrating the young men's rebellion or is she mourning it? Why do you think this?

Apply the skills

While knowing about a writer's biographical information can be helpful, it can also hinder, limit or close down possible interpretations. Just like anything you write, you need to make sure that you put that information to useful purposes.

Read these two responses:

A

In 'We Real Cool', Brooks talks about some people playing pool and drinking 'Thin gin'. This is important because Brooks was an African-American poet writing during Civil Rights.

B

In 'We Real Cool', Brooks suggests that the 'Seven At The Golden Shovel' are poor teenagers who are wasting their lives. As an African-American poet writing during the struggle for Civil Rights, Brooks suggests we can see these seven as symbolic of the injustice towards poor black people at that time.

- 10 a) Which of these responses uses context to add to the understanding of the poem?
- b) Which response helps develop a key theme?

Check your progress:

- ▲ I can understand the meanings of literary texts and their contexts.
- ▲ I can explore texts confidently beyond surface meanings and selectively integrate contextual understanding.

Making different interpretations

How can poems be interpreted in different ways?

Start thinking

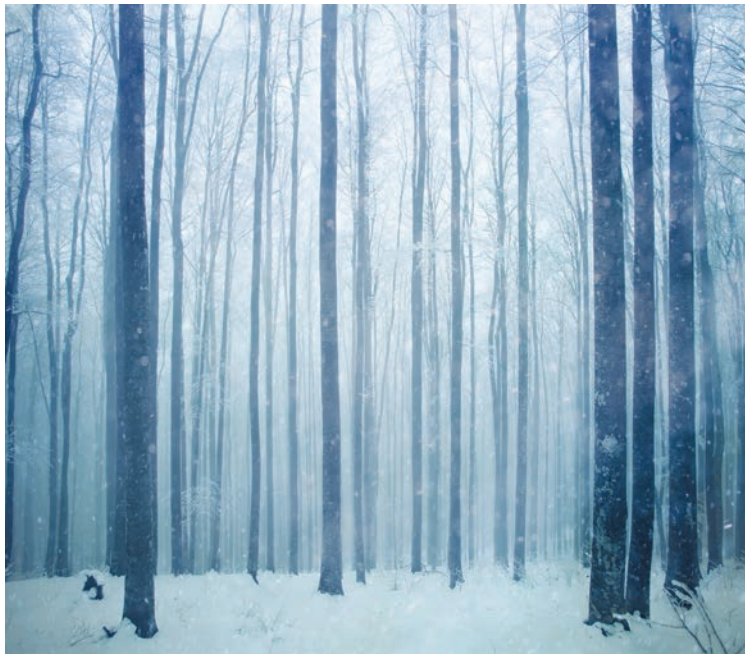
- 1 Consider the phrase 'Stopping by woods on a snowy evening'. Which of the following interpretations of this phrase could you agree with?
 - a) The person is stopping to warm up from the cold.
 - b) The person is stopping because they are tired.
 - c) The person is stopping to appreciate the natural environment.
 - d) The person is stopping to see if anyone is following them.
 - e) The person stopping is lonely.
 - f) The person stopping wants to enjoy the peace and quiet.
 - g) The person stops because they are contemplating their own mortality.
 - h) The person stops because they are very busy but want a brief rest.
 - i) The person is stopping because they have a flat tyre.
 - j) None of the above.
 - k) All of the above.
- 2 Why do some of these interpretations seem plausible – that is, more likely to be a valid interpretation – while others seem implausible?
- 3 Is it possible that two or more of these interpretations can be plausible at the same time? Why is that so?

Explore the skills

Read the poem below.

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening

Whose **woods these are I think I know**. A
 His house is in the village though; A
 He will not see me stopping here B
 To **watch his woods fill up with snow**. A
 My little horse **must think it queer** B
 To stop without a farmhouse near B
 Between **the woods and frozen lake** C
The darkest evening of the year. B
 He gives his harness bells a shake C
 To ask if there is some mistake. C
 The **only other sound's the sweep** D
Of easy wind and downy flake. C



The woods are lovely, dark and deep, D
 But I have promises to keep, D
 And miles to go before I sleep, D
 And miles to go before I sleep. D

Robert Frost

One popular interpretation of this poem is that it is simply about a weary traveller who decides to take a much-needed respite to enjoy the natural scenery.

- 4 How might the highlighted language choices support this interpretation? Using the example below, create mind-maps for these highlighted phrases to tease out connotations suggesting an appreciation for the surrounding natural scene.

*suggests familiarity,
that he's been here
before*

woods... I know

*suggests a safe
area, connected with
a friend or relative*

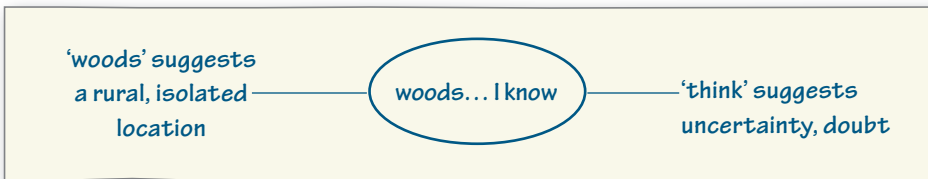
- 5 Which of the following adjectives do you think captures the **mood** of the poem, following this interpretation. Explain why.

a. gloomy b. reflective c. tranquil
d. sinister e. relaxing

- 6 The rhyme scheme of the poem has been annotated for you. Note how the rhyme scheme changes, and how the rhythm of the poem swings and sways. How does the rhyme and rhythm help create a peaceful and calming **mood** to the poem?
- 7 What **images** or other techniques does the poet use that would help you argue that this poem is about the loveliness of a natural scene?

Another popular interpretation of this poem is that it is not about appreciating nature but about death.

- 8 How might the highlighted language support this alternative interpretation? Using the example provided below, create mind-maps for these phrases to tease out connotations suggesting death.



- 9 Which of the following adjectives do you think captures the **mood** of the poem, following this interpretation? Explain why.

a. lonely b. reflective c. depressed
d. ominous e. relaxing

- 10 Note how the rhyme scheme changes, suggesting something's 'off', and how the rhythm swings and sways, perhaps like the speaker's thoughts. How might the **rhyme scheme** and **rhythm** of the poem support the idea that this poem is about death?
- 11 What **images** or other techniques does the poet use that would help you argue that this poem is about the death?
- 12 If this poem is about death, what do you make of the repetition of the final lines? What do they mean in this case?

Develop the skills

- 13 Read the following two responses, each of which begin analysing the poem a different way. For each, write the second paragraph, trying to follow a similar line of argument. Prompts have been provided for the first response to help guide you.

The poet introduces the key theme of natural appreciation in the first stanza. For example, the narrator says how he's 'stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow.' Here, the poet creates a peaceful and calm image of a person observing snow fall. The alliteration of the /w/ sound in 'watch' and 'woods' emphasises this by creating an equally peaceful and calm tone – the /w/ sound perhaps onomatopoeically mimicking the soft 'whoosh' of the snow falling. Moreover, the use of the verb 'stopping' suggests rest and repose, further highlighting the peaceful scene. The poet further develops this idea of natural appreciation when he writes '_____.'

- a) Choose another quotation that may link to this point about the appreciation of nature, for example, 'The woods are lovely, dark, and deep'.
- b) What key language or technique does Frost use in this quotation?
- c) What does this key language or technique mean, suggest and/or connote?
- d) What effect does this key language or technique have on the reader?

The poet introduces the key theme of death in the first stanza. For example, the narrator says how no one will 'see me stopping here' to 'watch [the] woods fill up with snow'. Here, the poet creates an image of isolation and loneliness: the narrator is alone in the forest without anyone nearby to witness his activities. Here, the verb 'stopping' suggests a cessation of activity, which introduces connotations of death; the narrator will be 'stopping' here for the rest of his life. The passivity of 'watching... woods fill up with snow' could be symbolic of time passing away. The snow collecting on the ground is like an hour glass counting down the final moments of his life.

The poet further develops this idea of death when he writes...

Apply the skills

Believe it or not, there is one further interpretation of this poem. While it's rather silly, it only serves to prove the point that if you have the evidence to support your argument, any sensible and reasonable interpretation can be valid.

- 14 Find evidence and write up to two paragraphs making the case that 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening' is actually about Father Christmas or Santa Claus.



Check your progress:

- ▲ I can understand that poems can be interpreted in different ways and I can find the necessary evidence to support my interpretation.
- ▲ I can confidently express a personal interpretation of a text, supported by very clear understanding and integrated, well-selected textual references.

Planning and writing a critical essay

How should I respond to a question on a poem I know well?

Understand the task

When you answer a question on a poem you have studied already, the first thing you should do is read the question carefully.

To start off, highlight or underline key words in the question, so you know specifically what you need to look for in the poem.

For example, look at one student's annotations of the following question:

Focus on authorial method; what techniques used?

Focus on characteristics; my opinion; how is the character portrayed? How is she portrayed in different ways?

How does Duffy convey vivid impressions of Mrs Faust in these lines?

'vivid' means clear, vibrant; focus on imagery, adjectives, similes & metaphors

Titular character; main character; focus must be on her as:

*protagonist – wife of Dr Faust;

*speaker – first person, female perspective
*voice/tone

1 Practise this 'engaged reading' with the following question.

How does Dharker powerfully portray the excitement of the people in these lines?

- a) Highlight or underline all the key words in the question.
- b) Annotate the question with ideas that help you understand what you need to do.
- c) List all the techniques you can think of which might be relevant as you read through the poem.

Gather your ideas and evidence

After you have read the question in Question 1, highlighted or underlined key words in the question, made any appropriate notes, *then* you should reread the poem with the question in mind.

Make annotations in the margins to record your thoughts and ideas on the poet's techniques, their effects and the meanings created that clearly link to the question.

2 Practise these skills on the poem below.

Blessing

The skin cracks like a pod.

There never is enough water.

Imagine the drip of it,
the small splash, echo
in a tin mug,
the voice of a kindly god.

Sometimes, the sudden rush
of fortune. The municipal pipe bursts,
silver crashes to the ground
and the flow has found
a roar of tongues. From the huts,
a congregation: every man woman
child for streets around
butts in, with pots,
brass, copper, aluminium,
plastic buckets,
frantic hands,

and naked children
screaming in the liquid sun,
their highlights polished to perfection,
flashing light,
as the blessing sings
over their small bones.

Imtiaz Dharker

intros idea of a lack of basic necessity; simile: lack of water creates problems – dry, painful skin pops – intros idea of drought, famine; image of people like dried-up, drying plants. Here, there is no excitement or joy – only despair and desperation – clearly contrasting with the excitement and joy that comes in the third and fourth stanzas



Plan your response

Drafting a quick plan helps you organise your ideas and provides a road map to develop your argument and analysis.

Generally, your response should consist of the following:

An **introduction** that:

- a) addresses the key terms expressed in the question
- b) links clearly to the poem's content
- c) potentially provides a brief summary of the poem's main points to demonstrate your understanding.

Three or so **main body** paragraphs that:

- a) develop key observations linked to the question
- b) make reference to a range of quotations and techniques used within the poem
- c) examine, explain and analyse *how* meaning is created through language and techniques.

A **conclusion** that:

- a) summarises your key observations and explains effects on the reader.

Try this with the following exam-style question:

How does Dharker powerfully portray the excitement of the people in these lines?

So, firstly, you need to track through the poem with the key terms of the question in mind:

- **the excitement** of the people – (what feature of the poem to focus on)
- **How...** powerfully portray – (poetic techniques and language that create the excitement).

Read the student's annotation of the opening lines. As the poem opens, you may notice at first the lack of excitement – indeed, the desperation and need that is clearly apparent – which contrasts with the joy which is so evident later on.

- 3 a) Now continue to annotate the poem, picking out details that relate to the idea of excitement and how the people feel.
 - b) Notice when and where there are changes in the levels or types of excitement.

You could track your observations using a table like this:

Key theme	Introduced: <i>first stanza</i>	Develops: <i>second stanza</i>	Develops further/ changes: <i>third stanza</i>
lack of joy, excitement / only dire need	'There is never enough water' = intros idea of a lack of a basic necessity; 'Skin cracks like a pod' = simile; lack of water creates problems – dry, painful skin pops – intros idea of drought, famine; a clear lack of joy and excitement	'Imagine drip of it' – people so desperate for water, they're constantly thinking about it; 'Imagine' also suggests illusion – the water's not real, such a lack they can only think about it	'sudden rush of fortune' – metaphor: water = fortune, wealth, money, gold; an unexpected flood of water – abrupt change from lack to abundance, from desperation to joy and excitement

- 4 For each observation, think about *how* the feeling is created through poetic techniques such as language, structure, form, sound, voice or perspective. Add comments to your annotations, or to your table.

The main body of your response should follow the focus of the question in relation to how it develops as you move through the poem, from beginning to end.

Write your response

- 5 Using that framework, write a response to the poem using any of the practice questions above.

Checklist for success

- ✓ Have you identified the key terms of the question?
- ✓ Have you tracked through or annotated the poem with the key terms in mind?
- ✓ Have you identified key language and techniques in the poem?
- ✓ Have you identified a range of key quotations that link to the question?
- ✓ Have you created mind-maps for that key language or those key techniques to help tease out meaning?
- ✓ Have you linked your observations to the focus of the question?

Evaluating your critical essay

How can I assess and improve my own work?

Your task

Read 'Blessing' by Imtiaz Dharker.
How does Dharker powerfully portray the excitement of the people in these lines?

Evaluating your work

Before you make an evaluation of how well you have done, check the table on page 186. It will help you decide if your work falls broadly into the first or second category – or outside them.

- 1 Go through your own response and, if possible, write your own brief annotations around it.
- 2 Now read the following response, thinking about what the writer of the response has done well and what advice they might need in order to make more progress.

The poet shows the excitement in many different ways. For example, the poet writes, 'the sudden rush of fortune.' Here, the poet uses language to suggest that the water coming is unexpected and this suggests excitement. 'Fortune' shows that they are lucky that this water has come. This makes me think that the people really needed water, that there was a drought, and that this water coming was almost like a life saver for them.

The author also writes that when the pipe bursts, 'silver crashes to the ground / and the flow has found / a roar of tongues.' This shows how valuable the water was; it was like 'silver'. 'Roar of tongues' suggests that the water was flowing very quickly, gushing and making a lot of noise. This suggests excitement because the water itself is making a lot of noise.

The people also show excitement with the water being available. They are 'frantic.' They all grab whatever they can to put the water in. This shows that they were so desperate,

key quotations

some response to language

understanding of the text and some deeper implications

key quotations

some response and development of language relevant response to the question

some use of key quotations

but also so excited for the water, that whatever was available they grabbed to collect and keep the water because they didn't know when they might get some more. This makes me think that, although they were lucky in this one instance, the water may not last. However, the excitement of this sudden moment makes them happy for once.

personal response

some understanding of the text

Comment:

A reasonably developed and relevant personal response

This is a reasonably developed and relevant personal response. The writer of the response demonstrates some thoroughness in their use of supporting evidence. They also make some response to how the poet uses language, but they don't really develop an analysis of all of the quotations used. The writer of the response also demonstrates an understanding of key ideas in the text, along with some deeper implications.

- 3 How could this sample response be improved? Using the table on page 186, think about what advice you might give the writer of the response to improve their work.
- 4 Now read a second response to the same question. As you read, think about what is an improvement on the first response.

The poet powerfully portrays the excitement caused by the pipe burst by introducing and developing the idea of miraculous events. The poem discusses how a 'municipal', or city-run, water pipe bursts, causing water to shoot up into the air and rush down the streets of a neighbourhood where people desperately need water. Dharker first introduces the idea of miracles in the title of the poem, 'Blessing'. 'Blessing' suggests an act of fortune from God – a gift from the divine as it were. Most times, people receive 'Blessings' in a time of great need, and this receipt causes a sense of euphoria in having been chosen for divine intervention. In this sense, 'Blessing' creates an inherent sense of coming joy, preparing the reader for the 'miraculous' appearance of the water at a time when they need it the most, as well as the excitement which follows.

critical understanding

We first see Dharker introduce the idea of miraculous intervention in the opening stanza when she writes,

'The skin cracks like a pod. / There never is enough water.'
The simile 'cracks like a pod' shows the arid environment in which the people live; the people are suffering due to a drought and are compared to plants to show how important water is to keeping them alive. The onomatopoeic 'crack' emphasises this suffering and dryness through the harsh and cutting /c/ sound, suggesting a painful, even deadly aridity in which the people's skin is becoming desiccated. There is little excitement in this stanza, but this is purposeful – Dharker wants to create a dusty, dry and deathly tone here in order to show just how sudden, amazing and miraculous the water is when it appears in the third stanza.

Moreover, in the second stanza, Dharker develops the idea of miracles when she writes, 'Imagine the drip of it' and 'the voice of a kindly god.' Here, the people are so desperate for water, that it is all they think about. 'Drip', 'splash' and 'echo' are other examples of onomatopoeia, sounds which are used to almost taunt and tantalise the people in their desperation. However, this second stanza also anticipates the coming 'rush of fortune' when Dharker writes, 'the voice of a kindly god.' Here, the poet uses a metaphor to compare water to divine speech, as if the water coming is God answering the people's prayers and responding to their desperation with this miraculous 'Blessing'. This anticipation creates a sense of coming excitement for the people and the reader alike; we too, as the readers, are waiting for and wanting this water to come almost as much as the people in the poem.

responds sensitively and in detail to how the writer creates effects

well-selected reference

personal and evaluative engagement

Comment:

This response sustains a personal and evaluative engagement with the task and the text. The writer of the response demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the poem and the techniques the poet uses, using literary methods to sustain a critical understanding of the poem with individuality and insight. They also respond with sensitivity when considering the poem's language. The recognition of key themes, tone, onomatopoeia, similes and metaphors demonstrates a thorough understanding of key techniques and how the author wields them to achieve her intended effects.

- 5 What advice might the writer of this response need to make even more progress? Use the table on page 186 to guide your ideas.

Extension: Developing an overview

How do I develop an overview and build an analysis in a poetry response?

Understand the task

This section focuses in detail on how to develop an overview and build your analysis, while working closely with the text.

One way to create a response that links your ideas together and connects them to the question, is by using **signposting** – that is, using language specific to the question and to your argument at the beginning and ending of your paragraphs.

- 1 Read the example **introductory** paragraph below on 'Mrs Faust', which begins to address the question:

How does the writer convincingly portray the character of Mrs Faust in the poem?

The writer convincingly portrays the character of Mrs Faust as materialistic, greedy and soulless. The poem retells the famous story of Dr Faust, a scientist who sells his soul to the Devil in order to obtain godlike knowledge and worldly possessions. However, Duffy chooses Faust's hypothetical wife as her narrator, and we see Faust's rise and fall from her unique perspective. Duffy shows the ways in which Mrs Faust's moral character is corrupted because of her marriage to Faust.

- a) Underline words in the introduction that reflect the language of the question.
- b) Circle words which you think constitute the main ideas of an argument.
- c) Double underline phrases which concisely summarise the plot of the poem.

- 2 Now read the ensuing first **body paragraph**. What language in this paragraph links back not only to the question, but also to the previous paragraph? Underline these words or phrases.

The poet introduces the idea of Mrs Faust being a materialistic, greedy and soulless character in the first stanza. For example, Duffy has the narrator say, 'I married Faust'. Here, the reader sees Mrs Faust as in control – she marries him, rather than the other way around. This is emphasised when the narrator refers to 'Two towelled bathrobes. Hers. His.' in that 'Her' bathrobe comes before the usual 'His'. This suggests her tendency to put herself first and get whatever she wants. Here, the poet demonstrates Mrs Faust's greedy nature by suggesting that she treats Faust almost as a possession himself – a trophy husband to show off with his 'PhD.'

Your **body paragraphs** should continue to build and link to ideas you introduced at the very opening of your response. Before you apply this approach to any poem, make sure you read and plan carefully to ensure that this approach will work to effectively address the question.

3 If you were carrying on from the paragraph above to write the second body paragraph to 'Mrs Faust', which would be the best paragraph opener?

a)

We also see Mrs Faust's character when she talks about going to 'yoga' and 't'ai chi' and see how she is only going to these activities because she 'loves the lifestyle' and doesn't have anything better to do with her life because she knows that her husband no longer loves her.

b)

Another key idea of the poem is that of good and evil.

c)

In the fourth stanza, the poet develops the idea of Mrs Faust's greedy and materialistic character when she writes, 'I went to yoga, t'ai chi, / Feng Shui, therapy, colonic irrigation.'

d)

Duffy also uses short sentences, caesuras and enjambment to create effects on the reader.

- 4 a) Why did you choose the sentence you did? How does that sentence connect with what came before?
- b) Why did you reject the other ones?

Writing a conclusion can add a great dynamic and sense of purpose to your response. To have a purposeful conclusion, you need to draw an overview, together with your own personal opinions about the poem's effectiveness.

Read the example below.

In conclusion, it's clear to me that Mrs Faust is an immoral, dishonest, and even wicked character. Duffy seems to use her to comment on the materialistic nature of modern society – of how people have come to value things and experiences over other people and even themselves. I think Duffy's portrayal of this idea is a powerful one because it shows how easily material possessions can take over your life. In this way, materialism is the Devil coming to take away your soul.

- 5 a) What broad or general idea has this response introduced to try to tie together the analysis? Highlight or circle key words which you think show this.
- b) Where do you see the response offering a personal opinion? Underline these instances.

Gather your ideas and evidence

Read the question and the poem on the following page, in which the poet deals with ideas and feelings concerning love, isolation and anxiety over the passage of time.

- 6 Annotate:
- a) where you think those ideas and feelings are conveyed
- b) how those thoughts and feelings are introduced, develop or change (if indeed they do develop or change) throughout the poem
- c) what key techniques you can identify.

How does the poet powerfully convey his thoughts and feelings in this poem?

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art

Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—
 Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,
 Like Nature's patient sleepless **Eremite**,
 The moving waters at their priestlike task
 Of pure **ablution** round earth's human shores,
 Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
 Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
 No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
 Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
 To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
 Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
 And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

John Keats



Glossary

Eremite: a Christian hermit or recluse

ablution: a ceremonial act of washing oneself

Plan your response

- 7 Use the table below to organise your own thoughts about 'Bright star!'.

Thoughts and feelings	Introduced:	Develops?	Develops further/changes?
anxiety over the passage of time			

Write your response

- 8 Using the framework below, write a response to the poem, addressing the question above. Use the sentence starters provided to help build your analysis as outlined in this section, if you need to.

Introductory paragraph

The poet powerfully conveys his ideas and feelings in this poem through the themes of love, isolation and the passage of time. The poem is about...

- Write the rest of the sentence summarising the poem in your own words.
- Close the introductory paragraph with a sentence which links back to the opening sentence, **highlighting** your key themes again and **signposting** the ideas you are to develop.

First body paragraph

The poet introduces ideas of love, isolation and time in the opening lines. For example, the poet writes...

Second body paragraph

The poet develops these ideas further near the middle of the poem, when he writes...

Third body paragraph

However, the poet changes the tone of his feelings nearer the end when he writes...

Conclusion

To conclude, I think that the poet is saying that love should be...

Evaluating your work

How can I assess and improve my own work?

Evaluating your response

Before you make an evaluation of how well you have done, check the table on page 186. It will help you decide if your work falls broadly into the first or second category – or outside them.

- 1 Go through your own response to the question you considered in Lesson 4.13, and write your own brief annotations around it.

How does the poet powerfully convey his thoughts and feelings in this poem?

- 2 Now read the following, thinking about what the writer of the response has done well and what advice they might need in order to make more progress.

The poet conveys his thoughts and feelings in a number of ways. Firstly, he compares himself to a 'Bright star'. 'Bright' suggests being shiny, and full of light, which could suggest the way he wants his love to be. By comparing himself to a 'Bright star', the poet wants to be noticed. We know this because in the third line, the poet writes 'Not in lone splendour'. This means that he doesn't want to be alone in his 'splendour' but wants to share it, just like he wants to share his emotions. The poet also says he doesn't want to be a 'Eremit', which is a Christian hermit. A hermit is someone who lives alone, and the poet uses this simile to show his fear of being alone. Therefore, here, the poet shows feelings of wanting his love to be noticed, but also fear of being alone.

This poem is a sonnet, which means it has 14 lines and a specific rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme for this poem is ABAB CDCD in the octave, and EFEF GG in the sestet. Sonnets are also usually about love, and a major theme of this poem is love.

some thoroughness in the use of supporting evidence

missed opportunity to comment on the effects of the rhyme scheme

We see this when the poet writes, 'pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast.' Here, the poet says he wants to rest his head on his lover's chest for all time, thereby being with them forever. Here, he feels his lover's breast's 'soft fall and swell', a key image showing how connected they are and how connected he wants them to be. This shows his emotions to be profound in that the poet loves this person so much that he wants to spend the rest of his life with them.

some response to the writer's use of language

However, the poet also introduces the idea of death at the end - 'or else swoon to death'. Here, the poet says that if he can't be 'steadfast' like a star - that is, to be around forever - then he at least wants to be with his love until he dies. It could also suggest, however, that if he can't be with her forever, then he would rather just be dead, because he can't live without his love. This shows how powerful his emotions are, as 'swoon' suggests passing out from extreme emotion. His love is so — powerful that it has the capacity to keep him alive, but it also has the ability to kill him. This is ironic as usually we think of love as a positive thing that most people want to live their life.

some understanding of the text and its deeper implications

personal response

Comment:

This is a reasonably developed and relevant personal response, although just. The writer demonstrates thoroughness in their use of supporting evidence with the use of the quotations throughout the response. They also make some response to how the poet uses language, although at times this can be quite general and sweeping rather than specific. However, there is some understanding of deeper implications.

- 3 How could this sample response be improved? Using the table on page 186, think about what advice you might give the writer of the response to improve their work.
- 4 Now read a second response to the same question. As you read, think about what has been done that is an improvement on the first response.

The speaker powerfully conveys conflicted feelings concerning his love and his fears surrounding the passage of time. He does this through his use of a central image – the ‘bright star’ to which the poem is addressed – and the sonnet form. The star’s radiance and beauty are emphasised immediately through the adjective ‘bright’ placed right at the start of the poem, suggesting the powerful strength of the star’s light, making it an appropriate metaphor for his desire to be strong, pure and constant in his love. The iambic rhythm of a sonnet is also immediately broken by the stress placed on this first word, ‘bright’, suggesting again the powerful force of the star’s light, and also creating the impression that the poem is bursting from the speaker’s lips, as if he is suddenly compelled to address the star because of the strength of his feelings.

confident focus on task and understanding of key writer’s methods

language analysis revealing confident understanding of central ideas in the poem

detailed structural analysis

However, the speaker’s feelings are conflicted, as demonstrated by the fact that he almost immediately qualifies his choice of the star as an image for his commitment to his love. He thinks that a star is actually too distant and ‘lone’, isolated like a hermit or ‘Eremité’. He uses images associated with purity, such as ‘priestlike... ablution’ and ‘new... snow’ to describe the star’s ‘eternal-lidded’ watching. Yet these images suggest sterility as well as purity – priests bless and cleanse but they do not marry; snow is bright and white like the star itself, but cold and, as it is a ‘mask’, untouched and hiding the warm earth beneath. The speaker wants to have the star’s constancy and ‘steadfast’ nature, but does not want to be cold and distant like a star, denied the touches of his lover. He feels a conflict between the purity of an eternal love and his desire to be ‘pillow’d’ on the ‘soft’ and ‘ripening breast’ of his lover, images suggesting embraces and fertility, as though lying with his lover in bed. The adjective ‘ripening’ sums up his fears – if his lover’s breast is ‘ripening’ then at some point it must become ‘ripe’, but like all soft, ripe fruit, it must also then eventually start to decay. He fears to lose his lover.

perceptive understanding of ideas, focused on the task

well-selected range of references explored perceptively and in detail

perceptive sense of overview, maintaining focus on task

detailed close language analysis; range of well-selected and integrated references; sustained focus on task

His conflicted desires, caught between an eternal yet cold and sterile love, like a distant unchanging star might feel, and a strong desire to embrace the 'fall and swell' of his lover's chest, are emphasised by the repetition of 'still, still'.

This repetition suggests his desperation to keep things as they are, listening to the 'fall and swell' of his lover's breath. The repeated 'll' sounds of 'fall and swell' and 'still' create a lulling sense of continuity, like a lullaby soothing him into a comforting 'sweet unrest'. However, the 'fall and swell' of the breath itself reminds us that life is proceeding, and must end in 'death', as the final rhyming couplet emphasises. The only way the speaker can ever really gain 'still' eternity is through dying, leading him to his final feelings of impossible conflict – either attempt to remain hugging his lover forever or die.

The sonnet form itself emphasises how trapped he feels by this oxymoronic choice – rather than a single volta between the octet and sestet, there is this further final twist, emphasised by the caesura in the last line, as well as the two earlier rejections of his image of the star. His desire to be steadfast whilst repeatedly turning from each choice creates an overall sense of irony, which powerfully conveys his conflicted thoughts and feelings.

sustained focus on task;
confident grasp of ideas;
well-selected references

confident engagement;
perceptive analysis of
patterns of language

perceptive exploration of
meanings; detailed focus on
text and task

confident understanding of
form

sustained focus on task;
sense of overview

Comment:

The response shows perceptive, sustained personal engagement with the task and poem. The analysis is very detailed, incorporating well-selected references. The writer of the response demonstrates a critical understanding of the poem and the techniques the poet uses, as well as a clear sense of overview and the way in which meanings develop across the poem.

- 5 What advice might the writer of this response need to make even more progress? Use the table on page 186 to guide your ideas.

Planning and writing a critical commentary on an unseen poem

How can I organise a response to an unseen poem?

Understand the task

One big difference between tackling a question on a poem you have studied and one on an unseen poem is the amount of time you need to read, plan and prepare your response. For an unseen question, you are advised to spend 20 minutes reading and planning your response.

Take a look at the example question below on a poem called 'Harmonium' by Simon Armitage.

Read carefully the following poem. The narrator discusses how he and his elderly father moved an old harmonium (a church organ), which was due to be scrapped, from a church.

How does the poet's writing powerfully show the relationship between father and son?

To help you answer this question, you might consider:

- how the poet describes the harmonium and its history
- how the poet describes his father
- how the poet conveys his feelings.

Most unseen questions provide some brief **context** – or additional information – which explains the basic premise of the poem. *Don't forget to read this!*

Unseen poetry questions provide bullet points after the question which help you focus your response. Treat these bullet points more as instructions rather than suggestions.

Again, the first thing you need to do is read the question carefully, highlighting or underlining key words, so you know specifically what to look for in the poem.

- 1 a) Highlight or underline all the key words in the question – *including* the context and the bullet points.
b) Annotate the question with definitions or ideas that help you understand what you need to do. Perhaps even rewrite the question in your own words if you think that would be helpful.

Gather your ideas and evidence

Again, *after* you have:

- 1) read the question,
- 2) highlighted or underlined key words in the question, and
- 3) made any appropriate notes,

then you should read the poem.

And for the unseen poem, the mantra of reading it, rereading it and then reading it again, is vital to ensure you have a solid grasp of the poem's content.

Harmonium

The **Farrand Chapelette** was gathering dust
in the shadowy porch of Marsden Church.
And was due to be bundled off to the skip.
Or was mine, for a song, if I wanted it.

Sunlight, through stained glass, which day to day
could **beatify** saints and raise the dead,
had aged the harmonium's softwood case
and yellowed the fingernails of its keys.
And one of its notes had lost its tongue,
and holes were worn in both the treadles
where the organist's feet, in grey, woollen socks
and leather-soled shoes, had pedalled and pedalled.

But its hummed harmonics still struck a chord:
for a hundred years that organ had stood
by the choristers' stalls, where father and son,
each in their time, had opened their throats
and gilded finches – like high notes – had streamed out.

Through his own blue cloud of tobacco smog,
with smoker's fingers and dotted thumbs,
he comes to help me cart it away.
And we carry it flat, laid on its back.
And he, being him, can't help but say
that the next box I'll shoulder through this nave
will bear the freight of his own dead weight.
And I, being me, then mouth in reply
some shallow or sorry phrase or word
too starved of breath to make itself heard.

Simon Armitage



Glossary

Farrand Chapelette: the brand of the organ

beatify: in the Roman Catholic church, a step towards turning someone who is already deceased into a saint; or, to make someone extremely happy

- 2 Read the poem and make some notes. In the first reading, you want to get a good sense of the poem's basics:
- What's happening? What is the poem 'about'?
 - Who's speaking? And from what perspective and with what 'voice'?
 - Where is it set? When is it set? Is it in the past or present tense?
 - How is the poem organised? How many stanzas are there? To what extent may this be relevant to what the poem is about?
 - Does it have a rhyme scheme and a particular rhythm?
 - Is the poem written in a particular form – a sonnet perhaps?
 - How might any or all of these questions help you understand the question focus?

Read the poem again. Your second reading should look to get into more detail.

- 3 Work through the poem closely, annotating any observations you make about the focus of the question. In this case, you need to look at:
- the **relationship** between **father and son**
 - **how** it is **portrayed** through:
 - how the poet describes the harmonium and its history
 - how the poet describes his father
 - how the poet conveys his feelings.

When you consider *how* the relationship is portrayed, you should show how the poet's techniques (language, imagery, form, viewpoint, rhyme, and so on) create this relationship.

Read the poem again. Your third reading should be a chance to 'step back' and understand the poem as a whole.

- 4 a) How do all these poet's techniques work together to create this poem and link to the question asked?
- b) Is there anything new that has sharpened or come more into focus because you've 'stepped back' from it? What is it and how does it help you address the question?

Plan your response

In your response for an unseen poem, make sure that it focuses on the question, and uses the bullet points to guide your organisation of the response. In many ways, however, it can be similar to that of a seen poem.

Generally, you can include:

- an **introductory** paragraph that provides an overview of the poem and the question focus
- three or so **main body** paragraphs where you develop your analysis, focused on the bullet points from the question. Each bullet point could be the focus of a paragraph
- a conclusion to draw together your ideas and your own opinions of the poem. Again, make the **conclusion** purposeful rather than perfunctory.

Once more, being able to trace the focus of the question through the text – noting how it is introduced in the beginning of the poem, how it develops in the middle and then how it develops further or changes by the end of the poem – is key to a strong, solid response.

You want to demonstrate that, in the short amount of time you have had with the poem, you have a healthy understanding of it and can aptly apply your analytical skills.

- 5 Use the table below to organise your own thoughts about 'Harmonium'.

Bullet point from the question	Observation	Poet's techniques	What this shows about the father / son relationship
how the poet describes the harmonium and its history			
how the poet describes his father			
how the poet conveys his feelings			

Write your response

You should now have a plan for your response.

- 6 Using this framework, write your response to 'Harmonium'.

Checklist for success

Make sure you include:

- ✓ clear points linked to the question
- ✓ a range of quotations from throughout the poem
- ✓ reference to a range of poetic techniques
- ✓ explanation of how the poetic techniques create meaning and link to the question.

Evaluating your critical commentary on an unseen poem

How can I assess and improve my own work?

Your task

Before you make an evaluation of how well you have done, check the table on page 186. It will help you decide if your work falls broadly into the first or second category – or outside them.

- 1 Reread the question on 'Harmonium' by Simon Armitage. Go through your own response and, if possible, write your own brief annotations around it.

How does the poet's writing powerfully show the relationship between father and son?

To help you answer this question, you might consider:

- how the poet describes the harmonium and its history
- how the poet describes his father
- how the poet conveys his feelings.

Evaluating your work

- 2 Now read the following, thinking about what the writer of the response has done well and what advice they might need in order to make more progress.

The poet shows the relationship between the father and son to be centred around the harmonium, which is a church organ. The poet writes how 'for a hundred years that organ has stood / by the chorister's stalls, where father and son, / each in their time, had opened their throats'. This suggests the harmonium has been around for a long time and that it helped create a strong relationship between the father and his son. In this way, the organ represents something that kept them together. The son stops the harmonium being 'bundled off': the word 'bundled' suggests the harmonium is old and unimportant.

focus on language and its effect

The poet also describes the relationship between father and son by describing the father. He has 'smoker's fingers and dottled thumbs'. This suggests that he is old and that he smokes. Because smoking is dangerous to your health, this could also suggest that he is close to death. The father seems to realise this when he jokes that 'the next box I'll shoulder through this nave / will bear the freight of his own dead weight'. This means that the father says to his son the next time he's in the church carrying something it will be the father's coffin with his dead body inside of it. This shows the reader that the father is waiting for his death, but the fact that he jokes about it suggests he's not that bothered by it.

However, this affects the son (who is also the narrator) because he doesn't say anything or know what to say, which suggests that he is sad about the idea that his father may die soon. In this way, the poet creates a link between the organ and the father – both of which are old and falling apart. The poet uses personification saying the keys are like 'yellowed... fingernails' and this personification links the harmonium to his father.

However, whereas the organ has previously brought fathers and sons together, this organ being taken out of the church creates a strained relationship between the narrator and his father because the narrator doesn't want his father to die.

personal response

focus on language and its effect

understanding of ideas and some deeper implications

Comment:

This is a reasonably developed and relevant personal response. The writer of the response demonstrates points using supporting evidence well throughout the response, although they could have used more precise, and less lengthy, quotations to augment their arguments. More could have been done to explore the language in detail. The reference to the metaphoric link between the organ and father is well-considered, if underdeveloped. The focus on the difference in relationships the organ creates, however, in the third paragraph clearly recognises some of the deeper implications of the poem.

- 3 How could this sample response be improved? Using the table on page 186, think about what advice you might give the writer of the response to improve their work.
- 4 Now read a second response to the same question. As you read, think about what the writer has done that is an improvement on the first response.

In 'Harmonium', the poet reveals his feelings about his ageing father through his attitude towards an old church organ which was going to be thrown away. Armitage introduces his feelings about age, and how we can consider things useless if they are too old, through his description of the harmonium. The phrases 'gathering dust' and 'bundled off' suggest the organ is neglected and unvalued by its owners. The porch is 'shadowy', suggesting no-one pays it any attention in the dusty gloom. The poet contrasts the organ in the present with its history in the following stanzas. Now abandoned in darkness, it used to be touched by 'sunlight'. Although this 'sunlight' was a 'day to day' occurrence, it has a miraculous quality: it seemed to 'beatify saints and raise the dead'. The fact that the organ used to be bathed in blessing and resurrecting light makes it sound holy. But despite this glory, the light has also 'aged' the harmonium. Armitage personifies its 'yellowed... fingernails' and 'lost... tongue' making us sympathise with the instrument as if it is a person, and value it more for its former glory and the suffering it has undergone, repeatedly 'pedalled' by the organist. The poet seems to want to save the harmonium and demonstrate someone cares for it after its hard life, just as later in the poem he wants to hold on to his relationship with his father.

deliberate focus on task and key writer's method

close analysis of language

confident exploration of contrast and patterns of language

well-selected references; developed, detailed analysis; confident grasp of meanings conveyed

sustained focus on task

Armitage portrays the harmonium's history as valuable to him, using musical imagery to convey the instrument's importance. The warm, alliterative sound of 'hummed harmonics' and the metaphor 'struck a chord' suggest his emotional attachment to it – and particularly to the memories it evokes of 'father and son' singing in church. The final image of this stanza suggests that, for the poet, the harmonium is a symbol of harmony, both musical and metaphorical, representing shared memories between his father and himself. Like the sunlight, it is given the power of performing miracles in the reversed simile 'gilded finches – like high notes', as if birds, not music, flew from their mouths when it was played. Father and son used to sing along to the organ with the beauty and freedom of golden birds, suggesting the harmonium has the power to transform their 'day to day' voices, and relationship, into something almost magical.

confident grasp of techniques; integrated references

perceptive understanding of deeper meanings

perceptive and evaluative response to language, focused on task and text

Armitage's description of his elderly father in the last stanza draws together his impressions of his father's physical ageing with his desire to salvage and value the harmonium. His father is described as being in 'his own blue cloud', echoing the dusty shadow the harmonium stands in, while his 'smoker's fingers,' which would be yellowed by nicotine, echo the personified harmonium's 'yellowed fingernails'. Even the adjective 'dotted', suggesting hands mottled with age, echoes the earlier sound of 'treadles' and 'pedalled'. These connections suggest the poet notices his father's ageing and compares it to the decaying organ, while the smoking hints at a possible future cause of his father's death. However, his father also draws this comparison, stating in a matter-of-fact way 'the next box' the poet will carry 'will bear the freight of his own dead weight'. The internal rhyme of 'freight' and 'weight' and the three stresses of 'own dead weight' create a sense of finality, which the father doesn't shrink from.

However, Armitage clearly feels less able to confront his father's inevitable death, failing to 'mouth in reply' anything that could 'make itself heard.' Ironically, here, it is the poet who is most like the frail organ which has 'lost its tongue', scared to face up to the reality of losing his father. The poem as a whole can be seen as a metaphor for Armitage's desire to hang on to his ageing father, their relationship and valuable memories together, just as he wants to salvage the decaying organ for the sake of the value he places on its past.

insightful explanation of method, focused on task

integrated range of references; confident analysis; sensitive understanding of implications

close analysis of language and rhythm; carefully selected references

sustained response; evaluates patterns of language, demonstrating perceptive understanding

insightful overview

Comment:

This response sustains a detailed personal and evaluative engagement with the task and the poem throughout.

The writer demonstrates a confident, critical understanding of the poem and the techniques the poet uses, sustaining an analytical understanding and incorporating well-selected references. The response demonstrates an appreciation of deeper implications as it develops and offers an insightful sense of overview.

- 5 What advice might the writer of the response need to make even more progress? Use the table on page 186 to guide your ideas.

Check your progress:

What are the features of a *reasonably developed, relevant personal* response?

Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You show how you know the text well by making reference to it and/or by quoting from it.• You make points that are relevant (close textual reference and/or quotation) to the task set.
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You show a sound understanding of the text, reading beyond the surface to explore implicit meanings.• You develop your ideas on themes, characterisation or ideas.
Language and effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You write about some of the ways in which the writer uses language, structure and form.• You make some exploration of the effects of the writer's choices and how these effects are created.
Personal response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You make your own honest and considered response to the text, appropriate to the task.• You show some development of your own ideas about the text and task.

What are the features of a response showing *sustained personal and evaluative engagement with task and text*?

Knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You show a detailed grasp of the text as a whole and a deep understanding of the task.• You support your ideas with relevant, well-selected, well-integrated reference to the text, skilfully and with flair.
Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You support your original ideas with carefully selected, well-integrated reference to the text.• You show your ability to analyse, evaluate and interpret the text in an original and perceptive way.
Language and effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You examine in depth the way the writer uses language, structure and form and you explore different interpretations.• You show the ability to make a close analysis of extracts from the text and (where appropriate to the question) respond to the writer's effects in the text as a whole.
Personal response	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You make a convincing response, showing deep interest, understanding and an involvement with both text and task.• You have your own individual ideas and judgements about the text and express them with confidence and enthusiasm.