

The AQA Anthology - Poetry

A guide to poetry in the AQA Anthology for
GCSE English/English Literature Specification A

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Introduction for students – what is the *English Anthology*?

The *English Anthology* is a collection of poems and short prose fiction. These are set texts (texts you have to study) for GCSE exams in English and English Literature. If you are a student preparing for these exams, then – for **some** parts of **each** exam – you will write about **some** of these texts. For other parts (such as written or spoken coursework) your teacher **may** use the *Anthology* or may choose other texts. There is more than one *Anthology* – as different exam boards have their own. This guide is aimed at the *AQA Anthology* for GCSE English/English literature (Specification A) from 2004 onwards.

Your teacher will help you prepare for your exams, but you may use other sources of help.

Your *Anthology* is a very important book. Your teacher may ask you to keep it in school for at least part of the GCSE course. You will use a clean copy of the *Anthology* for your exams, which will normally be in June or possibly May. (Most students take a two-year course and are assessed at the end of Year 11, but it is possible to take either exam in an earlier year. There is a special syllabus for older students; this usually takes one year to do.)

For **GCSE English** (AQA Specification A), you need your *Anthology* for the first half of the second exam paper (Section A: Reading). For this you will answer one of the questions (usually there are two to choose from) on **Poems from Different Cultures**. You will write about poems in one or other of the two clusters – you cannot mix poems from both clusters.

Answering your chosen question should take you about half an hour. If you go over this time, you may have to rush the second half of the paper (Section B: Writing). This is not a good idea generally. However your teacher may advise you to spend a little more time in a given section if he or she knows that you can pick up extra marks at one point without too much risk of losing lots of marks elsewhere. Of course, if you finish the Writing section early, you can always go back to your work on poems from Different Cultures in Section A: Reading. Below you will find guidance on how to use your answer booklet to leave space for this.

For **GCSE English Literature**, use of the *Anthology* is **optional** for the first part of the paper (you **may** use it but you don't *have to*) but **compulsory** for the second part. In the end-of-course exam (for which there is only one paper) you have to write on set texts. These are divided into two sections:

- post 1914 Prose (Section A) and
- pre- and post-1914 Poetry (Section B)

Section A – the prose texts in the *Anthology* are mostly shorter than the other set texts. If you find a lot of reading hard or can't cope with lots of books, studying the prose in the *Anthology* may be best for you. This section is worth 30% of the total marks for literature.

Section B – there will be a choice of three questions and you will answer one of these. Each question names a particular poem. This could be a poem by one of the four named poets, or a pre-1914 poem. The essay question will always ask you to compare one poem by **each** of two authors (either Seamus Heaney and Gillian Clarke as one pair or Carol Ann Duffy and Simon Armitage as an alternative pair), and two pre-1914 poems – one of these four poems must be the one that the examiners have named. The four poems will have a **common theme or subject** or some shared feature of approach, style or structure – for example, poems spoken by a character as monologues. So pupils need to study a broad range of the poems including those by the pair of modern poets they have chosen to study. This section is worth 40% of the total marks for literature. You may find it hard to know which are the poems to write about – you will find examples and tables below that show this more clearly.

English and English Literature

You may be studying both of these or just English. (English is a core subject of the National Curriculum. Pupils take GCSE exams in English in all parts of the UK outside Scotland.) When you are examined in English, the examiners are looking for particular skills. When you are examined in English literature, the skills required are rather different, but there is a lot of overlap. This should not frighten you. It may help you if you know what the examiners are looking for. You will find guidance about this below. This means that you may use the *Anthology* in very different ways for each subject.

English is generally considered more important than most other subjects. This is because it is (like maths and science) a **core subject** of the National Curriculum. If you wish to apply to university some time in the future, you will be required (normally) to have GCSE passes in both English and maths at grade C or above. For some courses, such as teacher training, the required grade may be higher.

English literature is an optional subject. You don't have to take it by law, although it may be compulsory in your school. In many schools pupils will do this by studying English and English literature together.

What's in the *Anthology*?

The AQA *Anthology* is clearly divided into three parts or sections, one (**Section 1**) for English and two (**Sections 2 and 3**) for English literature. These are the three sections:

Section 1 – English

This section contains **Poems from Different Cultures** divided into two clusters:

Cluster 1

- Edward Kamau Brathwaite: *Limbo*
- Tatamkhulu Afrika: *Nothing's Changed*
- Grace Nichols: *Island Man*
- Imtiaz Dharker: *Blessing*
- Lawrence Ferlinghetti: *Two Scavengers in a Truck*
- Nissim Ezekiel: *Night of the Scorpion*
- Chinua Achebe: *Vultures*
- Denise Levertov: *What Were They Like?*

Cluster 2

- Sujata Bhatt: from *Search For My Tongue*
- Tom Leonard: from *Unrelated Incidents*
- John Agard: *Half-Caste*
- Derek Walcott: *Love After Love*
- Imtiaz Dharker: *This Room*
- Niyi Osundare: *Not My Business*
- Moniza Alvi: *Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan*
- Grace Nichols: *Hurricane Hits England*

Section 2 – English literature; poetry

There are groups of eight poems by each of four poets whose work is from after 1914. (In fact, the first published work by any of them appeared in 1966.) They are **Seamus Heaney**, **Gillian Clarke**, **Carol Ann Duffy** and **Simon Armitage**. These are the poems:

Seamus Heaney

- *Storm on the Island*
- *Perch*
- *Blackberry-Picking*
- *Death of a Naturalist*
- *Digging*
- *Mid-Term Break*
- *Follower*
- *At a Potato Digging*

Gillian Clarke

- *Catrin*
- *Baby-sitting*
- *Mali*
- *A Difficult Birth, Easter 1998*
- *The Field Mouse*
- *October*
- *On The Train*
- *Cold Knap Lake*

Carol Ann Duffy

- *Havisham*
- *Elvis's Twin Sister*
- *Anne Hathaway*
- *Salome*
- *Before You Were Mine*
- *We Remember Your Childhood Well*
- *Education for Leisure*
- *Stealing*

Simon Armitage

- from *Book of Matches*, “Mother, any distance greater than a single span”
- from *Book of Matches*, “My father thought it...”
- *Homecoming*
- *November*

- *Kid*
- from *Book of Matches*, “Those bastards in their mansions”
- from *Book of Matches*, “I’ve made out a will; I’m leaving myself”
- *Hitcher*

Pre-1914 Poetry Bank

There is also a collection (or “bank”) of poems from before 1914 – some that go back to the 16th century, and others from more recent times. These are the poems:

- Ben Jonson: *On my first Sonne*
- William Butler Yeats: *The Song of the Old Mother*
- William Wordsworth: *The Affliction of Margaret*
- William Blake: *The Little Boy Lost and The Little Boy Found*
- Chidioc Tichborne: Tichborne’s Elegy
- Thomas Hardy: *The Man He Killed*
- Walt Whitman: *Patrolling Barnegat*
- William Shakespeare: Sonnet 130 – “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”
- Robert Browning: *My Last Duchess*
- Robert Browning: *The Laboratory*
- Alfred Tennyson: *Ulysses*
- Oliver Goldsmith: *The Village Schoolmaster*
- Alfred Tennyson: *The Eagle*
- Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Inversnaid*
- John Clare: Sonnet – “I love to see the summer...”

Section 3: English Literature – Prose

This section contains the complete text of seven short stories

- Doris Lessing: *Flight*
- Sylvia Plath: *Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit*
- Michèle Roberts: *Your Shoes*
- Joyce Cary: *Growing Up*
- Ernest Hemingway: *The End of Something*
- Graham Swift: *Chemistry*
- Leslie Norris: *Snowdrops*

Below you will find detailed guidance on how to answer questions about the poetry. You will also find information about other places where you can find help – whether in print, broadcast or online.

Putting the poems together

As you study the poems, you will see how they have certain things in common – perhaps the same subject, or theme, or maybe something less obvious like their interesting use of language and some features of form or structure. It is important to see as many such connections as possible, so that you can choose suitable poems on which to write in an exam. The examiners may ask you to write about poems with a quite **specific** link (such as poems about parents and children) or something much more **general** (such as poems which show strong feelings). This guide lists some connections, but the number is potentially vast. You cannot guess in advance all the things the examiners might ask about. Prepare a range of poems, and then pick the question that lets you write on those you know best.

For **English** it is quite easy – if you prepare all eight (or even most of them) in either cluster, then you should be able to answer any question. For **English literature** it is quite a lot harder, as you will have to find three poems that go well with the poem the examiners have named in the question. You can expect them to set at least one very open question, therefore, to give you a fair chance of responding. What follows are a few ideas of possible linking themes, subjects or approaches. The examiners **might** use one of these to set a question. But even if they do, they are quite likely to use other words for it. You must read the questions closely, as the best one for you may not be obvious. Use these examples to start your own lists but add to them – with your teacher’s help – throughout the GCSE course.

English – Poems from Different Cultures: Cluster 1

- Discrimination and victims of violence: *Limbo, Nothing’s Changed, Vultures*
- Rich and poor: *Nothing’s Changed, Blessing, Two Scavengers, Night of the Scorpion*
- Animals: *Night of the Scorpion, Vultures*
- Different places: *Island Man, Blessing, Night of the Scorpion, What Were They Like?*

English – Poems from Different Cultures: Cluster 2

- Language: *Search for my Tongue, Unrelated Incidents*
- Personal identity: from *Search for My Tongue, from Unrelated Incidents, Half-Caste, Love After Love, This Room, Not My Business, Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan*
- Different places and cultures: from *Search for My Tongue, Not My Business, Presents from My Aunts in Pakistan, Hurricane Hits England*

English Literature – Seamus Heaney and Gillian Clarke

- Nature: *Storm on the Island, Perch, Death of a Naturalist; A Difficult Birth, The Field Mouse*
- Family and relationships: *Digging, Mid-Term Break, Follower; Catrin, Mali, On the Train, Cold Knap Lake*
- Past and present: *Digging, Follower, At a Potato Digging; Catrin, Cold Knap Lake*
- Growing up: *Blackberry Picking, Death of a Naturalist, Digging, Follower; Catrin*
- History and politics: *At a Potato Digging; A Difficult Birth, The Field Mouse*
- Death: *Mid Term Break; October*

Comparing poems for English literature

	Poem by Heaney or Duffy	Poem by Clarke or Armitage	Pre-1914 poem	Pre-1914 poem
Subject Write a short description (one sentence) of what each poem is about.				
Theme What are the main ideas in the poems?				
Meaning Is each poem straightforward or ambiguous in meaning? What do you think it means?				
Viewpoint What is the viewpoint?				
Tone and mood Comment on each poem's tone and mood. Does either poem make any use of humour or irony?				
Interesting details Comment on any details which you find interesting in the poems				
Structure and form Describe the structure and form of the poems – look at such things as rhyme, metre/rhythm, stanza form				
Key images Look for the key images in each poem. In each case say <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what the image is • what it means • how it works in the poem 				
Other technical features Are there any other technical features, such as sound FX, contrast, colloquialism or wordplay?				
Personal response Give your own response to the poems, with reasons				

Poems from Different Cultures

Introduction

The writers in this section may live in the UK as members of ethnic minority groups or may live overseas. All the poems in this section are written largely or wholly in English, but in several you will find non-standard varieties of English, while several make use of other languages. One even has text in Gujarati.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite: *Limbo*

This poem tells the story of slavery in a rhyming, rhythmic dance. It is ambitious and complex. There are two narratives running in parallel:

- the actions of the dance, and
- the history of a people which is being acted out.

Going down and under the limbo stick is likened to the slaves' going down into the hold of the ship, which carries them into slavery. In Roman Catholic tradition, *limbo* is a place to which the souls of people go, if they are not good enough for heaven or bad enough for hell. Between them lies limbo; it has come to mean any unpleasant place, or a state (of mind or body) from which it is difficult to escape. The story of slavery told in the poem is very easy to follow, yet full of vivid detail and lively action. Limbo is a West Indian dance: each dancer in turn attempts to pass under a low bar. It may well have developed from an African ritual dance brought over by slaves.

The poem has a very strong beat, suggesting the dance it describes: where the word “limbo” appears as a complete line, it should be spoken slowly, the first syllable extended and both syllables stressed: *Lím-bó*. While the italics give the refrain (or chorus) which reminds us of the dance, the rest of the poem tells the story enacted in the dance: these lines are beautifully rhythmic, and almost every syllable is stressed, except for the many lines that end with the poetic foot called a **dactyl** – one stressed syllable, followed by two unstressed syllables: “...front of me”, “slavery”, “under me”, “saving me” and so on (note how often the last unstressed syllable is the pronoun “me”). In the very last line, the rhythm is broken, suggesting the completion of the dance, and the end of the narrative. If cannot find the rhythm, ask your friends or teacher to perform the poem or parts of it, until it becomes clear.

This poem is suited to dramatic performance – there is the dancing under the limbo pole (difficult for many Europeans) and the acting out of the voyage into slavery. The poem can be chanted or sung, with a rhythmic accompaniment to bring out the drama in it (percussion, generally, is appropriate but drums are ideal: in fact, the text refers to the “drummer” and the “music”).

- What do you find interesting in the way the poem appears on the page, sound effects in the poem, repetition in the poem and the way the limbo dance tells the story of slavery?
- Is this a serious or comic poem? Is it optimistic or pessimistic?
- What does the poem have to do with history?
- How does your own colour and ethnic group affect the way you read the poem?

If you have time, and want to learn more about slavery, you could look at extracts from feature films, like *Amistad*, or TV programmes, like *Roots*, and any number of books. There are also museums, like Wilberforce House in Hull, that can tell you more.

Tatamkhulu Afrika: *Nothing's Changed*

This poem depicts a society where rich and poor are divided. In the **apartheid** era (1948-1994) of racial segregation in South Africa, where the poem is set, laws, enforced by the police, used to keep apart black and white people. The poet looks at attempts to change this system, and argues that they are ineffective, making no real difference.

“District Six” is the name of a poor area of Cape Town (one of South Africa’s two capital cities; the other is Pretoria). This area was bulldozed as a slum in 1966, but never properly rebuilt. Although there is no sign there, the poet can feel that this is where he is: “...my feet know/and my hands.”

Similarly the “up-market” inn (“brash with glass”), with a bright sign (“flaring like a flag”) to show its name, is meant for white customers only. There is no sign to show this (as there would have been under apartheid) but black and coloured people (these were official descriptions under the apartheid laws), being poor, will not be allowed past the “guard at the gatepost”. The “whites only inn” is elegant, with linen tablecloths and a “single rose” on each table. It is contrasted with the fast-food “working man’s cafe” which sells the local snack (“bunny chows”). There is no tablecloth, just a plastic top, and there is nowhere to wash one’s hands after eating: “wipe your fingers on your jeans”. In the third stanza the sense of contrast is most clear: the smart inn “squats” amid “grass and weeds”.

Perhaps the most important image in the poem is that of the “glass” which shuts out the speaker in the poem. It is a symbol of the divisions of colour, and class – often the same thing in South Africa. As he backs away from it at the end of the poem, Tatamkhulu Afrika sees himself as a “boy again”, who has left the imprint of his “small, mean mouth” on the glass. He wants “a stone, a bomb” to break the glass – he **may** wish **literally** to break the window of this inn, but this is clearly meant in a **symbolic** sense. He wants to break down the **system**, which separates white and black, rich and poor, in South Africa.

The title of the poem suggests not just that things have not changed, but a disappointment that some **expected** change has not happened. The poem uses the technique of **contrast** to explore the theme of inequality. It has a clear structure of eight-line stanzas. The lines are short, of varying length, but usually with two stressed syllables. The poet assumes that the reader knows South Africa, referring to places, plants and local food. The poem is obviously about the unfairness of a country where “Nothing’s changed”. But this protest could also apply to other countries where those in power resist progress and deny justice to the common people.

- What does the poet think about change in his home country?
- How does the poem contrast the rich and the poor in South Africa?
- Why does the poet write about two places where people buy food?
- Comment on the image of the plate-glass window to show how poor people are shut out of things in South Africa. What does the poet want to do to change this?

Grace Nichols: *Island Man*

The subtitle really explains this simple poem – it tells of a man from the Caribbean, who lives in London but always thinks of his other home, as he “still wakes up to the sound of the sea”.

The poem opens with daybreak, as the island man seems to hear the sound of surf – and perhaps to imagine he **sees** it, since we are told the colour. This is followed by simple images – the fishermen pushing their boat out; the sun climbing in the sky; the island, emerald green.

The island man always returns to the island, in his mind, but in thinking of it he must also “always” come “back” literally to his immediate surroundings – hearing the traffic on London’s North Circular Road.

Grace Nichols ends the poem with the image of someone’s coming up out of the sea – but the reality is the bed, and the waves are only the folds of a “crumpled pillow”. The last line of the poem is presented as the harsh reality.

Many Afro-Caribbeans in Britain live a split existence. They may yearn for the warmth and simple pleasures of the islands they think of as home, yet they find themselves, with friends and family, in a cold northern climate. This poem neatly captures this division – between a fantasy of the simple life and the working daily reality. But perhaps it is not really a serious choice – if one were to stay on the island, then one would bring one’s problems there, too. In fact, this man is like most other British people – he does not relish work, but faces up to it.

After reading the whole poem, one sees that it is ambiguous – the island is both in the Caribbean and Great Britain.

Grace Nichols also challenges us to think about where home really lies. Is it

- the place we dream about,
- the place where we, our friends and family live, or
- the place where we do our work?

The poem is written as free verse – it is a quite loose sequence of vivid images. The poet relies on effects of sound – contrasting the breaking of the surf with the roar of traffic. There are a few rhymes and repetitions. Grace Nichols also refers to colour – blue for surf (surely an error – the surf is the white foam of the blue sea), emerald (green) for the island and grey for the traffic.

- Is this poem about the Caribbean or London?
- Why does the title have more than one meaning?
- Is this poem about a real wish for sun and surf or just an escapist fantasy?
- Would the poem work just as well if the man in London were thinking of any other island – perhaps one of those in Scotland or in the Pacific? (In other words is the particular place important, or only the idea of an island home to escape to?)
- What do you find interesting in the images of this poem?
- If the Island Man lived in the Caribbean for several years, would he find Paradise – or would he have dreams about London? (Do all the people in big cities live there because they have to, or do they live there by choice?)

Chinua Achebe: *Vultures*

This is one of the most challenging poems in the *Anthology*. The vultures of the title are real birds of prey but more important, perhaps, for what they represent – **people** of a certain kind. Chinua Achebe is a Nigerian writer, but has had an English-speaking liberal education: the poem is written in a literary manner – the poet uses an educated vocabulary rather than everyday terms – with a close eye for detail.

The poem introduces us to the vultures and their unpleasant diet; in spite of this, they appear to care for each other. From this, Achebe goes on to note how even the worst of human beings show some touches of humanity – the concentration camp commandant, having spent the day burning human corpses, buys chocolate for his “tender offspring” (child or children). This leads to an ambiguous conclusion:

- on the one hand, Achebe tells us to “praise bounteous providence” that even the worst of creatures has a little goodness, “a tiny glow-worm tenderness”;
- on the other hand, he concludes in despair, it is the little bit of “kindred love” (love of one’s **own kind** or **relations**) which permits the “perpetuity of evil” (allows it to survive, because the evil person can think himself to be not completely depraved).

We are reminded, perhaps, by the words about the “Commandant at Belsen”, that Adolf Hitler was said to love children and animals.

The poem is in the form of free verse, in short lines that are not end-stopped and have no pattern of stress or metre. Achebe moves from images of things that are actually present, to the imagined scene of the commandant picking up chocolate for his children, to the final section of the poem in which appears the conventional metaphor of the “glow-worm tenderness” in the “icy caverns of a cruel heart”. In studying this poem, you should spend a lot of time in making sure you understand all the unfamiliar vocabulary. Look out, also, for familiar words that are used in surprising ways, because of their context (what is around them). For example, we read of the commandant “going home...with fumes of human roast clinging **rebelliously** to his hairy nostrils” – it is as if he wants to get rid of the smell (put it out of nose and mind) but the smell refuses to go away, rebelling against his authority: something he cannot command. As you think about the first part of the poem, you should try to explain in your own words the different things on which the vultures feed, while looking for the evidence of the birds’ love for each other. The vulture is a creature about which we will have ideas before we read; because it feasts on corpses, it has come to symbolize anyone or anything that benefits by another’s suffering. (The vultures here are shown far less sympathetically, for example, than the scorpion in Nissim Ezekiel’s poem.)

- Is this poem really about vultures at all or does the poet use them only to make comments on some kinds of people?
- How does the poet try to make the reader feel disgust towards the vultures? Is this fair?
- The ending of this poem is highly ambiguous – the poet recommends both “praise” for “providence” and then “despair” (because the little bit of goodness in otherwise evil things allows them to keep going, in “perpetuity”). Which of these conclusions do you think the poet feels more strongly, if either?
- Chinua Achebe refers to Belsen, the Nazi death camp – do you think this is a powerful way of suggesting evil, or might readers now and in the future not know what Belsen is or what happened there? (Some younger readers may know of it mainly because Anne Frank died there, at the age of 15.)

Tom Leonard: from *Unrelated Incidents*

This poem uses non-standard English to explore notions of class, education and nationality. The poem is a phonetic transcript that shows how a Glaswegian Scot might speak. The poet imagines the BBC newsreader smugly explaining why he does not talk “lik/wanna you/scruff” – though in this version, of course, he is doing just this. The writer takes on the persona of a less educated or “ordinary” Glaswegian, with whom he clearly identifies.

The poem is set out in lines of two, three or four syllables, but these are not end-stopped. The effect is almost certainly meant to be of the Autocue used by newsreaders (the text scrolls down the screen a few words at a time).

The poem seems puzzling on the page, but when read out aloud makes better sense. A Scot may find it easier to follow than a reader from London, say.

The most important idea in the poem is that of truth – a word which appears (as “troot”) three times, as well as one “troo”. The speaker in the poem (with whom the poet seems to sympathize) suggests that listeners or viewers trust a speaker with an RP (Received Pronunciation) or “BBC” accent. He claims that viewers would be mistrustful of a newsreader with a regional accent, especially one like Glaswegian Scots, which has working-class or even (unfairly) criminal associations in the minds of some people.

The poem is humorous and challenges our prejudices. Leonard may be a little naïve in his argument, however: RP gives credibility to people in authority or to newsreaders, because it shows them not to favour one area or region – it is **meant** to be neutral. The RP speaker appears educated because he or she is aware of, and has dropped, distinctive local or regional peculiarities. And though RP is not widely spoken, it is widely **understood**, much more so than any regional accent in the UK. Tom Leonard’s Glasgow accent would confuse many listeners, as would any marked regional voice. RP has the merit of clarity.

- How does this poem work on the page and when read aloud? Do we need both to **see it and hear** it to get a full understanding?
- How does the poem challenge social attitudes and prejudices about language?
- Is this poem serious or funny or both at once? Say why.
- How does the poet explore the relationship between accent, public speaking and truth?
- What is the point of the last two words in the poem?
- Can you think of reasons why newsreaders and broadcasters should, or should not, have strong regional accents?
- Scotland is the one part of the UK where students will not be studying English GCSE or the Anthology. Does the poem give you a sense of Scotland (or its people) as belonging to a “different” culture from that in your part of the country?

If you know someone with an authentic Scots accent – especially a Glaswegian one, it may help you to get **him** or her to read the poem aloud – or maybe make an audio tape recording to bring the poem to life.

Imtiaz Dharker: *This Room*

This is a quite puzzling poem, if we try to find an explicit and exact interpretation – but its general meaning is clear enough: Imtiaz Dharker sees rooms and furniture as possibly limiting or imprisoning one, but when change comes, it as if the room “is breaking out of itself”. She presents this rather literally, with a bizarre or surreal vision of room, bed and chairs breaking out of the house and rising up – the chairs “crashing through clouds”. The crockery, meanwhile, crashes together noisily “in celebration”. And why is no one “looking for the door”? Presumably, because there are now so many different ways of leaving the room, without using the conventional route.

One’s sense of self is also confused – we say sometimes that we are all over the place, and Ms. Dharker depicts this literally, as well – she cannot find her feet (a common metaphor for gaining a sense of purpose or certainty) and realizes that her hands are not even in the same room – and have taken on a life of their own, applauding from somewhere else.

We do not know the cause of this joyful explosion, but it seems to be bound up with personal happiness and fulfilment – it might be romantic love, but it could be other things: maternity, a new job, artistic achievement, almost anything that is genuinely and profoundly life-changing.

The central idea in this poem is like that in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* of “a tide...that taken at its flood leads on to greatness” – that is, that opportunities come our way, and we need to recognize them and react in the right way, “when the...furniture of our lives/stirs” and “the improbable arrives”.

The poem works very much like an animated film – the excited “pots and pans” suggest the episode in Disney’s *Fantasia* of the Sorcerer’s Apprentice. It is a succession of vivid and exuberant images, full of joy and excitement. (Even if one does not enjoy the poem, the reader might like to know what made the poet feel like this – and perhaps give it a try.)

In the poem our homes and possessions symbolize our lives and ambitions in a limiting sense, while change and new opportunities are likened to space, light and “empty air”, where there is an opportunity to move and grow. Like Walcott’s *Love After Love* it is about change and personal growth – but at an earlier point, or perhaps at repeated points in one’s life.

- What do you think the poet means by imagining a room breaking out of itself?
- How does the poet suggest ideas of change and opportunity?
- This is a very happy poem – how does Imtiaz Dharker suggest her joy in it?
- Does the poem give us any clues as to why this upheaval is going on, or is the cause unimportant? What do **you** think might have caused it?
- What is the effect of the images in the poem – of rooms, furniture and crockery bursting into life?

Perch

This seemingly simple poem shows how the perch (a freshwater fish) lives up to its name – keeping its place or perch, while the river and everything else moves past or around it. Heaney uses the metaphor of “holding the pass” (like soldiers defending a strongpoint) to show how the perch remain unmoved. They may **seem** to sleep, as they are “adoze” (= dozing; Heaney makes up the word which is like *asleep*, *alive* and *adrift* in its form – the a replaces on as it was used in Old English, so “going on hunting” became “going a-hunting”; the adjective works in the same way as the present participle, so “asleep” = “sleeping”, “alive” = “living” and so on). But the perch rely on their “muscle” to guzzle the current. We see the fish from the **human viewpoint**, looking down into the clear river, but also from **their own** viewpoint – “under the water-roof”. The metaphor here, like a riddle, is of a kind popular in Old English poetry; it is called a *kenning* (Old English examples include “helmet-bearer” for “warrior” and “whale-road” for the sea).

Heaney says of this poem:

“...these perch, although they are actually in the river, they are very much in a kind of fifty-five year old memory lake of my own...I think that water is immediately interesting. It’s just as an element it is full of life. It is associated with origin, it is bright, it reflects you.”

The poem has a simple form – five couplets with half-rhyme (assonance rhyme, which uses a different vowel sound in each rhyme word). The metre is mostly anapaestic, with some iambic feet, especially at the ends of the lines - this works because the stress falls on the last syllable, whether of two or three. The pattern is also varied at the start of some lines, which open with a stressed syllable - “**P**erch”, “**N**ear” and “**G**uzzling”. (In terms of the metre this syllable serves as a poetic foot on its own.)

It is striking for the number of monosyllabic words the poet uses, and for groups of words with the same vowel: “grunts...slubs...runty”.

Heaney also indulges in wordplay – there are two senses of “perch” in the first line and a pun on “finland” (not to be confused with “Finland”), which is echoed by “fenland”.

The river mentioned here is the Lower Bann river. It drains Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland and is celebrated for its coarse fishing..

- What is the poet’s view of the perch?
- In what ways are the perch like people?
- How does the poet describe the river here?
- Explain the way the poet contrasts ideas of movement and staying still in *Perch*.

Blackberry-picking

This poem gives a vivid account of picking blackberries. But it is really about hope and disappointment (how things never quite live up to our expectations) and blackberry picking becomes a metaphor for other experiences.

In the first half of the poem Heaney describes the picking – from the appearance of the first fruit to the frenzy of activity as more fruit ripens. The second half of the poem concerns the attempt to preserve the berries – always a failure, as the fungus set in and the fruit fermented. (Now that many people in the west have freezers, this problem is solved. But do many young people still go to pick blackberries?)

In the first section Heaney presents the tasting of the blackberries as a sensual pleasure – referring to sweet “flesh”, to “summer’s blood” and to “lust”. He uses many adjectives of colour (how many can you find?) and suggests the enthusiasm of the collectors, using every available container to hold the fruit they have picked. There is also a hint that this picking is somehow violent – after the “blood” comes the claim that the collectors’ hands were “sticky as Bluebeard’s” (whose hands were covered with the blood of his wives).

The lusciousness of the fresh fruit contrasts with what it quickly becomes “fur” and “rat-grey fungus”, as “lovely canfuls” smell “of rot”.

The poem is set out in iambic pentameter couplets with half rhyme. Like many of Heaney’s poems it is full of monosyllabic (one syllable) nouns: “clot”, “knot”, “cans”, “pots”, “blobs”, “pricks”, “byre”, “fur”, “cache”, “bush”, “flesh” and “rot” (there are others). The poem has a clear structure – the two sections match the two stages of the poet’s thought.

This poem is ambiguous in its viewpoint, too. We see the view of a frustrated **child** in “I...felt like crying” and “It wasn’t fair”, but a more detached **adult** view in the antithesis (opposition or formal balance or contrast) of “Each year I hoped they’d keep, knew they would not” – the comma divides the opposed ideas into the two halves of the line. The poem looks at a theme that is as old as poetry itself – the transitoriness of pleasure (how good things do not last), and relates it to a familiar childhood experience.

Heaney suggests that what is true of blackberries may be true of good things generally. But this is argument by analogy. Nowadays we can preserve our fruit by freezing it – so does this mean that hopes are not disappointed after all?

- How far is this poem about something particular or about life in general?
- Explain how the poem contrasts ideas of expected pleasure and disappointment.
- Does this poem give the viewpoint of a child or an adult or both?
- Can you explain why Heaney, in the last line, says that he “hoped” for something, even though he “knew” it would not happen?

Digging

This poem is like *Follower*, as it shows how the young Heaney looked up to his elders – in this case both father and grandfather.

Seeing his father (now old) “straining” to dig “flowerbeds”, the poet recalls him in his prime, digging “potato drills”. And even earlier, he remembers his grandfather, digging peat. He cannot match “men like them” with a spade, but he sees that the pen is (for him) mightier than the spade, and he will “dig with it” into his past and celebrate them.

Heaney challenges the comic stereotype of the Irishman (“Mick” or “Paddy”) with a spade. The stereotype contains some truth – Irishmen historically have earned a reputation as manual labourers, building the canals, railways and more recently the motorways of Britain, but Heaney shows the **skill** and **dignity** in their labour. We also see their sense of the **work ethic** – the father still digs in old age, the grandfather, when he was working, would barely stop to drink.

Note: the pen is “snug as a gun” because it fits his hand and is powerful. Heaney is from County Derry (Northern Ireland) but the poem was published in 1966, before the “troubles”, and this is not a reference to them.

This poem has a looser structure than *Follower* and looks at two memories – the father digging the potato drills, the grandfather digging turf, for which he was famous as the best digger on the peat bog. The poet celebrates not so much their strength as their expertise. The digger’s technique is exactly explained (“The coarse boot nestled on the lug...”). Each man dug up what has real value

- food – “new potatoes”, and
- fuel – “the good turf”.

Again there are

- technical terms (“lug”, “shaft”) and
- monosyllabic (“bog”, “sods”, “curt cuts”) or
- colloquial terms: “By God, the old man could handle a spade.”

The onomatopoeia (where the sound resembles or suggests meaning) is obvious in “rasping”, “gravelly”, “sloppily”, “squelch” and “slap”.

There is a central extended metaphor of digging and roots, which shows how the poet, in his writing, is getting back to his own roots (his identity, and where his family comes from). The poem begins almost as it ends, but only at the end is the writer’s pen seen as a weapon for digging.

- How does the poem explore ideas of heritage and family tradition?
- What does the poem suggest about physical labour?
- Explain in your own words the image in the last line of the poem.

Some people object to the characterization of Irishmen as people who wield spades. Seamus Heaney does not challenge the depiction. Instead, he accepts it but shows it in positive terms – as something wholesome and worthy of celebration. It reinforces man’s relationship with the good earth that sustains us all.

Pre-1914 Poetry Bank

- Ben Jonson: *On my first Sonne*
- William Butler Yeats: *The Song of the Old Mother*
- William Wordsworth: *The Affliction of Margaret*
- William Blake: *The Little Boy Lost and The Little Boy Found*
- Chidioc Tichborne: Tichborne's Elegy
- Thomas Hardy: *The Man He Killed*
- Walt Whitman: *Patrolling Barnegat*
- William Shakespeare: Sonnet 130 – "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"
- Robert Browning: *My Last Duchess*
- Robert Browning: *The Laboratory*
- Alfred Tennyson: *Ulysses*
- Oliver Goldsmith: *The Village Schoolmaster*
- Alfred Tennyson: *The Eagle*
- Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Inversnaid*
- John Clare: Sonnet – "I love to see the summer..."

Ben Jonson: *On my first Sonne*

About the poet

Ben Jonson (1572-1637) was an actor, playwright and a poet. He wrote his plays around the same time as Shakespeare, whom he outlived. (According to an eccentric and almost certainly false theory, someone else wrote Shakespeare's plays – and Jonson is the chief suspect). In his own time, Jonson was more highly regarded than Shakespeare. In 1598 he was convicted of murdering a fellow actor, Gabriel Spencer, but escaped the hangman by claiming a special privilege called benefit of clergy (he proved he was in holy orders, and so not liable to trial in the ordinary courts). His work is closer in style to the classical dramatists of the ancient world. He published two collections of poems and translations.

About the poem

The poem records and laments (expresses sorrow for) the death of the poet's first son. We call such poems **elegies** or describe them as **elegiac**. Jonson contrasts his feelings of sorrow with what he thinks he **ought** to feel – happiness that his son is in a better place.

The death of a child still has great power to move us – Seamus Heaney records a similar experience in *Mid-Term Break*. It would have been a far more common event in 17th century England, where childhood illnesses were often fatal. The modern reader should also be aware of Jonson's Christian faith – he has no doubt that his son is really in a "state" we should envy, in God's keeping. Sometimes poets write in the first person (writing "I") but take on the identity of an imagined speaker (as Yeats does in *The Song of the Old Mother* and Browning does in *My Last Duchess*). Here we can be sure that Jonson is speaking for and as himself.

The poem in detail

Jonson writes as if talking to his son – and as if he assumes that the boy can hear or read his words. He calls him the child of his "right hand" both to suggest the boy's great worth and also the fact that he would have been the writer's heir (the image comes from the Bible – it reflects ancient cultures and the way Jesus is shown as sitting at God's right hand).

The poet sees the boy's death as caused by his (the father's, not the boy's) sin – in loving the child too much – an idea that returns at the end of the poem. He sees the boy's life also in terms of a **loan**, which he has had to repay, after seven years, on the day set for this ("the just day"). This extended metaphor expresses the idea that all people really belong to God and are permitted by him to spend a certain time in this world before going to meet their maker.

Jonson looks at the contradiction (or paradox) that we "lament" (cry over) something we should really envy – escaping the hardships of life and the misery of ageing. The writer suggests that "his best piece of poetry" (the best thing he has ever made, that is) is his son. Remembering his sin (of loving too much) he now expresses the hope or wish that from now on, whatever he loves he will not do so "too much".

The poet's method

The poem uses the line that Shakespeare, Jonson himself and others rely on for most of the dialogue in their plays (the technical name is the **iambic pentameter** – as it has five [penta] poetic “feet”, each of which has two syllables, of which the second [usually] is stressed). Jonson arranges the lines in rhyming pairs, which we call “couplets”.

The poem is written in the form of an address to the dead child – but really shows us Jonson's own meditations (inner thinking). The short lyric contains one striking metaphor – that of the boy's being “lent” for “seven years”, and paid back “on the just day”. (When the poet develops an image in this way, we may call it an **extended** metaphor.)

The last two lines are memorable – a quite complex idea is packed neatly into two rhyming lines, an effect we call an **epigram**. (The couplet is at the same time both **epigram** and **epitaph**!)

A note on the text

Unlike the poems by Blake and Whitman, the text here has not been changed to modern standard UK English spelling. It also uses some words that are no longer common – such as “tho” (“thou”) for “you”. You might find it helpful to “translate” or update the poem, so that you understand it more easily.

Responding to the poem

What do we say when sad things happen? Compare this poem to other poems or songs written to mark the death of some loved person – you could use Seamus Heaney's *Mid-Term Break* or examples from outside the *Anthology* like Elton John's and Bernie Taupin's song *Candle in the Wind* (this exists in two versions – one written in 1973 for Marilyn Monroe, and a more famous version re-written in 1997 for Princess Diana).

Where do our loved ones go? Despite supposed falling attendance in some places of worship, most people in the UK, when asked, say that they believe in some kind of God or spiritual existence. When people die, we often find that we **do** believe, or want to believe, that death is not the end. What is your belief about such things? Say how far you agree with the ideas that Ben Jonson has about what has happened to his son.

Writing your own elegies

Few of us can write things that are good enough to be published, and that express universal or general experiences. But it may be important for our own private grief to put our feelings down on paper. If you have had a very sad experience – it may be a loss or separation, the death of a pet or something as serious as the death of a friend or relative – then you might wish to write your own elegy in prose or verse. **You must decide whether you want to show it to anyone else.** (A teacher who asked students to write in this way would not be so insensitive as to read out or display the results, unless the writer wanted this to happen.)

Parents and children

This poem is very much written from the viewpoint of the **father**. Students in schools will all be someone's child, but most will not have your own children yet. Does this affect the way we read the poem? Do you see it from the poet's point of view, or identify with the child who has died?

William Butler Yeats: *The Song of the Old Mother*

About the poet

W.B. Yeats (1865-1939) was an Irish poet and dramatist, as well as being very active in politics and culture, and a student of magic and mythology. He founded Dublin's Abbey Theatre and became a senator of the Irish Free State from 1922 to 1928. In 1923, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. His poetry explores Irish mythology and history, classical civilization and modern culture and politics from both public and personal viewpoints.

About the poem

The Song of the Old Mother comes from *The Wind among the Reeds*, published in 1899. The date of its composition is unknown, but those in the collection for which we have dates all come from the period 1892-95. It is among the very simplest of all Yeats' poems, and quite easy to understand. Yeats himself (in *Autobiographies*) describes it as "an old woman complaining of the idleness of the young".

The poem is a simple **monologue** in rhyme – an old woman describes her daily routine and contrasts it with the easy time that young people have. She gets up at dawn to light the fire, wash, prepare food and sweep up. Meanwhile the young people sleep on and pass their day "in idleness". More than a century later, few old people in the west will live quite such hard lives – but the poem is still an accurate portrait of the lives of old and poor people in much of the world.

The poem in detail

The poem starts with the old mother's telling how she starts her day at dawn – her first job is to light the fire (necessary, even in summer, for the rest of her jobs). She kneels down and blows to get it started – in 19th century Ireland this would probably be a slow-burning peat fire. The next three jobs are scrubbing (using water heated over the fire, perhaps), baking (making the staple food, bread) and then sweeping up. (Can you see why the four tasks should be in this order?) By the time the work is done, the stars are coming out again – "beginning to blink and peep".

The young people meanwhile are able to "lie long", dreaming of "matching" ribbons on their clothes and in their hair. Not only are they lazy, but they get upset if the wind disturbs their hair slightly. The poem ends with the image of the fire's going cold. This may be a metaphor for the loss of energy that comes with old age. It is certainly a reminder of how the next day will start – and every other day.

The poet's method

Like many of the poems in this collection, *The Song of the Old Mother* is in rhyming pairs of lines. The metre here is of the kind called **anapaestic** (two unstressed syllables, followed by a stressed one) – you will find this metre in Browning's *The Laboratory* and Hopkins' *Inversnaid*.

The Old Mother uses a simple and familiar vocabulary, naming common household chores.

Like the speaker in Hardy's *The Man He Killed* (and unlike the speaker in *My Last Duchess*) this is not a specific and named or unique individual. Rather she may represent, in some way, **all** old women in all times and places.

The last but one (penultimate) line contains what is almost a proverb – at the least it is presented as a general or universal truth:

“I must work because I am old”

You might like to think about whether this is, or ever has been, generally true.

Responding to the poem

Ask an expert

Show the poem to a person who is a lot older than you – perhaps a grandparent or neighbour – and ask him or her to tell you more about any of the chores that they also had to do.

Is it still true?

Perhaps the nature of the tasks has changed – but is it still true (was it **ever** true) that old people have a harder life than the young?

Rewriting the song

You might like to try writing different versions of, or responses to, the song – perhaps in the same style or as prose accounts. Some possibilities would be:

- the song of the lazy teenager
- the song of the old mother (21st century style)
- the song of the single parent
- the song of the yuppie commuter

Perhaps you could choose your own – either a typical representative person (as in Yeats' poem) or perhaps a comic stereotype.