

Whether you are preparing a poem for class discussion, or writing about a poem, try to do the following:

- * Read poem aloud.
 - * Be aware of the immediate effect on you. ie.
What is your initial response? (eg. amusement, stillness, a shiver up the spine?)
 - * Try to make a general statement about the mood atmosphere or tone of the poem.
 - * Try to make a general statement about the content and theme of the poem. (You may not be sure of this to begin with. After a closer and more detailed analysis of the poem, you may be able to say with more certainty what you think the poem is "about").
 - * Now ask yourself the following questions about the poem. (Remember, poetry is precise and deliberate. There is a reason for everything that happens in a poem. So at the same time as you are noting particular things about rhythm etc. try to say how each of these aspects contributes to the poem's total effect.
 - a) How does the poem appear on the page? ie. How is it written down? How many stanzas are there? How many lines in each? Do they begin under each other in the same place? Does each begin with a capital letter? WHY?
 - b) What is the poem's rhythm? Regular? - If so, describe its metre. Irregular? Then describe it in words. (eg. jerky, smooth, conversational etc.) Does the rhythm change? If so, where, how and why? Does a change in rhythm signal a change in tone or mood?
 - c) Does the poem employ rhythm? Just at the ends of lines? All the way through? WHY? What effect does it have?
 - d) What images are used in the poem? What associations do these have for you?
 - e) What metaphors are used? How obvious or direct are they? Are they effective? Original?
 - f) How does the poem sound? Is there a succession of similar sounds at any point? What is the effect of this?
 - g) Does the poem use a well-known character, story, legend, saying, historical or biblical event and re-work or re-organize it? Explain how and with what success?
 - h) What is the actual meaning of each line?
 - i) Why have particular words been chosen? Are there any unusual or unexpected words or expressions? If so, can you say why they might have been chosen?
- Such an analysis provides a useful 'formula' or process by which you can learn to better enjoy and understand a poem. However the most exciting or moving poetry has a mystery or magic about it that cannot be explained away. Always try to be responsive to what is unique in a particular poem, and if you are writing about it make sure that your enjoyment and delight comes through in the writing!

W H Y P O E T R Y ?

- What good is poetry?
- Poetry's O. K. It's studying it that I can't stand!
- If that's what he meant, why didn't he say that?
- I used to love poetry in primary school but now it's so hard!
- You asked me for my opinion and now you've marked it wrong!

Do any of these points of view echo your attitudes? Is this a part of your English studies that you approach with a vague feeling that you lack the skills to find value in the study of poetry? Yet little children love rhythm and the repetitive sound patterns of verse: nursery rhymes and lullabies are often remembered for their sounds and imagery, rather than their ideas.

All great literatures have poetry at the centre of their society's thought and imagination. Perhaps the mistake we make in senior studies is to concentrate too much on the complex and the subtle, at the expense of the musical, the amusing and the simple pleasure of words. The study of poetry, like any other study, has its technical side and, as a senior student, you must make every effort to discuss the techniques with confidence. However, as with any skill, you will grow in confidence as your experience widens: the more poetry you sample, the more assured your responses will become. The samples in this course or the poems selected by your teacher can only be signposts to a fascinating journey that should last a lifetime. The American poet, Carl Sandburg, said, in his *Ten Definitions of Poetry*, that 'Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment'.

Perhaps, as many poets themselves say, we should never submit poetry to the pressure of written examinations, since students are more likely in such circumstances to look for the 'right' or exclusive interpretation and avoid the challenge of possibilities. Yet this is the very quality that makes poetry such a valuable part of any

senior language study: seeking to balance ideas and technique in poetry will teach you more about the rich possibilities of your language than any formal course in vocabulary or usage. Your general method of approach to any poem can be guided by three basic questions.

- **What** is the poet saying?
 - Consider each idea in the poem's **content** or **subject matter**.
 - Study the **arrangement** or **development** of ideas.
 - What seems to be the poet's **purpose** or **intention** in the poem?
 - Can you identify a **theme**?
- **How** is the poet saying what he has to say?
 - Examine the **form** of the poem: stanza divisions, rhythm, rhyme.
 - Consider the **diction** or **language** for its effect on **mood** or **tone**, as well as the development of ideas; for its capacity to appeal to the imagination or to present an idea in an unexpected or memorable way.
 - How much does the effect of the poem depend on **sound** and what evidence of sound patterns can you find?
- Was it **worth** saying?

Your answer to this question has little value until you have carefully considered all aspects of the first two questions above. You will then be able to say whether you consider the poem effective for its ideas or its ingenuity of language or its unusual design. You may assess its relevance for modern life and its appeal or otherwise for yourself. Most importantly, by a careful analysis of all aspects of the writing, you will have avoided an over-hasty or over-generalised response. The poet will have been given a fair chance to challenge or stimulate you.

That's the theory — or do you feel that too often good intentions can become a . . .

Whether you are preparing a poem for class discussion, or writing about a poem, try to do the following:

* Read poem aloud.

* Be aware of the immediate effect on you. ie.

What is your initial response? (eg. amusement, stillness, a shiver up the spine?)

* Try to make a general statement about the mood atmosphere or tone of the poem.

* Try to make a general statement about the content and theme of the poem. (You may not be sure of this to begin with. After a closer and more detailed analysis of the poem, you may be able to say with more certainty what you think the poem is "about").

* Now ask yourself the following questions about the poem. (Remember, poetry is precise and deliberate. There is a reason for everything that happens in a poem. So at the same time as you are noting particular things about rhythm etc. try to say how each of these aspects contributes to the poem's total effect.

a) How does the poem appear on the page? ie. How is it written down? How many stanzas are there? How many lines in each? Do they begin under each other in the same place? Does each begin with a capital letter? WHY?

b) What is the poem's rhythm? Regular? - If so, describe its metre. Irregular? Then describe it in words. (eg. jerky, smooth, conversational etc.) Does the rhythm change? If so, where, how and why? Does a change in rhythm signal a change in tone or mood?

c) Does the poem employ rhythm? Just at the ends of lines? All the way through? WHY? What effect does it have?

d) What images are used in the poem? What associations do these have for you?

e) What metaphors are used? How obvious or direct are they? Are they effective? Original?

f) How does the poem sound? Is there a succession of similar sounds at any point? What is the effect of this?

g) Does the poem use a well-known character, story, legend, saying, historical or biblical event and re-work or re-organize it? Explain how and with what success?

h) What is the actual meaning of each line?

i) Why have particular words been chosen? Are there any unusual or unexpected words or expressions? If so, can you say why they might have been chosen?

Such an analysis provides a useful 'formula' or process by which you can learn to better enjoy and understand a poem. However the most exciting or moving poetry has a mystery or magic about it that cannot be explained away. Always try to be responsive to what is unique in a particular poem, and if you are writing about it make sure that your enjoyment and delight comes through in the writing!

A student's guide to reading poetry

The poems referred to in this handout are

Robert Gray *The Calm*

Gwen Harwood *Barn Owl*

Seamus Heaney *Mid-Term Break*¹

Poetry is part of an oral tradition and as such should be approached differently from prose. Here are some pointers to help you enjoy the experience of reading poetry.

For each poem,

- be prepared to read with an open mind
- read aloud or listen to someone read the poem - it's the best way to get the feel of a poem. Do this at least twice before forming any responses to the poem.
- ask yourself what sounds the poem makes
- note any words that create an impression on you
- look at the form of the poem: are the lines arranged in a special way?
- think about any colours you'd associate with this poem. This should help you decide the mood of the poem. Note that these may not be the colours which the poet describes.
- use all of the above prompts to think about **what** the poet is saying and how he or she has conveyed this meaning

There is some technical language associated with the study of poetry. It's not essential to master this in order to enjoy poetry but it can sometimes help you in expressing your ideas. Here's a brief survey of some of the terms and their meanings. If you're interested in exploring poetic devices in more depth your library will be sure to have many books which can help you.

Imagery

- Simile
- Metaphor
- Personification

This is at the heart of poetry. It is the way in which the poet helps you "see" his or her ideas. Often this is by painting a vivid word-picture in a literal sense. For example, in *Mid-Term Break* when Seamus Heaney writes, "Snowdrops / And candles soothed the bedside" we are given a picture of the room as it appeared on the morning of the funeral. The word "soothed" sets the mood for the flower and candle filled room.

More often a poet's use of imagery is through figurative language. That is, by using figures of speech: images which are not meant to be taken as being factual but help us to imagine what the poet is describing. Consider Robert Gray's description of "the clouds/like quilting" in his poem *The Calm*. This is an example of a **simile**, a description of something as being similar to or like something else so that we can gain a mental image of the thing being described as well as gaining other impressions through the connotations, or implied meanings, of the word. In this case "quilting" makes me

¹ These poems can be found in Guy, R. *English Matters* (Social Science Press, 1994). The information in this handout is taken from *English Matters* Chapter 7 pp 119 - 121.

think of soft and comfortable padding: the clouds aren't dark and threatening; it's not likely to rain.

The other main forms of figurative language are **metaphor** and **personification**. A metaphor describes one thing as if it is another. Personification is when qualities usually associated with a person are attributed to non-human things. This quotation from *The Calm* gives an example of both of these:

*The curtains here
long gowns, under which the feet of
the breeze*

*prance
their few steps and
slide back.*

We have an image of the curtains and the breeze combining to become partners in a dance. It is a pleasing image, gentle in tone.

Tone

The **tone** in which something is said affects its meaning. We know this from everyday life. Take an ordinary question like, "Have you finished yet?" and notice the way the meaning can change depending on which word is emphasised. It can be a friendly enquiry or a question born out of exasperation. The tone is central to the meaning. In poetry, the tone is established by the choice of words, the images, the rhyme pattern and the sound of the words.

Rhythm

Sound is very important. We've noted how the soft sound of "soothed" affected the meaning in Heaney's poem. Look now at the harshness of words like "wrecked" and "hobbled" in Gwen Harwood's *Barn Owl*. They leave us in no doubt about the horror of this experience. It wouldn't make sense to read these words in a gentle tone.

When reading, follow the punctuation. Don't pause simply because a new stanza has begun. In the extract above from *The Calm* you should avoid a lengthy pause between "breeze" and "prance".

The sound of a poem is determined by the poet's word choices and by the form of the poem. The length of a line, for example, can result in abruptness or in a lazy, relaxed feeling. This helps establish the **rhythm** of the poem and contributes to the general tone.

Rhyme

One last point: don't fall into the trap of thinking poetry has to **rhyme**. Rhyme can add to a poem's effect (as in *Barn Owl*) but it is only one option open to the poet. The images and the sounds are central to poetry. These can be achieved in both rhyming and non-rhyming poetry. When rhyme is used well, it is unobtrusive - you'll hardly notice it. Used in a contrived or artificial way, rhyme results in doggerel not poetry.

THEME AND CONTENT

As students, our first task is to make sure we know what the poet is saying. We should be able to offer an explanation of each idea as it is developed in the poem and then consider how the ideas link to form a whole. Thus we are assessing whether there is unity of purpose in the poem. You will find occasionally that the poet uses unfamiliar words or even everyday words in an unfamiliar way. It is your responsibility to check all possible meanings if your reading is to be satisfactory. When you have considered the whole subject matter of a poem, you should try to find its **theme** — the central or controlling idea. Sometimes, but by no means always, the title of the poem may suggest its theme. It may be obvious or subtle, but only the theme will tell you the poet's attitude to the subject chosen.

Beware of saying, 'The theme of the poem is **about** ...' The theme must be a definite idea. So you must say, 'The theme of the poem is ...' The **content** or **subject matter** may keep repeating the theme, or it may be a pictorial or symbolic illustration of the theme. This will become clearer to you as you identify the themes in the poems set for study. Consider the poems 'Beleaguered Cities' and 'Ozymandias' and answer the questions that follow.

LANGUAGE

Imagery

The poet's appeal to our imagination may be his ability to observe accurately and describe precisely the **literal** details of objects and scenes but he is more likely to employ **figurative** devices to tantalise our senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste or touch, startle our intellect or invade our emotions. Our task as students of poetry is to be able to explain whether such imagery is vivid or hackneyed, whether it enhances the content or mood of the poem, or whether it obscures the poet's intention by being too unexpected or over-complicated. Guard against rejecting an image at first reading because it does not seem to make sense to you. Careful re-reading and awareness of the full context of the poem are necessary to ensure that you are not making over-hasty judgements.

Simile

In a **simile**, the comparison asks us to see one thing in terms of another. The image is always a double one, highlighting a particular quality which the two objects, creatures or scenes have in common. It is always expressed in a phrase beginning with 'like' or 'as'. Study the following examples.

Like a rocket shot to a ship ashore
The lean red bolt of his body tore,
Like a ripple of wind running swift on grass;
Like a shadow on wheat when a cloud blows past.'

from 'Reynard the Fox' by John Masefield

and all the woman heaves
As a great elm with all its mounds of leaves
Wallows before the storm

from 'Mrs Reece laughs' by Martin Armstrong

Metaphor

A **metaphor** implies a comparison, without the signal of 'like' or 'as'. In that assertion of like qualities, the metaphor is often more vivid than a simile. Study the following examples

The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns
from *Hamlet* Act 3, scene 1

Set in the hills' freshwater green
a bright mosaic of houses
bracelets the river

from 'Calm Day' by Gwen Harwood

Similes and metaphors abound in everyday prose as well; some students of language would argue that all language develops by a process of association of like qualities. Our judgement of a poet's success with metaphor will take note of the vividness and originality of the comparisons invited.

Devices of sound

These could really be called **sound imagery**, since the poet uses them to echo the sense of his words or, in association with the more obvious verse techniques of rhyme and rhythm, to reinforce ideas or moods. Indeed, sometimes they provide the main devices of pattern in verse.

Word or phrase repetition

This is used for emphasis of ideas, or to create a sense of spontaneous feeling.

Look at the stars! look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!
from 'The Starlight Night' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Alliteration

This is the deliberate repetition of consonants, especially at the beginning of words or stressed syllables. It is a very old device in English verse, older than rhyme. Whether such repetition is musical or harsh does not depend on the choice of consonant sounds alone, but on the choice of sound reinforcing the literal meaning of the language chosen. We can never divorce ideas from techniques. Consider the effect of repeated consonants in these examples.

Build, build your Babels black against the sky.
from 'Beleaguered Cities' by F. L. Lucas

Summer ends now; now, barbarous in beauty, the
stooks arise

Around; up above, what wind-walks! what lovely
behaviour

Of silk-sack clouds! has wilder, wilful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever and melted across skies?
from 'Hurrahing in Harvest' By Gerard Manley Hopkins

Personification

A close relative, or extension, of metaphor is the device of giving the characteristics of a living creature to inanimate

objects or concepts, suggesting a personality for non-human things.

Study the following examples.

But look, the morn in russet mantle clad
Walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill.
from *Hamlet* Act 1, scene 1

The cypresses are looped with wind.
The poplars besom the swinging sky.
Squat dark trunks, hands on hips,
Plant their feet in the fleeting grass.
from 'Windy Day in Provence' by L. Aaronson

Assonance

This is the deliberate repetition of identical or similar vowel **sounds**. This has the same emphatic effect as interior rhyme, but it is also possible to suggest that vowel

sounds can alter the mood of a poem since they differ in length of sound. Compare the examples below.

Nothing is so beautiful as spring —
When weeds, in wheels, shoot long and lovely and
lush;
Thrush's eggs look like little low heavens, and thrush
Through the echoing timber does so rinse and wring
The ear, it strikes like lightnings to hear him sing
from 'Spring' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with
toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell:
the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
from 'God's Grandeur' by Gerard Manley Hopkins

Onomatopoeia

This is the use of words whose sounds resemble the sounds they describe, for example, drip, hiss, rattle, splash. Note the onomatopoeic effects in the extracts

Guard sounds a warning whistle, points to the clock
With brandished flag, and on his folded flock
Claps the last door: the monster grunts: 'Enough!
Tightening his load of links with pant and puff.

from 'Morning Express' by Siegfried Sassoon

O cold the black-frost night. The walls draw in to
the warmth

and the old roof cracks its joints; the slung kettle
hisses a leak on the fire.

from 'South of My Days' by Judith Wright

Students of poetry are often inclined to think that awareness of patterns of sound is a wilful obsession of English teachers and express doubts about the poet's conscious decision to employ any of the devices we are discussing in these examples. It is certainly true, especially in recent poetry, that writers today are less concerned with the traditional verse forms and techniques, but students of poetry will be better equipped to respond to poetry as they become more aware of the variety of sound patterns that our language makes available to any writer.

F O R M

It is usually possible to recognise verse simply by looking at its more or less regular lines on the printed page; but there is more to its **form** than this regularity. When we consider the form of a literary work, we look at shape and structure, not because we wish to divorce form from content but because an awareness of the poet's choice of patterns should help to explain **how** his ideas create mood and atmosphere or help to suggest the poet's attitude to his subject matter. The form of any poem depends on the writer's choice of **rhythm** and **metre**, **rhyme**, **line length** and number of syllables, **stanza division**, and even a particular **set of rules** (such as that governing the sonnet). If you think that the technical names for these formal aspects of verse are complicated, you might think of them as filling the same role as technical terms in mathematics or science. You can appreciate the ideas of a poem without knowing any of the terminology, but you will find them usefully exact when you wish to explain **how** a particular effect is gained.

Rhythm

Speaking generally, rhythm is any sense of movement suggested by the arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables. There is rhythm in prose as well as in verse, but prose rhythm is intermittent — it does not follow a regular pattern. Verse has access to all the rhythms of prose as well as the regularity which comes from the division of lines into metrical feet (see metre below). The rhythm of verse may vary from high regularity to a prose-like irregularity. Compare the two extracts below.

How sweet I roam'd from field to field
And tasted all the summer's pride,
Till I the Prince of Love beheld
Who in the sunny beams did glide!

from a 'Song' by William Blake

Free verse

Verse of this sort has no regular metre or line length, nor any regular rhyme pattern, so that the emphasis falls on the rhythmic effects of individual lines or even phrases. The extract above from Lawrence's poem, 'Bat', is a typical example. Consider the following poem.

Work

There is no point in work
unless it absorbs you
like an absorbing game.

If it doesn't absorb you
if it's never any fun,
don't do it.

When a man goes out into his work
he is alive like a tree in spring,
he is living, not merely working.

When the Hindus weave thin wool into long, long
lengths of stuff
with their thin dark hands and their wide dark eyes
and their still souls absorbed
they are like slender trees putting forth leaves, a long
white web of living leaf,
the tissue they weave,

Use (and abuse) of rhyme

While many modern poets choose to ignore rhyme as being conventional or artificial, it is both the commonest and most traditional metrical device. It can assist in creating a structure for the poem, organising ideas into sound patterns and reinforcing rhythm; and the sound echoes themselves can be pleasing when verse is spoken and not simply read. Usually it is the last syllable of the line that carries the rhyme (the **end rhyme**). If the rhymed syllable also carries a stress we say that it is a **masculine rhyme**, while a rhyme depending on two syllables, the second of which is unstressed, is known as a **feminine rhyme**. Some poets will add rhymes within a given line (**internal rhyme**) and we might consider **alliteration** and **assonance** as extensions of rhyme patterns as well. Modern poets have often made use of **half** or **imperfect rhyme** where the words seem similar in appearance or sound but do not exactly correspond. Sometimes this device is seen simply as a subtler sound than traditional **exact rhyme**, but it is also popular in poems to suggest an atmosphere that is frustrating or

unsatisfactory, just as the rhyme fails to conform to the expected pattern.

The pattern of rhyme in any poem is called the **rhyme scheme** and it is represented by letters of the alphabet. Study the following example.

Dirty British coaster with a saltcaked smoke stack (a)
Butting through the Channel in the mad March
days (b)
With a cargo of Tyne coal, (c)
Road-rail, pig-lead, (d)
Firewood, iron-ware, and cheap tin trays. (b)

from 'Cargoes' by John Masefield

Unless the poet is trying to be odd or amusing, his rhymes should not be too obvious or hackneyed. In a good poem, you should never feel that a word has been chosen **simply** because it rhymes with another. That great eighteenth century technician, Alexander Pope, gave the warning in his *Essay on Criticism*.

While they ring round the same unvary'd chimes,
With sure returns of still expected rhymes;
Where-e'er you find "the cooling western breeze",
In the next line, it "whispers through the trees":
If crystal streams "with pleasing murmurs creep",
The reader's threaten'd (not in vain) with "sleep":

from *Essay on Criticism* by Alexander Pope

Predictable rhyme is one symptom of unoriginal writing, while clumsy line arrangement in order to accommodate rhyme is another. The example below comes from Wordsworth, who should have known better.

Poor Susan moans, poor Susan groans;
"As sure as there's a moon in heaven,"
Cries Betty, "he'll be back again;
They'll both be here — 'tis almost ten —
Both will be here before eleven."

from 'The Idiot Boy' by William Wordsworth

STANZAS

- Couplet — two lines rhyming
- Triplet — three lines rhyming
- Quatrain — four lines, rhymed in a variety of patterns or even unrhymed
- Quintain/quintet — five lines
- Sestet — six lines following the
- Octave — eight lines that open the Italian sonnet

The **quatrain** is the commonest stanza pattern in European verse and allows enough flexibility for developing an idea while still conforming to a technical pattern. However, many poets reject stanza divisions altogether or divide their work into **verse paragraphs**, stanzas of irregular length according to the stages of thought in the poem. Of those poets who still use regular stanza divisions, many will contrive to **run on** the sense of a line to the following line, or even the following stanza, to reduce the sense of artificial divisions conforming to a set pattern. This technique is known as **enjambement**.

As a review on the discussion of form so far, study the poem below and answer the questions that follow.

FORM AND

GENRE

Poetry divides into two broad kinds of verse: poems of action or story, called **narrative** verse, and poems of thought and feeling, called **lyric** verse.

Ballad

Most English ballads are so old as to be anonymous and, like their European counterparts, were often stories told to a musical accompaniment. The **folk** ballad belongs to the oral tradition of literature. The stories were transmitted from singer to singer by word of mouth, and thus their structure often shows repetitive devices to help keep the work in the memory of both narrator and hearer. The story is often dramatic, concentrating on a single episode, the imagery and the language generally are simple, and, while the narrator remains objective in his attitude, there is often an implied criticism of the society or human relationship portrayed in the ballad.

Literary ballads are poems by writers acknowledged as poets, imitating the style and choice of subject of the folk ballads. Examples that you might encounter in your studies include Coleridge's 'Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' and the numerous Australian bush ballads of the nineteenth century.

Epic

This is narrative verse of much more solemnity and grandeur than the ballad. Its subject matter is great events and heroes of a nation's history. As with other narrative verse, the poet's treatment is **objective** (his own feelings are not themselves the concern of the poem). John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an example in English verse, detailing the fall from grace of Satan, his temptation of Adam and Eve, and the fallen state of mankind. In the extract below, Satan, having built his palace of Pandemonium, considers the dangers of leaving Hell to search for a land closer to Heaven.

From *Paradise Lost*, Book II

O Progeny of heaven, empyreal Thrones,
With reason hath deep silence and demur
Seized us, though undismayed. Long is the way
And hard, that out of hell leads up to light;
Our prison strong, this huge convex of fire,
Outrageous to devour, immures us round
Ninefold, and gates of burning adamant
Barred over us prohibit all egress.
These passed, if any pass, the void profound
Of unessential Night receives him next
Wide gaping, and with utter loss of being
Threatens him, plunged in that abortive gulf.
If thence he scape into whatever world,
Or unknown region, what remains him less
Than unknown dangers and as hard escape?
But I should ill become this throne, O Peers,
And this imperial sovereignty, adorned
With splendour, armed with power, if aught proposed
And judged of public moment, in the shape
Of difficulty or danger could deter
Me from attempting. Wherefore do I assume
These royalties, and not refuse to reign,
Refusing to accept as great a share
Of hazard as of honour, due alike
To him who reigns, and so much to him due
Of hazard more, as he above the rest
High honoured sits?

John Milton