



Christian Brothers School

AQA REVISION GUIDE:

ENGLISH - POETRY

For your GCSE examination in English you will be studying poems from different cultures and traditions. These poems are contained in your AQA Anthology.

You will be asked to show that you:

- Know what the poems are about.
- Understand how the poet is using words to create a particular effect.
- Have thought carefully about the effect the poem has on you.

Nothing's Changed

The poem is set in South Africa. In the 1960's the white government decided that black people and white people should be separated. They should live in separate housing areas and go to separate schools. This system was called APARTHEID. In 1990 Nelson Mandela came to power. He formed the first black government. He abolished apartheid.

The poet returns to District Six. This is the place he had to leave as a boy because he was coloured. He expects to see change, however, he discovers that nothing has changed and he sees a brand new white's only inn. This makes him very angry. The inn is an expensive place in which to eat. There is a guard at the gate post to keep black people out.

Down the road there a cheap café and it sells cheap food and has plastic tables. There is where black people will eat.

Even though there is a new government the poet sees no real change. He wants a stone or a bomb to blow up the new inn. He is very disappointed at the lack of change.

- What happens in the poem?
 - Lines 1-16, he describes his return to District Six. He says that, even though the old sign is gone, his sense tell him where he is - "my feet know/ and my hands" (lines 11-12).

- Lines 17-32, this section's about the inn. The inn represents the reality - blacks and whites still don't mix. It's clear that the inn is for white people only.
- Lines 33-48, he thinks about the cheap café "down the road". It is very different from the inn. In the final four lines, he says he wants to destroy the inn.

- The types of language used.
 - **Harshness and Bitterness** - he's angry at the inequality, and uses harsh-sounding words. They're often one-syllable words, with alliteration and onomatopoeia adding to the harsh feel.
 - **Metaphorical Language** - the glass of the inn becomes a metaphor for apartheid. The inn represents the dominance and arrogance of the white people.
 - **Comparisons** - the difference between the lives of white and black people give you plenty to talk about. Keep an eye out for the comparisons split between different verses, e.g. the inn and the café.

- Feelings and attitudes in the poem
 - There is the physical recognition of the poet's home district (lines 9-16).
 - But this is tinged with anger at its neglected state.
 - There is bitterness and resentment in his contrasting descriptions of the white people's inn (lines 17-32) and the black people's café (lines 33-40).
 - This turns to violent feelings at the end of the poem, when he wants to "shiver down the glass" of the whites only inn (lines 45-47).

Vultures

This is a difficult poem. Despite the title it is not about vultures. It is about good and evil.

In the first part we learn that vultures are ugly birds. They live on the dead and the dying. They begin by eating the eyes and then the soft organs, the liver and kidneys. They have cold, telescopic eyes.

Yet these birds show love for each other. Pairs of vultures stay close to each other.

In the human world, the commandant of Belsen spends his day running the concentration camp. Over 875,000 Jews, men, women and children were gassed and their bodies burned in this camp. This was a truly evil man, yet his man could also show acts of kindness. On his way home from work he would call into a sweet shop and bring chocolate home to his children. They loved their daddy.

The poet tells us that good and evil exist side by side. Should we be grateful that such an evil man has some good in him? Or should we be sad that the little bit of good inside that person will always be infected?

- This poem is pretty grim. We are told how a pair of vultures, despite having some disgusting eating habits, are still capable of affection for each other. The poet compares the vultures to a Nazi officer who is cruel and murderous during the day but loving and kind when he is with his family.
- What happens in the poem?
 - Lines 1-21, a pair of vultures is described, scoffing down eyes and other horrible things.
 - Lines 22-29, the poet discusses how odd it is that love - seen here as a person- chooses to ignore the presence of evil.
 - Lines 30-40, a Nazi commandant goes home, with the smell of murder clinging to him (lines 32-35). He buys some sweets for his child waiting for him at home (lines 37-38).
 - Lines 41-51, the poet finishes by saying you could look at it two ways: on the one hand you could be grateful that such an evil person even has a shred of decency on him (lines 41-41). On the other hand, the good inside that person will always be infected with evil (lines 47-51).
- The types of language used
 - **Contemplative tone** - although the poet talks about the disgusting things, he does not say outright that he is appalled by them. He contemplates the evil that humans are capable of, and how love cannot seem to conquer cruelty - he says it is "strange" (line 22), rather than tragic.

- **Evil Mood** - the poem starts at dawn, but there is no sign of the sun (lines 3-4). There are plenty of words related to darkness and ugliness
- a **sombre mood** hangs over the poem.
- **Metaphorical Language** - the vultures are a metaphor for evil behaviour of people. There is a lot of symbolism- love is seen as a person, who chooses not to notice the less pleasant aspects of humanity (lines 22-29).
- The feelings and attitudes in the poem
 - The poet finds the appearance and behaviour of the vultures (lines 8-21) and the Commandant (30-35) unpleasant.
 - But he is not shocked by it. His disgust is detached and unemotional - although this apparent lack of surprise may be intended to shock the reader.
 - He is unsure about how to look at the fact that people are capable of both kindness and cruelty.

Two Scavengers

This poem is set in San Francisco. The poet is watching the early morning traffic. The traffic is stopped at a red light. Side by side on the road there is a bin lorry and an open top Mercedes. The poet examines the huge contrast between the vehicles and their occupants.

The men in the bin lorry have been up since early morning collecting the rubbish. They are tired and smelly. They wear read plastic jackets. The older one has grey hair and a hunched back. They are riding in the back of the lorry. The poet refers to them as scavengers, making a living from collecting the waste of others.

The people in the Mercedes are described as elegant. They are a cool couple. They have an expensive car and wear expensive clothes. They have good jobs and are obviously much richer than the bin men.

Even though the two groups are close on the road they are very far apart in social terms. The poet is fascinated by the extremes in society. Life seems to be unfair.

- What happens in the poem?

- Lines 1-9, two "garbage men" (bin men) look down from their truck to see a rich, attractive couple in a flashy Mercedes car.
 - Lines 10-25, two stark contrasts between the two pairs of people are described - the fashionable clothes and expensive hair-dos of the couple in the Merc, and the dirty, tired bin men.
 - Lines 26-37, the poet describes how far apart the pair are in social terms, even though they are physically very close. This is a very important message in the poem.
- The types of language used
 - **Stillness** - the poem describes a single moment, and the odd layout spreads the phrases around like the different things you might notice in a photograph. There are no full stops - it is read in one go.
 - **Comparisons** - there are a few similarities between the rich and poor people, e.g. "sunglasses and long hair" (line 12), but there are also many differences.
 - **Social Commentary** - this just means the poet says things about people and society. He often uses sarcasm to show his opinions e.g. describing the rich people as "beautiful" and "elegant" (line 8), when he does not really admire them at all.
 - The feelings and attitudes in the poem
 - The poet is fascinated with the extreme in society.
 - But he is also critical of society for allowing these extremes, and for making the differences between rich and poor so obvious.
 - There is a sense of the bin men longing for a life that they cannot have and the rich couple being unaware or unconcerned by the contrast.

What were they like?

This poem was written after the war in Vietnam. The Americans tried to bomb their way to victory in this war. Many innocent people were killed. This is an anti-war poem.

In the poem someone is trying to find out how life has changed for the Vietnamese people as a result of the war. What was life like before the war and how has this changed? The first part of the poem contains six questions. The second part tries to answer these six questions. The poem asks questions about culture, behaviour, and language.

The six questions are answered one by one. We are told that the people used to be light-hearted and happy, but the war changed that. Their history is lost and their culture is destroyed.

Laughter has been replaced by screams. The music has been replaced by silence. Bombs shattered the lives of these simple people.

The feelings in the poem are ones of sadness, anger and regret.

- What happens in the poem?
 - Verse 1. There is a series of questions about how Vietnamese people used to live before the war. It asks about their way of life (Questions 1 and 4), their culture (Question 2 and 5), their behaviour (Question 3), and their language (Question 6).
 - Verse 2. This answers the questions one by one. We are told that they used to be light-hearted and happy, but the war changed that (Answer 1 and 3). Their history is lost and their culture destroyed. The tone of the answers is vague and uncertain, as if the person speaking them cannot be sure about life before the war (Answer 6).
- The types of language
 - **Respectful language** - the poet sees the Vietnamese people and culture as beautiful and admirable (e.g. Answer 5). This makes the destruction caused by the war seem even more appalling.
 - **Metaphorical language** - there is a mythical feel to some of the language (e.g. Answer 5). This is related to the old stories and ceremonies of the Vietnamese culture.
 - **Formal tone** - it is based around the style of a formal military investigation. Answers 1 and 3 start with "Sir" - like a soldier reporting back to his superior officer.

- **Sense of devastation** - war and destruction are constant themes. The whole poem is in the past tense, suggesting that everything that is being described has been lost forever.

Blessing

This poem is set in a slum in India. The weather is always very hot and so there is very little water to go around. Everything is very dry, even skin cracks in the heat. The people are always thirsty. We learn that they are poor and live in huts.

A pipe bursts in the town and there is water everywhere. Suddenly from nowhere people rush into the streets with pots and buckets to catch the precious water. The adults believe that the water is a gift from God. Water is more precious than silver to these people.

The children react differently to their parents. They strip off and begin to play in the water. We realise the children are malnourished. They have small bones. They are excited and happy in the water.

We take water for granted. We have so much water. However, for these people water is like a miracle.

- Deals with a whole community's lack of water.
- We learn that in this very hot country there never is enough water.
- While the rich houses have a plentiful supply the very poor survive on little.
- A burst pipe means that for once the villagers can have as much water as they want. While the adults fill pots and pans, the children use this opportunity to play and to have fun in the water.
- The poet who is a spectator feels that these children of the poor are malnourished. She comments on their small bones.
- They do not feel anger with the authorities; they have no wish for a stone or a bomb. They have no white hot anger in their eyes.
- They feel blessed at their good fortune. They have simple beliefs and they see the extra water as a gift from God.
- The poet is an onlooker, she is simply commenting on what she sees.

- What happens in the poem?

- Lines 1-6 - the poet describes the dryness of the slum, caused by drought and no water supply. We get a sense of how every drop of water is cherished by the people living in the slum.
- Lines 7- 17 - a water pipe bursts and loads of people frantically gather round to collect as much water as possible with anything that comes to hand (lines 14-16).
- Lines 18 - 23 - the children of the slum are described, basking in the light of the "blessing" (line 22).

- The types of language used
 - **Metaphorical Language** - the words used to describe water make it seem valuable. The people of the slum follow it like a religion (line 12).
 - **Changing Tone** - each verse has a feel of its own. The dreamy fantasy of water in verse 2 gives way to the frenzied pace of the rush when it appears for real. The final verse has a strange, religious feel.
 - **Life-Related Language** - the reliance on water for survival is a constant theme.

- The feelings and attitudes in the poem
 - There is a real desperation because of the lack of water - and the poet appeals to the reader to imagine how this would feel.
 - This desperation leads to the frantic urgency in collecting the water.
 - There is sheer delight at the rare pleasure of having water to drink. The poet uses sight, sound and feel of water to give the reader an impression of the people's excitement.

Limbo

This poem tells the story of slavery when people were taken from their homes in Africa and put on slave ships to America and the Caribbean. The poem uses the limbo dance to describe this cruel journey.

The limbo dance and the voyage of a slave ship are the two main themes introduced in this poem. The middle of the poem is the middle of the voyage right under the stick of the Limbo pole.

In the final section the poet sees an end to the suffering he comes "out of the dark" at last.

The poet feels angry at the conditions on the cramped slave ship. Descriptions of darkness and the slave ship are used to stress the living hell of slavery. The poet also admires the strength of the slaves and he celebrates the slaves past and their survival.

- This poem uses the limbo dance as an extended metaphor. The poet uses it to describe the story of African people being transported as human cargo to the Caribbean colonies to work as slaves.
- What happens in the poem?
 - Lines 1-19 - the poem begins in the midst of slavery. Two main themes are introduced - the limbo dance and the voyage of the slave ship.
 - Lines 20-36 - the middle of the poem is the middle of the voyage, right under the stick or limbo pole.
 - Lines 37 -51 - in the final section, the poet sees an end to the suffering. He comes "out of the dark" at last - although where he ends up is unclear.
- The types of language used in the poem.
 - **References to slavery** - this is the main theme. The journey of the first African slaves is linked to the poet's individual life. The past and present are difficult to separate.
 - **Repetition** - the lines "limbo/limbo like me" are repeated throughout the poem. Some lines are repeated with minor differences, e.g. lines 16 and 17, lines 41 and 43.
 - **Metaphorical language** - descriptions of darkness and the slave ship are used to stress the living hell of slavery. The voyage of the ship is used as a metaphor for the long-term plight of generations of slaves.
 - **Rhythm** - the beat of the drum on the ship emphasises the monotony and relentlessness of slave labour. Also, the tribal beat of the limbo dance recalls the slaves' African roots.
- Feelings and Attitudes in the poem

- He's angry at the conditions on the cramped slave ship and the cruelty the slaves have suffered (e.g. line 20).
 - But he admires the strength and resolve of the slaves.
 - He celebrates the slaves' past- and their survival (line47).
- The effect of the poem as a whole
 - The poem is one long sentence. This helps to create the feel of a continuous dance, and the seemingly never-ending suffering of the slaves. Having "and" as the first word suggests this isn't the start of the suffering - it's been going on for generations.

Night of the Scorpion

This poem tells the story of a mother who has been stung by a scorpion. A scorpion sting can be deadly but only for the very young, very old or very sick people. For others it is extremely painful and the pain can last many hours.

The scorpion in this case was hiding from the rain. When the mother moved a sack of rice where the scorpion was hiding, it bit her.

All the neighbours hear the woman's screams they come rushing into the hut. The hut is soon crowded with people.

The people begin to pray. Some try to find the scorpion to kill it, but it had escaped. The people believed that if they killed the scorpion, the poison would stop moving around the woman's body. They believed that the pain would clean the woman's soul. They believed that her suffering would be decreased in the next life (reincarnation).

The woman's husband who is normally very calm is very concerned about his wife. He begins to mix potions to help the pain. He even sets fire to the woman's toe, trying to burn the poison out.

The man arrives and says prayers over the woman. However, after twenty hours the pain leaves the woman. All the mother says is thank God the scorpion stung her and not her children. While everyone else, the neighbours, the holy man, her husband was thinking about the woman, she was concerned about her children.

- What happens in the poem?
 - Lines 1-7 - The poet recalls how a scorpion, which had come inside to escape the rain, stung his mother.
 - Lines 8-33 - Some locals come round and look for the scorpion, but they cannot find it. They try to help the woman, saying religious stuff about reincarnation - they clearly think the woman is going to die.
 - Lines 34-48 - The woman is in agony (lines 34-35). The husband does everything he can to cure her. Then, after all the fuss, she pulls through, and just thanks God it was her and not her children (lines 47-48).
- The type of language used
 - **Factual Tone** - there is a neutral, straightforward way of talking when the poet describes the more action-based parts of the story, e.g. the stinging incident (lines 1-4).
 - **The Child's Perspective** - it is a first person narrative, so we witness the events through the child's eyes. He is confused and frightened.
 - **Religious Language** - it is set in a Hindu community, where they believe in reincarnation - so there are a lot of things about purifying the soul of sin for the next life (lines 19-28).
- Feelings and attitudes in the poem
 - The poet is frightened by what is happening, but admires the woman's courage.
 - There is a sense of panic in the villagers' reactions. Even the husband, who is not religious, goes along with the religious practice.
 - The poet seems critical of religion - the ceremonial language and the talk about the next life seem unhelpful and premature.

Island Man

The poet Grace Nichols was born in the Caribbean and then moved to the South coast of England. She still writes about life in the Caribbean.

In this poem, the poet writes about a man from a Caribbean island that is now living in London. In his sleep, the man dreams about life on his island,

with the blue surf, the wild sea birds' and the fishermen going out to sea. The colours he sees are blue and emerald green. Everything is peaceful and calm.

However, the man wakes up in London where he has come to work. He is woken by the noise of the early morning London traffic, the wheels and horns of the cars. London colours are different from those of the island. Everything in London is grey, the colour of sickness and old age. The man wishes he could go back to his dream but he realises he must get up to begin another day in London.

- What happens in the poem?
 - Lines 1-10, the man wakes up thinking of the sights and sounds of a Caribbean beach. But it is an idealised image- he only remembers the good things about it. This seems to show he wishes he was still there.
 - Lines 11-19, he slowly "comes back" to the reality of daybreak in London - grey buildings and the sound of traffic. He reluctantly "heaves himself" up to face the day.

- The types of language
 - **Contrasting descriptions** - there are a lot of hints that he would rather be in the natural paradise of the Caribbean than the dull, artificial greyness of London.
 - **Dreamy language** - some words are strongly linked to ideas of sleeping or waking up. Others have confused double meanings.
 - **Irregular structure** - the line lengths and number of lines in each verse vary, creating a muddled, sleepy feel. Some lines are separated from the rest of the poem and there is virtually no punctuation.

- Feelings and attitudes in the poem
 - The poet seems to have sympathy for the man, e.g. the description of him "groggily" returning to reality (line11).
 - There are fond memories of the Caribbean (lines 1-10).
 - There is also a subtle resentment at the London lifestyle and how it intrudes on his dreams (lines 16-18).
 - The poem concludes with a feeling of resignation and dread at the prospect of "Another London day".