Unit Introduction

In this unit we will be learning how to analyse poetry. We will explore the different aspects of poetry, including structure, themes, rhyme and rhythm. We will also look at a series of different poems to show you how the skills you are learning can be put into practice. In the companion unit, 'Analysing Imagery', you can find lots of information about how to identify and comment on images, such as similes, metaphors and personification.

Before we start looking at the examples, first we need to learn a little more about poetry itself: what it is, how it has changed over time, and how it relates to the society in which it is written.

What is Poetry?

Poetry has certain characteristics that make it special. Here are a few ideas - you may be able to think of more.

- Poetry uses vivid images and descriptive language to ‘paint’ a picture in the reader’s mind.
- Poetry cuts out all the excess words that you might find in prose, creating its magic with a limited amount of text.
- Poetry is normally designed to be read out loud - when you read it, do try to hear it as well.
- Poetry often makes the reader emphasise certain important words, and it usually has a strong rhythm.
- Poetry may rhyme, but it does not have to.

Poetry and Society

Throughout history, poets have commented on the society in which they live. Just as novelists write in a particular social context, so too do poets. Poetry can be a very special form of commentary, because part of its magic is that it can be read aloud. Some poets in our modern society write 'performance poetry', specifically designed to be heard.

One of the ways in which poets can comment on their society is by choosing particular themes, such as religion or politics. We will be looking at the themes that poets choose in greater detail later on in the unit.

When you analyse any piece of poetry, you should take the social context into account.

Structure

When you look at a poem, whether in class or for an examination or coursework essay, the first thing to explore is the way that it is structured.

Generally speaking, poems are structured in verses, and within the verses you may also find a specific line structure. An example of this is the Shakespearean Sonnet, which we will be analysing further on in this section.

When commenting on the structure of a poem, you should ensure that you discuss how the structure affects the impact of the poem, and the way that it works. Let's look briefly now at a poetry extract to see how you might do this.

Structure

When you are analysing a poem's structure, ask yourself the following questions:

- **Stanzas.** How many are there and how long is each one? Are the verses all the same length or are they different?
- **Punctuation.** Does each verse end with a full stop or not? How does the punctuation affect the flow of the poem?
- **Rhyme Pattern.** Is there a constant rhyme pattern? Does this affect the structure and flow of the poem?
- **'Storyline'.** Does each stanza contain a particular part of the story, or does it run throughout?

Structure

The poem below has been annotated to show how it is structured.

Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening <u>star</u>,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the <u>bar</u>,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and <u>foam</u>,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again <u>home</u>.

Each stanza has 4 lines.

Lines 1 & 3 rhyme in every stanza.

Stanza one ends with a comma.

Lines 2 & 4 rhyme in every stanza.

Stanza two ends with a full stop.

Structure

Crossing the Bar (continued)

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there by no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809 - 1892)

Exclamation marks are used at the end of the second and tenth lines.

Verse three ends with a semi-colon.

Verse four ends with a full stop.

Structure

Once you have annotated the structure of the poem, you need to think about the effects its structure creates.

Each stanza has 4 lines

This creates a set rhythmic pattern, particularly in conjunction with rhyme scheme. It also breaks the poem up into four clear sections, or parts of the 'story'. However, the impact of the break is lessened somewhat by the use of a comma at the end of stanza one, and a semi-colon at the end of stanza three.

Lines 1 & 3 rhyme in every verse

The use of rhyme creates an 'end stop', whereby the reader pauses slightly, thus emphasising the rhyming words.

Structure

Stanza one ends with a comma

Because there is a comma here, the reader moves onto the second verse with only a slight pause. If there had been a full stop, the four lines, with a regular rhyme scheme, would create a very definite ‘end’ to each verse. As it is, the reader ‘flows’ into the second verse, just as the poet talks about putting out to sea.

Lines 2 & 4 rhyme in every stanza

Again, the choice creates a stop, or pause, for the reader. However, the regimented pattern is broken up by the use of punctuation as explained above.

Structure

Verse two ends with a full stop

The full stop creates a break or divide right in the middle of the poem. It is at this point that the poet uses the image “turns again home”, and the full stop seems to echo this.

Exclamation marks are used at the end of the second and tenth lines

Exclamation marks can be used to express surprise, or shock, or, as seems to be the case here, a kind of unwillingness to go, combined with resignation. Because they are followed by the word “and”, the exclamation marks do not denote the end of a sentence, but rather an exclamation or expression of the poet’s feelings.

Structure

Verse three ends with a semi-colon

Again, because there is no full stop here, the reader is pulled into the fourth stanza with only a slight pause. The thought expressed by the poet is continued in the last stanza. Again, the image of being pulled out to sea is echoed by the flow between the stanzas.

Stanza four ends with a full stop

The poem ends with a full stop, bringing things to a close. Although most poems do end with a full stop, here the poet uses punctuation to echo ‘storyline’ or the themes of the poem: death or ‘crossing the bar’. The poet hopes to meet God, or his “Pilot” on the other side. See the section on ‘Storyline’ for more information about such extended metaphor.

Form

Poems come in a variety of specific forms, although not all poets will be working within these forms, or formats. Poems that fall within a particular form could have a defined number of lines, or a specific rhyme pattern. Examples of common forms are:

- The Ballad.
- The Limerick.
- The Haiku.
- The Sonnet.

On the next slides you will consider: the limerick and the sonnet. You will be looking at a specific form of sonnet, the Shakespearean Sonnet.

The Limerick

A limerick is a comic poem with five lines and a specific ‘a / b’ rhyme scheme. Look at the example below to see how rhyme scheme works.

There was an old lady from Wales
Who loved to eat her garden snails
But she felt quite unwell
When she crunched on a shell
And now she just sticks to the tails.

The first, second and fifth lines rhyme - this is called rhyme ‘a’.

The third and fourth lines rhyme - this is called rhyme ‘b’.

The Limerick

Limericks also use a specific ‘meter’, or internal rhythm. Meter is created by the amount of syllables, and the stress that is put on certain words. Look at the example below to see how this works.

There **was** an old **la**dy from **Wales**	1 **2** 3 4 **5** 6 7 **8**
Who **loved** to eat **her** garden **snails**	1 **2** 3 4 **5** 6 7 **8**
But she **felt** quite un**well**	1 2 **3** 4 5 **6**
When she **crunched** on a **shell**	1 2 **3** 4 5 **6**
And **now** she just **sticks** to the **tails**.	1 **2** 3 4 **5** 6 7 **8**

Storyline

It seems strange to use the word ‘storyline’ in connection with poetry, but just as a novel or short story will have a plot, so too will the majority of poems.

When you first read a poem, whether in class or in an examination, you are looking for meaning.

What is this poem about, you ask yourself? Some poems are not ‘about’ anything - they simply evoke a mood, or an emotion, or a vivid atmosphere. But even these poems can be said to have a ‘story’, because the poet is saying something to the reader.

When you are analysing a poem, you should avoid saying it is definitely about ‘X’ or ‘Y’. Try instead to interpret its possible meaning or meanings in your analysis.

Storyline

Often, the ‘story’ in a poem will work on more than one level. There could be the literal level, at which plot or action of the poem is apparent, but there could also be one or more deeper levels of meaning.

When you see a poem for the first time, take the following steps:

- On your first reading, simply gain a feeling for atmosphere or emotion. Do not try to ‘make sense’ of it.
- On your second reading, look to see if there is something happening in the poem. What is the poet or character doing?
- On your third reading, start to look deeper. Does the poet create a metaphor? Is the poem really about something else?

Storyline

On the next slides you will find the poem “Crossing the Bar”. We have already looked closely at this poem’s structure. Now we are going to explore what it is about. Consider the questions below as you read the poem.

Questions

- What sort of atmosphere does the poet create in his ‘story’? How does he seem to be feeling?
- What is the poem *literally* about? What is the ‘surface story’?
- What deeper meanings might there be? Could the whole poem be an extended metaphor? If so, what does the metaphor mean? What is the poet trying to say?

Storyline

Crossing the Bar

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning of the bar,
When I put out to sea,

But such a tide as moving seems asleep,
Too full for sound and foam,
When that which drew from out the boundless deep
Turns again home.

Storyline

Crossing the Bar (continued)

Twilight and evening bell,
And after that the dark!
And may there by no sadness of farewell,
When I embark;

For though from out our bourne of Time and Place
The flood may bear me far,
I hope to see my Pilot face to face
When I have crost the bar.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809 - 1892)

Storyline

Question

- What sort of atmosphere does the poet create in his 'story'? How does he seem to be feeling?

Answer

The atmosphere in this poem seems to be one of peacefulness and calm acceptance. The poet says there is "*no moaning of the bar*" and "*no sadness of farewell*". The words used in the poem are soft, with a lot of repetition of sounds 's' and 'f', that create a gentle feeling. The poet seems to be feeling positive, almost hopeful about the journey he will be taking.

Storyline

Question

- What is the poem *literally* about? What is the 'surface story'?

Answer

On the surface, the poem seems to be about a journey by boat. Someone, probably the poet, is preparing to set off on a journey of some sort.

It is evening, as the poet talks of the "sunset and evening star", and the "twilight and evening bell".

At the end of the poem he talks of meeting "my Pilot". On the surface, he is making a journey to meet someone.

Storyline

Question

- What deeper meanings might there be? Could the whole poem be an extended metaphor? If so, what does the metaphor mean? What is the poet trying to say?

Answer

The poem would indeed seem to be an extended metaphor. The poet seems to be talking about his journey towards death. He is going to “put out to sea” on his final voyage.

The use of images of evening and coming darkness are part of the metaphor, as they suggest the end of the day, and the end of a life.

The “Pilot” that the poet talks of could be his God, whom he hopes to see “face to face”.

Viewpoint

The word '**viewpoint**' describes the point of view from which a poem is written. Just as in a novel, a writer might use a first or third person narrative, so with poetry it is important to identify **what viewpoint the poet is using**.

Sometimes, poets will use **a real or invented character**, to tell their story, while other poems might be written from the poet's own perspective. Some poems use a mixture of viewpoints, shifting between them in a way not possible in a novel.

Poems that simply describe a place or an emotion might not use either the first or third person narrator. When the poet writes as though he or she were a 'godlike' voice, looking at the world from 'high', rather than through a person, this is known as **the omniscient viewpoint.**

Viewpoint

Here is a brief description of the **three main types of viewpoint**:

This viewpoint is easily identifiable:

- **First Person Viewpoint** because the writer talks directly to the reader. Look out for the words “I”, “my”, “me”, and so on.
- **Third Person Viewpoint**. In the third person viewpoint, the poet is slightly more distant, talking through a character. Look for the words “he”, “she”, “him”, “her”, and so on.
- **Omniscient Viewpoint**. With this viewpoint, the poet is even further away from the reader, and from his or her subject. The poem written using this viewpoint might provide a description, without any sense of character.

Viewpoint

Let's look now at examples of each of the three types of viewpoint to help you understand the different effects they can create.

Remember, when you are discussing any part of a poem, it is important to say ***why*** **the poet uses a specific technique**, and the impact it has on the reader.

As you have already seen, **the three different viewpoints identified offer varying degrees of distance from the subject and from the reader**.

With the **first person viewpoint**, the reader tends to **associate strongly with the writer**, feeling what he or she is feeling and thinking like.

The **third person and omniscient viewpoints** allow you to '**remove**' yourself more.

First Person Viewpoint

The Old Stoic (extract)

Riches I hold in light esteem,
And Love I laugh to scorn;
And lust of Fame was but a dream
That vanished with the morn -

And if I pray, the only prayer
That moves my lips for me
Is - 'Leave the heart that now I bear,
And give me liberty.'

Emily Brontë (1818 - 1848)

Third Person Viewpoint

The Blessed Damozel (extract)

The blessed damozel leaned out
From the gold bar of Heaven;
Her eyes were deeper than the depth
Of waters stilled at even;
She had three lilies in her hand,
And the stars in her hair were seven.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828 - 1882)

Omniscient Viewpoint

God's Grandeur (extract)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
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.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1884 - 1889)

Theme

Poets use a huge range of themes or subjects in their work. When you are studying a piece of poetry, you may find that the theme is immediately apparent, or that you need to look deeply into the poem to decide exactly what its theme is.

Poets will often deal with more than one theme in a piece of work. For instance, a poet might deal with the themes of childhood, memories and the natural world, all within one piece of poetry.

Remember, when you are analysing poetry, **you must comment on the effects or images that are created**, **not simply identifying themes**.

Theme

Now look at the poetry extract below and identify which theme or themes the poet is dealing with.

The Prince of Love (extract)

How sweet I roamed 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!

He showed me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair,
Where all his golden pleasures grow.

William Blake (1757 - 1827)

The themes used are ...

and ...

Message

In addition to using a particular theme or themes, **poets will often give the reader a message through their work**. They could comment on something specific, such as a particular brand of politics or a war that is taking place. They might give a more general message, for instance about their religious beliefs or their feelings about love and beauty.

One example of poetry with a strong message is that written during the First World War. Well known poets, such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon used their poetry to comment on the futility of war, and to tell readers at home exactly what was going on.

Again, when looking for a message in a poem, **ensure that you comment on its effectiveness and impact**.

Rhyme

As already noted, poetry does not have necessarily to rhyme. However, when you are analysing a poem, you should always comment on the effects that rhyme (or the lack of it) creates.

The use of rhyme within a poem will affect its rhythm. Rhymes change the way one reads poetry, because when you come to a word that rhymes, you tend to pause slightly, putting an extra emphasis on that word.

Poets may use a particular rhyme scheme, such as the Shakespearean Sonnet. When you are identifying and analysing a rhyme scheme, you ***must*** **comment on how its use affects you as a reader**.

Rhyme

The English language has many words that rhyme, including homonyms (words that sound the same but have a different spelling and meaning) e.g. son and sun.

There are various different types of rhyme that you should learn to identify:

- **End Rhyme**: words that rhyme at the end of a line.
- **Internal Rhyme**: words that rhyme within a line.
- **Half Rhyme**: words that ‘almost’ rhyme, either within or at the end of a line.

On the following slide you will find examples of each of the rhymes, to show you how they work, and the effects that they can create.

End Rhyme

The sky was grey, the snow pure white
The flakes fell heavy through the night.

white
night

rhymes with

This is a rhyming couplet, a pair of lines that rhyme.

The sky was grey, the snow pure white
As winter took a hold
The flakes fell heavy through the night
Outside the world was cold.

white
hold rhymes with
night rhymes with
cold

This poem uses the a/b rhyme scheme: lines one and three rhyme (a), lines two and four rhyme (b).

Internal Rhyme

grey today

rhymes with

The sky was grey today, the snow pure white
As the night fell and light bled from the world.

night light

rhymes with

Notice the effect of internal rhyme. It alters the rhythm of the line, making you pause and place emphasis on the rhyme. This in turn slows the reader down slightly.

Half Rhyme

now snow flew

‘almost’ rhymes with and with

The sky was grey, now snow flew pure white

Notice the effect of half rhyme here. Again, it changes the rhythm of the line.

Each of the half rhymes is a monosyllable, and this adds even further to slowing down the reader as he or she says these words.

Rhythm

Poetry is about sound as well as about creating images. Even if you are not reading a poem out loud, you should still be able **to 'hear it' in your head**, and this will help you understand its rhythm.

Rhythm is a very important aspect of poetry. As well as changing the way that you say a poem, it can also link to the images that the poet describes. For instance, if a poet were describing a clock ticking, he or she might use short, alliterative words to help echo the sound of the clock.

Rhyme and rhythm are inextricably linked, and the use of rhyme will create a certain rhythm naturally within a poem.

Rhythm

As well as the poet's use of rhyme, there are various other aspects of a poem that will help to create rhythm:

- Word length. A series of monosyllables will create a very different effect from longer words.
- Line length. When we are reading a poem, we tend to stop or pause at the end of a line.
- Use of punctuation. Full stops, commas, semi colons and other forms of punctuation will all have an impact on a poem's rhythm.
- Use of techniques such as alliteration and imagery. They affect the way one can say the words and consequently the rhythm of a poem.

Rhythm

Now we are going to look at an example, to see exactly how rhythm is created. The poem that we are going to look at is called *"No Worst, there is None"*. You can see the poem in full on the next slide.

The writer of this poem, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 - 1889) wrote with a style that was ahead of his time. As you will see from studying this example of his work, he makes particular use of the rhythm inherent in the English language. He was very much concerned with the *sound* of words and, although he does use rhyme, there are many other aspects of the work that help to create its rhythm.

Look at the way the poet 'plays' with language, too. He creates 'new' words or uses old words in unfamiliar ways.

‘No Worst, there is None’

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?
My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-
woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing -
Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked ‘No ling-
ering! Let me be fell : force I must be brief’.
Of the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne’er hung there. Nor does long our small
Durance deal with that steep or deep. Here! creep,
Wretch, under a comfort serves in a whirlwind : all
Life death does end and each day dies with sleep.

Rhythm

First, let's think about how word length affects rhythm. Here are the first four lines of the poem again. Find all the words that have more than one syllable.

'No Worst, there is None'

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

Questions

- What effect is created by the use of monosyllables in the first line?
- How does rhythm change in lines 3 and 4?

Rhythm

Question

- What effect is created by the use of monosyllables in the first line?

Answer

The monosyllables make the tone sound almost angry, as though the words are being spat out by the speaker. Alternatively, it might be that the speaker is worn out, with all the emotion and normal rhythm of speech lost from his voice. The reader is forced to read the line with an even emphasis on each word, and this effect is enhanced by the alliteration of the letter ‘p’ in the words “pitched past pitch”.

Rhythm

Question

- How does rhythm change in lines 3 and 4?

Answer

Rhythm changes abruptly in the third and fourth lines. The word “comforter”, with its three syllables, slows the reader right down. It is a much softer word that those used previously, and it is mirrored at the end of the line by the word “comforting”.

In the fourth line, rhythm changes again. This time, the word “Mary” with two syllables, gives a swing to the line, repeated in the words “mother” and “relief”.

Rhythm

Next, let's look at some of the punctuation in these first four lines, and the ways it affects the rhythm of the piece.

'No Worst, there is None'

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

The full stop in the middle of the first line creates a break and causes the reader to stop abruptly on a 'down' beat.

The commas in the second line break the line into three.

The question marks in the third and fourth lines create a pause as the question is asked, and add to the poem's tone.

Rhythm

Finally, let's consider how the use of alliteration and assonance adds to rhythm. Here are lines five to eight from the poem. Find some examples of such techniques.

Assonance of the letter 'o'

My cries heave, herds-long; huddle in a main, a chief-woe, world-sorrow; on an age-old anvil wince and sing - Then lull, then leave off. Fury had shrieked 'No ling-ering! Let me be fell : force I must be brief'.

Activity

- Choose one of these examples of alliteration or assonance, and discuss or write about the effects it creates.

Tone

The **tone of a poem** is one of the first things that you will notice it about it as you read. The word ‘tone’ describes the **overall sort of atmosphere and feeling conveyed.**

A good way to understand exactly what tone means, is to think of a poem like a song. Ask yourself: if this poem were set to music, what sort of music would it have? For instance, a poem about losing a lover would probably have a sad, emotional music, because this would fit its tone. On the other hand, a poem about a beautiful spring day might have a more energetic, positive tone.

Look at the short extracts on the following slides and choose the tone or tones that you think best describes them.

Tone

Is the tone of the poem ...

Holy Sonnets (extract)

Despair behind, and death before doth cast
Such terror, and my feebled flesh doth waste
By sin in it, which it towards hell doth weigh.

Happy?

Sad?

Fearful?

Excited?

Resigned?

Calm?

Tone

Is the tone of the poem ...

The Tiger (extract)

Tiger! Tiger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Happy?

Sad?

Fearful?

Excited?

Resigned?

Calm?

Tone

Is the tone of the poem ...

Song (extract)

When I am dead, my dearest,
Sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
Nor shady cypress tree:

Happy?

Sad?

Fearful?

Excited?

Resigned?

Calm?

Mood and Emotion

When you analyse **the mood and emotion of a poem**, you should think both about **the feelings of the speaking voice**, and the **mood or emotions** that **the poem creates**.

There are various ways to create a strong sense of mood or emotion. They could use:

- **Vivid imagery**, for instance **metaphor**, **personificatio**n or alliteration.
- Adverbs and adjectives that suggest/convey a feeling.
- A subject or theme that automatically evokes strong feeling, e.g. war or love.

Mood and Emotion

Look at the extracts below, and decide what mood or emotion the poet is creating.

Daffodils (extract)

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

William Wordsworth (1770 - 1850)

A Red, Red Rose (extract)

My love is like a red, red rose
That's newly sprung in June:
My love is like the melody
That's sweetly played in tune.

Robert Burns (1759 - 1796)