

OxfordAQA

International GCSE

English Literature (9275/2)

Teaching poetry guide

Where do students encounter poetry in the course of study and assessment?

Teaching poetry for this specification involves studying the poems in the People and Places anthology, and answering questions on this anthology and on an unseen poem in Paper 2.

What are the assessment objectives?

The assessment objectives are:

AO1	Understanding of, and engagement with, themes, ideas and contexts.
AO2	Analysis of how writers create meanings and effects.
AO3	Express informed, personal responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and coherent, accurate writing.

These are always at the forefront of examiners' minds when they are setting and marking the examinations, and it is useful for teachers to keep them in their thoughts when planning lessons too.

AO1 is about meanings, essentially – what do students think the poems mean? 'Contexts' here has a wide range of meanings itself, as it could refer to historical or literary contexts or just the context of the question. It is not separately assessed and does not have to be explicitly stated as context. Some of the poems in the anthology require some historical or social context to be grasped fully, such as 'London' or 'At the Border 1979'. However, in responding to the question in the exam students only need to use parts of these contexts that are relevant to the question. A page on the context of London at the time of the poem, learned beforehand and reproduced in the exam will never receive high marks as the question will never ask for that. More effective responses will use some contextual factors which are relevant to the question, and they do not have to be specifically identified as 'context'.

AO2 is about writer's methods and how students think they 'create meanings and effects'. Obviously some literary terminology is useful here as shorthand for identifying poetic features. However, as with contexts there are no specific marks for using the term in responses. It is more important for students to demonstrate how the features create meanings or even multiple meanings? A simple list of similes, metaphors etc which does not show and explain how the meanings are created is not going to get beyond Level 2 of the 6-level mark scheme.

AO3 tends to be assessed at the end of a student's response and is an overall assessment of the answer. 'Appropriate terminology' might be as simple as 'language', and 'coherent, accurate writing' simply means that the reader (the examiner, for instance) can understand it. Spelling and punctuation are not separately assessed as this is a response to literature, not a test of writing accuracy. Of more significance is the reference to an 'informed, personal response', which is really at the centre of AO3: how well organised, of course, but 'personal' – what does the student think? That idea will form the basis of the suggestions below about teaching the poems for the specification.

Encouraging skills development and effective answers

Students need to demonstrate their thinking about the poems so that they can answer the questions in the exam to the best of their ability. They don't know what the questions are going to be, and neither does the teacher, so learning by rote and writing out something that the teacher thinks is not going to work. What the examiner is looking for is what do they - the students - think? Examiners have no preconceptions about what students will write, and there are no right and wrong answers. While 'Indicative content' is listed in the exam mark schemes for specific questions, such as those you can see in the specimen papers for an Unseen poem at the end of this guide, this only described of possible features of responses as opposed to a definitive list. Examiners are often surprised by ideas they read about poems from students, but that's fine! Do the ideas work? Are they supported and developed? These are the key considerations in determining the level and mark given to each response.

Suggestions for lessons

How then might you organise a course that encourages students to:

- read poems and understand what they might mean and how they are written
- write about them effectively and to the best of their ability in the exam?

Most of the approaches suggested below rely on the teacher asking questions rather than giving answers. The aim is not simply to facilitate good exam results, but to encourage the students to become independent critical readers. The two are intertwined.

The lessons suggested below are merely an outline of how you might begin teaching the anthology poems, and how the course might proceed in stages. There are many ways of doing this, as long as the principles outlined above are taken into consideration.

Lesson 1

Begin with one poem from the anthology, preferably one that doesn't require too much context to understand it – perhaps 'Below the Green Corrie' or 'Cold Knap Lake'.

- Read the poem to the class, without any comment. If it's 'Below the Green Corrie', you might simply explain what a corrie is.
- Divide the class into groups, maybe three or four in a group.
- The group task is to decide what the poem is about, with some evidence, and to notice how the poem is written. Then jot down what they think, so that they can report back. A time limit for this, whatever you think is appropriate.
- Choose a group to explain what they think to you/the class. Don't necessarily choose the group you think is the best. The chosen group could feedback aloud, or jot it down (not in sentences) in a way that the whole class can see.
- Now open it to any groups in the class to comment on this and add to it. Depending on what the class as a whole has found, you (the teacher) might have some additional questions to ask the class as a whole if you think they've missed something important. Avoid telling them what they've missed unless you have to, and encourage them to make connections between meanings and methods.

Lesson 2

- Recap on the process that was followed in the first lesson, then pick another poem from the anthology as the focus for this lesson. Read the poem to the class.
- Perhaps divide the class into pairs this time. The task this time is the same overall, but with a question such as how the poem shows affection, or learning, or something else. The pairs have to write a response to the poem – what it means and how it's written - this time. The teacher observes and helps, via questions about what the pairs are thinking or help in the form of what they're writing.
- At the end of the time you've given, there could be a class discussion again – ask a pair to read out what they've written, and then the rest of the class if they've anything to add, or even (even better!) disagree with.
- An alternative approach could involve the teacher creating a response to the question from what the class has suggested. This could focus on the whole poem or just to part of the poem like the last verse. In this way the teacher models what writing about the poem might look like, without giving the 'answers'. The teacher is simply asking questions and being a scribe.

Lesson 3

There are twenty poems in the anthology, and so far the students have only looked at two. Now might be the time to look at some of the rest together - in pairs or groups of poems.

It's important to recognise that **comparison is not tested** in this specification and comparison is **not in the Assessment Objectives or the mark scheme**. However, when teaching the poems it can be useful to compare how poems are similar or different in terms of what they are about and how they are written is a useful way of working out how individual poems work

There are many ways you might choose to start this exploration, but one might be:

- Get the class, in groups or pairs, to work on the two poems that have been chosen with a specific focus, such as an exam question might have.
- A class discussion about the two poems may then follow to discuss what they've found.
- Students may then record their individual written responses to the question. This could begin in class, to allow for you to respond to questions and see what they're doing and then finish as homework.
- After marking the homework, and before handing it back, show a list of the descriptions of the 6 levels of assessment in the mark scheme, as part of understanding why you as the teacher have assessed their work in the way that you have.

These level descriptors are:

Level 1: Simple, explicit comments

Level 2: Supported, relevant comments

Level 3: Explained, structured comments

Level 4: Clear understanding

Level 5: Thoughtful, developed consideration

Level 6: Convincing, critical analysis and exploration

Depending on the range of ability in your class, you might expect most of them to have shown writing about the poems in Levels 2-4, but perhaps not in Levels 5 or 6. It's worth saying that the mark scheme is exactly the same for all the questions on both papers, so this underlies all the work the students do during the Literature course. You could introduce them to the whole detailed mark scheme at some point in the course, shown here as a part of the Unseen question at the end, but that's up to you, as it may appear a little forbidding.

In order to show how to access the top levels, it may be a good idea to do this via introducing an unseen poem, without the pressure of writing about one of the studied poems.

Lesson 4

Choose a poem which isn't in the anthology, and which has the possibility of multiple possible layers of meanings in part or whole, and which has moments where the writing can be closely analysed. Simon Armitage's 'Mother any distance greater than a single span' might do, but really you should choose any poem which will work with what you are going to do below.

- Again in groups look at the poem in terms of what it means/how it's written.
- Instead of groups reporting back this time, when the time you've given is up give them a list of the sort of features which a poet might use to convey meaning. This list could mention form, structure, rhyme, figures of speech, rhythm, line and verse breaks, etc.
- Now point students to a specific moment in the poem where several features are working together, and ask them what is happening here, and how it is contributing to the meaning(s) of the poem.
- You could just ask the class as a whole or give them a couple of minutes in their group. Either way, the teacher should start to create a paragraph about this moment from what they say, testing all the time whether it makes sense, and if there is anything else to say. At the end of this the class will have created, with you writing it down, a paragraph which hits Level 6, 'Convincing, critical analysis and exploration'. This is a model, therefore, of part of what they are aspiring to.

Further lessons

From here there are a number of ways you could deal with the rest of the anthology poems. You could continue to work through them one by one or in groups, or you could spread them out during the rest of the Literature course, all the time varying group work/pair group/individual work, with writing in class and at home.

Working this way should ensure that writing about an unseen poem is not as daunting as it might otherwise be – it's just another poem. Spread practice for this during the course too. It's perhaps worth saying that the use of acrostics to shape exam responses, such as PETAL or FORREST, can sometimes be unhelpful, as they encourage candidates to look for features which might not be there in a particular poem, or to identify them without examining what the effect of it might be.

You'll find below an example of an unseen poem which has been used in an exam, with three responses at different levels and comments from an examiner indicating the level of each response.

In the exam some candidates saw the ship as a metaphor for old age, as one candidate did here, or the poem as a feminist poem, or even anti-feminist. The examiners concerned had not thought of these interpretations, and neither had the poet, probably, but that does not matter. The interpretations were supported and argued and were credited, as it was candidates thinking that mattered.

The Unseen Poem

Read the poem below and answer the question that follows.

The Wreck

Seared bone-white by the glare of summer weather,
Cast side-long, on the barren beach she lies,
She who once brought the earth's far ends together
And ransacked East and West for merchandise.

The sea-gulls cluster on her after-deck
Resting from the near seas that wash and fall.
But, I have heard, at night this side-cast wreck
(When all the belfry bells at midnight call)

Puts up sail and goes out past mortal seeing:
Once more the oceans break beneath her will
And she resumes the breath of her old being;
She lives the dreams that slumber in her still.

Thrilling as down the windy Dark she slopes,
Ecstatic, as her sails grow great with wind—
She feels the seamen walking with her ropes,
The harbour dropping like a star behind.

Harry Kemp

How does the poet present the ship in the poem?

Mark scheme

Paper 2 Route A Questions 1–4; Route B Questions 1–3

AO1: Understanding of, and engagement with, themes, ideas and contexts – 40%

AO2: Analysis of how writers create meanings and effects – 40%

AO3: Express informed, personal responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology, and coherent, accurate writing – 20%

Mark	AO	Typical features	How to arrive at a mark
Level 6 Convincing, critical analysis and exploration 26–30 marks	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration of themes/ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by specific, detailed links between context/text/task • Judicious use of precise references to support interpretation(s). 	At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be a critical, exploratory, well-structured argument. It takes a conceptualised approach to the full task supported by a range of judicious references. There will be a fine-grained and insightful analysis of language and form and structure. Convincing exploration of one or more theme/idea/perspective/contextual factor/interpretation.
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis of writer's methods • Exploration of effects of writer's methods on reader. 	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical, exploratory, conceptualised response to task and whole text. 	At the bottom of the level, a candidate will have Level 5 and be starting to demonstrate elements of exploratory thought and/or analysis of writer's methods and /or contexts.
Level 5 Thoughtful, developed consideration 21–25 marks	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thoughtful consideration of themes/ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by examination of detailed links between context/text/task • Apt references integrated into interpretation(s). 	At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be thoughtful, detailed and developed. It takes a considered approach to the full task with references integrated into interpretation; there will be a detailed examination of the effects of language and/or structure and/or form. Examination of themes/ideas/perspectives/contextual factors, possibly including alternative interpretations/deeper meanings. At the bottom of the level, a candidate will have Level 4 and be starting to demonstrate elements of thoughtful consideration and/or examination of writer's methods and/or contexts.

Level 4 Clear understanding 16–20 marks	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear understanding of themes/ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by specific links between context/text/task • Effective use of references to support explanation. 	<p>At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be clear, sustained and consistent. It takes a focused response to the full task which demonstrates clear understanding. It uses a range of references effectively to illustrate and justify explanation; there will be clear explanation of the effects of a range of writer's methods. Clear understanding of themes/ideas/perspectives/contextual factors.</p> <p>At the bottom of the level, a candidate will have Level 3 and be starting to demonstrate elements of understanding and/or explanation of writer's methods and/or contexts.</p>
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear explanation of writer's methods • Understanding of effects of writer's methods on reader. 	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, explained response to task and whole text. 	
Level 3 Explained, structured comments 11–15 marks	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some understanding of implicit themes/ideas/perspectives/contextual factors shown by links between context/text/task • References used to support a range of relevant comments. 	<p>At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be explanatory in parts. It focuses on the full task with a range of points exemplified by relevant references from the text; there will be identification of effects of a range of writer's methods. Explanation of some relevant ideas/contextual factors.</p> <p>At the bottom of the level, a candidate will have Level 2 and be starting to explain and/or make relevant comments on writer's methods and/or contexts.</p>
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explained/relevant comments on writer's methods • Identification of effects of writer's methods on reader. 	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some explained response to task and whole text. 	

Level 2 Supported, relevant comments 6–10 marks	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some awareness of implicit themes/ideas/contextual factors• Comments on references.	At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be relevant and supported by some explanation. It will include some focus on the task with relevant comments and some supporting references from the text. There will be identification of effects of deliberate choices made by writer. Awareness of some contextual factors. At the bottom of the level, a candidate's response will have Level 1 and be starting to focus on the task and/or starting to show awareness of the writer making choices and/or awareness of contexts.
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identification of writers' methods• Comments on effects of methods on reader.	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supported response to task and text.	
Level 1 Simple, explicit comments 1–5 marks	AO1	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simple comment on explicit ideas/contextual factors• Reference to relevant details.	At the top of the level, a candidate's response is likely to be narrative and/or descriptive in approach. It may include awareness of the task and provide appropriate reference to text; there will be simple identification of method. Simple comments/responses to context, usually explicit. At the bottom of the level, a candidate's response will show some familiarity with the text.
	AO2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Awareness of writer making deliberate choices• Simple comment on effect.	
	AO3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Simple comments relevant to task and text.	
0 marks	Nothing worthy of credit/nothing written		

0	3
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Harry Kemp: The Wreck

How does Harry Kemp present the ship in the poem?

[30 marks]

Indicative content

Examiners are encouraged to reward any valid interpretations. Answers might, however, include some of the following:

AO1

- The importance of the ship in the past, eg 'brought the earth's far ends together'.
- The ship's current condition, eg in 'this side-cast wreck'.
- The ship as not dead, only sleeping, eg 'the dreams that slumber in her still'.
- The ship's strength of movement, eg in 'her sails grow great with wind'.

AO2

- Use of rhyme and verse form, eg in change to half rhyme in final two lines to create a sense of change.
- Use of contrast between current and past descriptions of the ship, and day and night movement.
- Use of simile and metaphor to convey the nature of the ship, eg in 'seared bone-white', 'dropping like a star behind'.
- Use of personification of the ship.
- Use of position of first words in the lines of the last verse to create excitement of the ship.

AO3

Examiners are looking to award the candidate's proficiency in:

- presenting an argument
- organising their thoughts
- responding to the task
- communicating their ideas.

Responses to the Unseen Poem

Response 1

The poet presents the ship as being wrecked for a long time, as it is described as 'bone-white'. It used to be very powerful and sailed a long way. It 'brought the earth's far ends together'. Now just the seagulls sit on it. At night, though, 'at midnight', the ship seems to come alive again, and in its dreams it travels the seas again. The dreams 'slumber in her still'. The ship enjoys the voyage, as it is 'thrilling', and imagines that there are still sailors working on board. It is moving out to sea, as the harbour is dropping away 'like a star' as it moves.

The poet uses personification, as the ship is described as 'she' five times, and the adjective 'her' is used five times as well. The poem is written in four verses of four lines in each verse, and it rhymes ABAB. There is alliteration of 'b' in 'barren beach' and 'g' in 'grow great'. There is a simile, 'like a star', to describe the appearance of the harbour lights as the ship moves away.

Examiners' commentary

The response is largely narrative or descriptive. There are some **comments on references** and some **awareness of ideas**, but no **explanation**. There are **identifications of methods**, but the **effects** of the methods are not **identified or explained**. The simile 'like a star', for instance, is identified as describing the harbour lights, but no effect of this on the reader is explained. This is a **Level 2** response.

Response 2

The ship is personified as 'she' from the beginning of the poem, suggesting the ship is like a living being, though initially a dead one, as 'she' has been 'seared bone-white' suggesting the wreck is like a skeleton. 'She' is even 'side-long' not upright, like a skeleton might be, and is just a resting place for seagulls, again implying inaction. The ship was once powerful, though, and far-ranging, bringing the 'far ends together' and perhaps even involved in piracy, as the word 'ransacked' implies.

The real change in the ship's presentation is from death back to life, and at night, not in the 'glare' of the day. At night, 'past mortal seeing', so beyond our understanding in a way, the ship becomes powerful again, so that 'the oceans break beneath her will' – a superhuman power almost, the word 'break' emphasised by the alliteration of 'b' in the word that follows it. In her dreams she 'lives' but is also excited. The words 'thrilling' and 'ecstatic' are placed at the beginning of the lines in the last verse, and the living ship is emphasised by the active verbs 'slopes', 'grow' 'feels'. The closing simile about the harbour 'dropping like a star behind' suggests the movement of the ship away from the harbour where she rests, increasing the distance between the ship and where she lies, and the distance between the dead ship and the one that still lives on.

Examiners' commentary

This is a **clear response** to the text and the task and **effective use of references**. There is a **clear explanation** and **understanding** of method, such as the placement of the words at the beginning of the lines. There is some **clear understanding of ideas**. This is a **Level 4** response.

Response 3

On one level this is about the wreck of a ship, which has not only been 'cast' aside after her work is done, but has been 'cast aside' viciously – the first word of the poem is 'Seared' and 'side-cast' repeats the idea in the second verse, while the skeleton connection in 'bone-white' suggests that the ship has been buried, effectively.

At night, however, this once powerful being – the ship is personified as 'she' throughout – is brought to life again by the midnight bell, a magical summons, as it is 'past mortal seeing'. The inference here is a connection with old age. The body of somebody old – female, presumably – is unable to move freely, but 'the dreams ... slumber in her still' – she remembers the power, to control events, 'the oceans break beneath her will', and her strength: 'her sails grow great with wind'. She feels alive again, with 'the breath of her old being', and it's exciting. The first two lines of the last verse begin with 'Thrilling' and 'Ecstatic', the words standing out not only because of their position, but also as adjectives contrasting with 'Resting' in the second verse, the only other time in the poem that an adjective begins a line.

The simile in the last line is intriguing. 'The harbour dropping like a star behind' might simply suggest movement, as presumably the star gets smaller as the ship moves. However, 'behind' is not a full rhyme with 'wind', two lines earlier, for the only time in the poem, which has full rhymes ABAB throughout, apart from this closure. One way of looking at this as a poem about old age might rejoice in the person still living their younger life in their mind 'past mortal seeing', but we are not immortal. 'Dropping like a star behind' might be about the end of old age.

Examiners' commentary

This is an **exploratory** response to the task and text, supporting interpretations, and **using precise, judicious references** throughout. There is **analysis of methods and their effects**, and a sense of exploration in a **well structured response**. There is strong **exploration of meaning**. **Level 6**.