English Poetry

A Study Book in English Modern Letters

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Prepared for Maggie Enow's school of English Modern Letters.

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Chapter 1: What Poetry Is — and How to Read a Poem

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- explain, in your own words, what makes a text a poem;
- distinguish between what a poem says and how a poem means;
- use a calm, repeatable method for a first reading, a second reading and a close reading;
- talk about speaker, audience, occasion and tone without confusing the poet with the speaker of the poem.

1.1 A working definition

A poem is language arranged so that sound, shape and sense work together. A newspaper report tries to give you information as directly as possible. A poem also gives you information, but it asks you to notice the words themselves: their music, their pictures, their weight and their order on the page.

That is why a poem can be very short and still take a long time to understand. The poet has compressed meaning. One line may carry a story, a feeling, an argument and a sound pattern all at once. Your job as a reader is not to unpack the poem into a single flat sentence and then throw the poem away. Your job is to see how the compression works, and what it does to you as you read.

Keep three questions beside you whenever you read:

1. What is happening in this poem, in plain words?
2. How is the language making that happening feel the way it feels?

3. Why might the poet have chosen this form, this voice and these images, rather than others?

If you can answer the first question, you have understood the surface. If you can answer the second, you have begun literary study. If you can discuss the third with evidence, you are writing the kind of answer that earns strong marks at university level.

1.2 The speaker is not always the poet

In fiction you learn early that a narrator is a created voice. Poetry needs the same care. When a poem says "I", that "I" is the speaker of the poem. Sometimes the speaker is close to the historical poet. Sometimes the speaker is a character, a mask, or a voice from another century. William Blake, for example, wrote songs spoken by children, chimney sweepers and nurses. It would be a mistake to read every one of those voices as Blake speaking directly about himself.

Use this safe language in your essays: "the speaker says", "the voice in the poem", "the poem presents". Move to "the poet suggests" only when you are discussing a choice of craft — for example, "the poet places the turn of the sonnet late, so the speaker's change of mind feels sudden". That distinction is small, but examiners notice it.

1.3 Denotation, connotation and tone

Every important word in a poem works on two levels. Its denotation is its dictionary meaning. Its connotation is the cloud of associations it carries: feelings, memories, social judgements and echoes of other texts.

Consider the word "home". Denotation: the place where someone lives. Connotations: safety, family, belonging — or, in a different poem, confinement

and the wish to escape. A good close reading notices which connotations the surrounding words awaken and which they suppress.

Tone is the attitude the speaker takes towards the subject and the audience: reverent, ironic, tender, furious, playful, mournful. Tone is rarely stated outright. You infer it from diction (word choice), imagery, rhythm and punctuation. Always support a claim about tone with a quotation. "The tone is bitter" is an opinion. "The tone turns bitter when the gentle word 'gentle' is replaced by the hard consonants of 'cut' and 'cold'" is an argument.

1.4 A method you can trust: three readings

First reading — aloud, without stopping. Read the poem aloud from beginning to end. Do not stop to look words up. Listen for where your voice naturally slows, where the lines push forward, where something repeats. Mark any place where you stumbled: a stumble often marks a deliberate difficulty.

Second reading — the plain-sense pass. Go line by line and write, in pencil or in your notes, a plain paraphrase. Who is speaking? Where are we? What changes between the beginning and the end? Look up unfamiliar words now, including familiar words used in old senses. In older poetry, "want" may mean lack, "let" may mean hinder, and "presently" may mean at once, not soon.

Third reading — the craft pass. Now ask how the poem is made. Note the form, the metre, the rhyme pattern, the images and their order, the sentences and where they fall against the lines. Ask what the poem would lose if it were rewritten as prose. That loss is, very often, the poem's real subject for an essay.

Worked Example 1.1: A first close reading

Read these opening lines from "Sonnet 18" by William Shakespeare (public domain):

> *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate.*

In plain sense, the speaker asks whether he should compare the person he addresses to a summer's day, and answers that the person is lovelier and calmer than such a day.

Now the craft. The poem begins with a question, which makes it feel like thinking aloud rather than a finished compliment. The comparison itself is conventional — poets had compared beloveds to summer for generations — and the speaker immediately improves on the convention: the beloved is not just like summer, but better than summer, because summer is changeable and brief. The word "temperate" does double work: it describes mild weather and a balanced, even character. In two lines Shakespeare has set up the poem's whole argument: natural beauty fades, but this beauty, preserved in verse, may not. Notice how much is already in motion before we have been told anything else. That economy is what Chapter 4 will show you in the sonnet form as a whole.

Worked Example 1.2: Hearing a voice

Read the opening of "The Tyger" by William Blake, from *Songs of Experience* (public domain):

> *Tyger Tyger, burning bright, In the forests of the night; What immortal hand or eye, Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

The plain sense is an address to a tiger, pictured as burning in a dark forest, and a question about what powerful maker could have created such a frightening and perfectly formed creature.

The craft is in the sound and the questions. The repeated name at the start works like a call or a chant. The regular, hammering beat suits a creature of power. The

poem does not describe the tiger in a zoological way; it wonders at it. The question is not really about anatomy. It is about creation itself: what kind of maker makes both beauty and terror? Keep that question in mind. In Chapter 5 we will see how Blake sets such songs of experience against his songs of innocence, and how a short poem can carry a large philosophical argument without ever stating it as prose.

Exercises — Chapter 1

4. Take any short poem you know well. Write its plain-sense paraphrase in no more than three sentences. Then list three things the paraphrase loses. What does your list tell you about why the text needed to be a poem?
5. Find a poem with a clear speaker who is not the poet — for example a dramatic monologue or a song spoken by a character. Write a short paragraph beginning "The speaker…" and a second paragraph beginning "The poet…". Make sure the two paragraphs do not say the same thing.
6. Choose five important words from a poem you are studying. For each, write its denotation and two possible connotations. Which connotation does the poem itself activate? Give your evidence.

Answer guidance

7. Strong answers usually lose sound, image order and ambiguity in the paraphrase. If your list names only "the rhyme", push further: ask what the rhyme connects, and what feeling the connection creates.
8. The speaker paragraph should stay inside the world of the poem (what the voice wants, fears or claims). The poet paragraph should discuss choices: why this mask, why this moment, why this audience inside the poem.
9. There is no single correct connotation, but there must be evidence. A connotation is activated when nearby words, images or situations point the

reader towards it. If you cannot point to such a pointer, choose a different connotation.

Chapter 2: Sound, Rhythm and Metre

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- hear and describe stress, beat and line length in English verse;
- identify iambic, trochaic, anapaestic and dactylic patterns, and explain why a poet might choose each;
- explain caesura, enjambment and end-stopping, and read their effects rather than merely naming them;
- discuss rhyme, half-rhyme, alliteration, assonance and consonance with accurate examples.

2.1 English rhythm is a rhythm of stress

English is a stress-timed language. In ordinary speech we lean on some syllables and hurry over others: "the CAT sat ON the MAT" is not how we speak, but "the CAT SAT on the MAT" is close to our natural emphasis. Poets organise those natural stresses into patterns. That organisation is metre.

A foot is a small repeating unit of stressed and unstressed syllables. A line is measured by how many feet it contains: one foot is monometer, two dimeter, three trimeter, four tetrameter, five pentameter, six hexameter. The most famous line in English poetry is iambic pentameter: five iambic feet, each foot an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one — da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM.

Do not treat metre as a cage. Good poets establish a pattern so that departures from it become meaningful. A sudden extra stress can feel like a blow. A missing

stress can feel like a held breath. In your essays, always complete the thought: name the pattern, quote the line, and say what the pattern or the departure does.

2.2 The main feet and their characters

An **iamb** (unstressed–stressed) rises. It is close to ordinary English speech, which is why it suits drama, meditation and narrative. A **trochee** (stressed–unstressed) falls. It can feel chanting, urgent or childlike, especially at the start of a line. An **anapaest** (unstressed–unstressed–stressed) gallops; it carries narrative quickly and can feel comic or breathless. A **dactyl** (stressed–unstressed–unstressed) rolls forward and then eases; in English it is harder to sustain and often feels songlike.

These characters are tendencies, not laws. A skilled poet can make iambs violent and trochees tender. What matters is the relationship between pattern and subject in the particular poem in front of you.

2.3 The line: end-stopped, enjambed, broken by caesura

A line is not the same as a sentence. When a sentence ends exactly at the end of a line, the line is end-stopped; the effect is settled, formal, conclusive. When the sense runs over the line ending into the next line, that is enjambment; the effect is forward pressure, urgency, or thought outrunning form. A caesura is a pause inside a line, often marked by punctuation. It can split a line into two balanced halves, or chop it into uneasy fragments.

Learn to read line endings with your eyes and your ears together. Ask: does the form contain the feeling, or does the feeling strain against the form? Many fine essays are built on that single tension.

2.4 Rhyme and the music of repetition

Rhyme is repetition of sound at line endings, but repetition in poetry is much wider. Alliteration repeats consonant sounds at the beginnings of words. Assonance repeats vowel sounds. Consonance repeats consonant sounds inside or at the ends of words. Refrain repeats whole lines or phrases.

Rhyme schemes are described with letters: lines that rhyme share a letter. A quatrain rhymed ABAB alternates; AABB moves in couplets; ABBA encloses. Naming the scheme is the beginning of analysis, not the end. Ask what the scheme joins together. A rhyme can marry two ideas the poem wants us to compare — or force together two ideas that resist each other, and the strain is the meaning.

Half-rhyme (also called slant rhyme) matches sounds only partly. Modern poets often prefer it because it feels honest and unsettled where full rhyme might feel too neat for subjects such as war, grief or doubt.

Worked Example 2.1: Metre doing meaning

Return to Blake's "The Tyger", quoted in Chapter 1. Its beat is trochaic and strongly regular: TY-ger TY-ger BURN-ing BRIGHT. The falling, hammering rhythm suits both the forge the poem imagines — a maker hammering a creature into shape — and the repeated, unanswered questions. Now imagine those lines rewritten in smooth, rising iambs. The sense could survive, but the menace would soften. Blake's metre is not decoration on the meaning; it is part of the meaning. That sentence pattern — "X is not decoration; it is part of the meaning because…" — is one you can adapt, with fresh evidence, to many poems.

Worked Example 2.2: An opening that breaks its own calm

John Milton opens *Paradise Lost* with a vast sentence that runs for many lines before it rests. The opening words are (public domain):

> *Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste Brought death into the world…*

Notice the enjambment: "the fruit / Of that forbidden tree". The sense spills over the line ending just as the consequences of the act spill over into all of history. The iambic pentameter — blank verse, unrhymed — gives Milton room for a sentence that behaves like a river, gathering clauses. When you meet blank verse, ask why the poet refused rhyme. Often the answer is scale and freedom: rhyme closes; blank verse can keep opening.

Exercises — Chapter 2

10. Mark the stresses in four lines of a poem set for your course. Name the metre. Then find one departure from the pattern and explain its effect.
11. Take a stanza you know. Rewrite it as prose in your notebook. Read both versions aloud. Write a paragraph on what changed in pace, emphasis and feeling.
12. Find one example each of alliteration, assonance and a refrain in poems you have read. For each, explain what the repetition connects or emphasises.

Answer guidance

13. Accuracy matters more than speed. If two readings of a line are possible, say so and defend yours from the sense of the line. A departure only matters if you can tie it to a word or moment that deserves emphasis.

14. Good paragraphs notice that prose removes the line as a unit of attention: words that stood at line endings lose their spotlight, and pauses the poet built in disappear.
15. Avoid the empty phrase "it makes it musical". Say what is repeated, where, and what idea or feeling the repetition underlines.

Chapter 3: Image, Metaphor and Symbol

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- define image, simile, metaphor, personification and symbol, and tell them apart in practice;
- follow an image pattern across a whole poem instead of collecting isolated quotations;
- explain how a symbol differs from a simple metaphor, and why symbols gather meaning from context and tradition;
- write about figurative language by moving from identification to effect to argument.

3.1 Images: language you can sense

An image is language that appeals to the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste, smell and movement. Images are not ornaments sprinkled on a poem. They are how a poem thinks. When a poet wants you to understand an abstraction — grief, time, freedom — the poet usually gives you something concrete to hold: an empty chair, a river, an opened door.

As you read, keep an image diary for the poem. List the images in order. Then look for families: images of light and dark, of binding and loosing, of rising and falling, of gardens and wilderness. Poems often argue through the contest between two image families. The side that wins, changes or returns at the end is frequently the poem's conclusion stated in pictures.

3.2 Simile and metaphor

A simile compares openly, with "like" or "as". A metaphor compares directly, saying one thing is another. The two parts of any comparison have traditional names: the tenor is the thing being described; the vehicle is the thing it is described as. In "my love is a rose", the tenor is the love (or the beloved) and the vehicle is the rose. The vehicle brings its associations with it: beauty, thorns, brevity, scent. A good analysis asks which associations the poem uses and which it pointedly refuses.

An extended metaphor sustains one vehicle across many lines. A conceit is an extended comparison that is deliberately far-fetched and intellectual, famous in seventeenth-century metaphysical poetry, where love might be compared to a pair of compasses or a flea might carry an argument about union. Conceits reward slow reading: follow the logic step by step, because the poet has built an argument, not just a picture.

Personification gives human qualities to things, animals or abstractions. Ask what changes when Death is given hands, a voice or a courtesy caller's manners. Personification makes an abstraction act, and once it acts, it can be resisted, welcomed or judged.

3.3 Symbols

A symbol is an image that carries more than itself and keeps carrying it. A road can be a symbol of a life's choices; a sea can symbolise eternity, danger or the unconscious. Unlike a simple metaphor, a symbol is not used up by one explanation. Its meaning grows from the whole poem and often from a tradition of earlier poems, stories and beliefs.

Handle symbols with humility in essays. Write "the sea here suggests..." rather than "the sea means...", and show how the poem guides the suggestion. Examiners reward that precision because it matches how symbols actually work.

3.4 Mixed and strained images

Not every mixed image is a mistake. Poets sometimes strain a comparison on purpose so the reader feels a mind under pressure. Before you call an image confused, ask whether the confusion belongs to the speaker's situation. A grieving speaker may reach for image after image precisely because no single image is adequate. The failure of images can itself be the poem's most honest moment.

Worked Example 3.1: One image, changing

In Wordsworth's lyric known as "Daffodils", the poem that begins "I wandered lonely as a cloud" (public domain), the opening simile makes the speaker a cloud: solitary, drifting, above the earth. The daffodils he meets are given the opposite qualities: they are a crowd, a company, rooted in the earth yet moving in dance. Across the poem the lonely singular speaker is gradually joined to the plural, joyful flowers, until at the end the memory of them fills his solitude. The argument of the poem is carried almost entirely by the movement from one image family (solitude, drifting) to another (company, dancing, stored light). If you track the images in order, the poem explains itself.

Worked Example 3.2: A symbol you must not flatten

The "forests of the night" in Blake's "The Tyger" work symbolically. A forest at night is a place where human sight fails, where paths vanish, and where what is wild has the advantage. Placing the burning tiger there does more than set a

scene: it puts the creature in the region of everything human beings cannot see clearly — the origin of evil, the intentions of a creator, the wildness inside ordered life. A flat reading ("the forest symbolises darkness") earns little. A developed reading shows how the symbol feeds the poem's unanswered questions.

Exercises — Chapter 3

16. Choose a poem and build its image diary. Group the images into families and write a paragraph on how the families interact from start to finish.
17. Take one metaphor from a poem you are studying. Name its tenor and vehicle. List three associations the vehicle brings, and show, with evidence, which ones the poem uses.
18. Find a symbol in a poem and write two readings of it: a flat reading in one sentence, and a developed reading in a paragraph. What extra evidence does the developed reading use?

Answer guidance

19. Order matters. A family that appears early and returns changed at the end is usually structurally important; mention that return explicitly.
20. If the poem uses an association only to reject it — for example a rose presented as thornless in a world of thorns — say so. Rejected associations are evidence too.
21. Developed readings draw on the whole poem: position (opening, turn, close), neighbouring images and the speaker's situation. If your paragraph could be written without reading past the symbol's own line, it is not yet developed.

Chapter 4: Poetic Forms — Sonnet, Ballad, Ode, Elegy and Free Verse

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the shape and rhyme scheme of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet, and locate the volta, or turn;
- explain the ballad stanza, the ode's public voice, and the elegy's movement from grief towards consolation;
- explain what free verse is free from, and what disciplines replace rhyme and regular metre in it;
- argue, in an essay, that a poem's form is part of its meaning.

4.1 Why form matters

Form is a set of promises a poem makes to its reader. A sonnet promises compression and a turn. A ballad promises a story told in song. An elegy promises that grief will be worked through, not merely displayed. Poets keep these promises, bend them or break them — and all three choices mean something. Your task is to notice which choice has been made.

4.2 The sonnet

The sonnet is fourteen lines, traditionally in iambic pentameter. The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet divides eight and six: an octave (ABBAABBA) that poses a problem, a picture or a plea, and a sestet (with a variable rhyme scheme) that answers, qualifies or resolves it. The joint between them, usually near the ninth line, is the volta — the turn.

The English or Shakespearean sonnet divides into three quatrains and a final couplet (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG). Its argument often builds in steps through the quatrains and then lands, with epigrammatic force, in the couplet. But do not force every sonnet into a diagram. Some poets delay the turn until the couplet; some turn early and spend the poem living with the consequences. The interesting essay question is always where the turn falls in this sonnet, and what changes there: image, tone, addressee, tense or argument.

A sonnet sequence strings sonnets together to follow a love, a faith or a grief over time. In a sequence, read each sonnet twice: once as a complete poem, once as a chapter in the longer story.

4.3 The ballad

Ballads are narrative songs. The traditional ballad stanza has four lines, alternating four and three stresses, often rhyming ABCB, with refrains and repeated phrases that helped singers remember and audiences join in. Traditional ballads begin in the middle of the action, leap between scenes, and let dialogue carry the story. Literary ballads — written by known poets in imitation of the tradition — keep the music but add a poet's shaping hand.

When you analyse a ballad, watch the repetitions. A phrase that returns unchanged can mark fate; a phrase that returns slightly changed can mark the story's turn. Incremental repetition — repetition with a small, significant variation — is the ballad's favourite engine.

4.4 Ode and elegy

The ode is a poem of public address and elevated feeling, often speaking directly to its subject: a nightingale, a season, an urn, a duty. Its stanzas may be regular or irregular, but its voice is ceremonial. Ask what entitles the subject to

ceremony, and whether the poem's feeling grows, questions itself or breaks down as it proceeds.

The elegy mourns the dead. Classical elegy used a particular metre; English elegy is defined more by its movement than its measure: lament, praise of the dead, and some turn towards consolation, however fragile. Pastoral elegy places the mourning in an imagined countryside of shepherds. Modern elegies often refuse easy consolation, and that refusal is itself a statement about grief in their world. In essays, track the movement: where does lament dominate, where does praise enter, and what kind of consolation — religious, natural, artistic, none — does the poem finally allow itself?

4.5 Free verse and the open forms

Free verse abandons regular metre and fixed rhyme schemes. It is not free from discipline. Its poets organise by line length, breath, image pattern, repetition and the white space of the page. A line break in free verse is a deliberate act: it can isolate a word, delay a revelation or make two meanings hover at once. When analysing free verse, never write "the poem has no form". Write instead about the form it makes for itself, poem by poem.

Concrete and visual poetry go further and make the shape on the page part of the sense. Read such poems twice: once as text, once as picture, and discuss how the two readings qualify each other.

Worked Example 4.1: The sonnet's promise kept and bent

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18", introduced in Chapter 1, follows the English pattern: quatrains that find fault with summer — too hot, too brief, dimmed, declining — and a couplet that promises the beloved a different fate in verse. The turn is effectively prepared across the third quatrain, where the poem shifts from

summer's failings to the beloved's "eternal summer". The couplet then states the poem's boldest claim: that the poem itself will keep the beloved alive for as long as people read. Form and argument are one: the tight, memorable shape of the sonnet is offered as proof that verse can defeat time. When a form performs the very thing the poem claims, say so in your essay — that is form as meaning at its clearest.

Worked Example 4.2: Elegiac movement in miniature

Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (public domain) opens in a landscape at dusk:

> *The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea…*

The scene is quiet, communal and fading. From that scene Gray widens to meditate on the unknown villagers buried in the churchyard: lives without fame, whose virtues and crimes alike were limited by their narrow circumstances. Lament for them becomes praise of ordinary life, and praise becomes a reflection on the poet's own coming death. Even if you study only an extract, name the movement you can see — scene, meditation, personal turn — because elegy is a genre defined by movement.

Exercises — Chapter 4

22. Take a sonnet set for your course. Mark its rhyme scheme, locate its volta, and write a paragraph defending your placement of the turn.
23. Choose a ballad or a song-like narrative poem. Identify one repeated phrase and show how its repetitions advance or darken the story.

24. Write a paragraph beginning "This poem is in free verse, but it is not formless, because…" Support every clause with a specific observation about line, repetition or image pattern.

Answer guidance

25. A defensible volta is a place where something demonstrably changes. If the change is gradual, say so and identify the lines across which it happens; gradual turns are real turns.
26. Quote the phrase at two different moments. The comparison between the two quotations is your evidence; without both, the claim about repetition is unsupported.
27. Strong answers usually cite three disciplines: line-break placement, a pattern of repeated words or images, and stanza grouping. If you find a hidden regularity, such as lines shortening as the poem closes, give it prominence.

Chapter 5: Poetry Through the Ages — From the Renaissance to the Romantics

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- place the major movements of English poetry between the Renaissance and Romanticism in order, with their characteristic concerns;
- explain the metaphysical poets' wit, the Augustans' order and satire, and the Romantics' turn to nature, feeling and the individual imagination;
- read a poem historically without reducing it to its period label;
- compare two poems from different periods on a shared theme, using form and image as evidence.

5.1 The Renaissance: new learning, old forms remade

English Renaissance poetry grows from recovered classical learning, court culture, print and religious upheaval. Its poets inherit medieval forms and fill them with new ambition: the sonnet sequence, the pastoral, the epic. Love poetry of the period is often a game of wit and persuasion, conducted through classical allusion and elaborate compliment — and often shadowed by awareness that beauty and life are brief. When you read a Renaissance lyric, ask who is performing, for what audience, and what the performance is meant to win.

5.2 The metaphysical poets: argument as passion

In the early seventeenth century, John Donne and the poets grouped after him as "metaphysical" made poems that argue. Their conceits yoke unlike things together and then defend the yoking with logic. Their speakers plead, tease,

reason and pray, sometimes within a single poem. The lesson for your reading is patience: follow the argument's steps before judging the comparison absurd. The absurdity is usually the doorway, not the destination.

Religious poetry of the period shares the same intensity turned towards God: Herbert's shaped, disciplined devotion and Milton's epic ambition both treat the inner life as a drama of the highest stakes.

5.3 The Augustans: order, reason and the sting of satire

After the civil wars and restoration of the monarchy, the dominant taste prized clarity, balance and social intelligence. The heroic couplet — rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter lines — became the signature measure: neat, pointed and ideal for satire. Alexander Pope could praise and wound within the same couplet, the rhyme clicking shut like a box. Augustan poetry is not cold; it is poetry that believes feelings should survive the test of reason and good form. When you read it, watch the couplets: antithesis (balanced opposites) is its favourite figure, and the balance itself expresses a worldview.

5.4 The turn to feeling: pre-Romantic and Romantic poetry

Across the later eighteenth century, poets increasingly valued feeling, nature, childhood and the lives of ordinary people. Thomas Gray meditated in a country churchyard; William Blake set simple songs against the suffering of industrial London. Then, with Wordsworth and Coleridge's joint collection *Lyrical Ballads* at the century's end, Romanticism announced itself: poetry as the expression of powerful feeling, the imagination as a creative power, nature as teacher and companion, and common life and common language as fit subjects for serious verse.

The second generation — Byron, Shelley and Keats — intensified the stakes: political liberty, the fate of the poet, beauty shadowed by early death. Keats, who died young, packed his odes with sensuous imagery and with questions about whether art outlasts life. In Romantic poems, track the relationship between the perceiving mind and the world perceived: again and again the poem claims that the mind half-creates what it sees.

5.5 Reading historically without flattening the poem

A period label is a map, not the territory. Use history to supply questions — What did this audience believe? What form was fashionable, and is this poet obeying or resisting the fashion? — not to supply conclusions. A Romantic poem is not automatically sincere, nor an Augustan poem automatically artificial. Let the individual poem correct the label whenever the two disagree, and say in your essay that it does: that independence is exactly what university marking rewards.

Worked Example 5.1: Two treatments of a creature

Set Blake's tiger (Chapter 1) beside any Augustan description of an animal and the period difference becomes audible. Augustan verse tends to place the creature within an ordered, intelligible world, described with balanced phrases. Blake's questions never resolve into order: the tiger remains "fearful", its maker unnamed, its symmetry a source of awe rather than comfort. Blake is writing against an age of confident explanation. His short lines and repetitions belong to song — a form associated with children and the Bible — yet the questions they carry are among the largest poetry can ask. Form from one tradition, questions against another: Blake's originality lives in that tension.

Worked Example 5.2: Wordsworth and the recollected moment

Wordsworth's "Daffodils" lyric (Chapter 3) demonstrates the Romantic doctrine often summarised in his phrase about poetry taking its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity. The poem is not set only at the lakeside encounter; its final stanza is set later, indoors, in a vacant or thoughtful mood, when the flowers return to the inward eye. The event's value is proven by its afterlife in memory. When you write about Romantic nature poetry, always ask about time: when did the experience happen, when is it being recalled, and what has the interval done to it? That double time-frame is one of the period's great inventions.

Exercises — Chapter 5

28. Choose two poems on a similar theme from different periods in this chapter. Compare their forms, their speakers and their attitudes in a structured essay plan (introduction, three comparative points, conclusion).
29. Take a metaphysical conceit from a poem you have studied. Unfold its logic step by step in plain prose, then write a paragraph judging where the comparison is strongest and where it strains.
30. Write a paragraph explaining how one Romantic poem treats the relationship between mind and nature. Use at least two quotations.

Answer guidance

31. Compare point by point (form, then speaker, then attitude) rather than writing about one poem fully and then the other; point-by-point structure makes comparison visible to the marker.

32. Unfolding the logic means writing "first the poem claims…, then it follows that…, therefore…" If a step is missing in the poem, note the gap: poets sometimes leap, and the leap can be the most interesting moment.
33. Look for verbs: does nature act on the mind, does the mind act on nature, or do they exchange qualities? Your paragraph should name the direction of influence and show it changing or deepening across the poem.

Chapter 6: From the Victorians to the Moderns — and How to Write About Poetry

Learning aims

By the end of this chapter you should be able to:

- describe the main pressures on Victorian poetry — faith and doubt, industrial change, empire and the dramatic monologue;
- explain key modernist moves: fragmentation, allusion, the image as unit, and free verse;
- plan and write a university-level essay on a poem, from first annotation to final paragraph;
- revise your own critical writing for precision, evidence and economy.

6.1 The Victorians: a crowded, questioning age

Victorian poetry speaks to a society transformed by industry, science and expanding empire, and troubled by religious doubt. Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate for much of the reign, gave the age its music of mourning and endurance, wrestling in long poems with grief and with the challenge that new geology and biology posed to faith. Robert Browning perfected the dramatic monologue, in which a speaker — a duke, a painter, a monk — reveals more than he intends while justifying himself to a silent listener. The reader becomes judge. That transfer of judgement to the reader is the monologue's great lesson: in such poems, always ask what the speaker is trying to hide, because the poem has arranged for you to find it.

Victorian women poets — Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti among them — wrote with major ambition in an age that tried to confine them,

treating love, faith, renunciation and artistic vocation. Read them as central to the period, not as additions to it.

6.2 Modernism: break the line to tell the truth

In the early twentieth century, poets confronting mechanised war and fractured certainties concluded that smooth forms could lie. Modernist poetry — T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound are the famous names in English — works by fragmentation, sudden juxtaposition, dense allusion and voices that interrupt one another. The image, presented hard and clear, becomes the unit of meaning. Difficulty in such poetry is not a puzzle with one solution; it imitates a world whose meanings no longer arrive whole.

War poetry crosses the boundary between the Victorian inheritance and modern plainness. Poets who served wrote in traditional forms filled with untraditional horror, and the collision between lovely form and terrible content is often the poem's point. When you meet it, name the collision.

6.3 After modernism: many voices

Later twentieth-century and contemporary poetry multiplies the available voices: regional, diasporic, feminist, postcolonial and working-class poetries claim the tradition and remake it. Poets writing in English from Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia and their diasporas bring other landscapes, other Englishes and other histories into the form. For a student of English Modern Letters at Yaoundé, this is not a footnote: it is the living edge of the subject, where the question "whose English, whose experience, whose canon?" is asked inside the poems themselves. Bring your own linguistic knowledge to these poems as an asset. A reader who knows more than one language hears things in them that a monolingual reader may miss.

6.4 Writing the essay: a complete method

Annotate before you plan. Mark form, image families, turns, repetitions and difficulties on the text itself.

Find the essay's question inside the set question. If the question asks whether a poem is "really about" its apparent subject, your thesis will usually be a qualified yes-and-no: it is about the subject, and through the subject about something larger.

Build paragraphs as arguments. Each paragraph: a claim, evidence (a short quotation), analysis of the evidence (how the language works), and a link to the poem's whole design. Claim–evidence–analysis–link, repeated, is the skeleton of nearly every strong literary essay.

Quote short, quote exactly, quote often. A four-word quotation analysed well beats a four-line quotation summarised flatly. Always copy quotations with complete accuracy, including punctuation, and name the poet and work in your first reference.

End by answering "so what?" Your conclusion should state what the poem finally does to a reader and why it matters — not merely repeat your introduction in different words.

Worked Example 6.1: Judging a monologue speaker

Imagine a dramatic monologue in which a proud speaker shows a visitor a portrait of his late wife, praising her beauty while complaining, in polished phrases, that she smiled too freely at others. A surface reading reports a connoisseur discussing art. A judged reading notices the pattern: every compliment tightens into possession; the wife's living warmth is treated as a fault; the portrait is preferred because in it she is finally still, owned and silent.

The poem never states "this man is dangerous". It arranges the evidence and trusts the reader's judgement. In your essay, imitate that trust: lay out the speaker's own words in order, and let your analysis show the verdict emerging from them. Browning's monologues are the classic training ground for this skill.

Worked Example 6.2: From annotation to paragraph

Suppose your annotation on Blake's "The Tyger" notes: repeated questions; no answers; forge and fire images; trochaic beat. A weak paragraph lists these features. A strong paragraph argues from them: "Blake's questions are the poem's engine. They accumulate — about the maker's hand, eye, tools and courage — without a single answer, so the poem performs the failure of human explanation before a creation that joins beauty to terror. The forge imagery makes creation an act of strength and violence at once, and the hammering trochaic beat lets the reader hear that labour." Notice: features have become a claim about what the poem does. That transformation is the whole craft of critical writing.

Exercises — Chapter 6

34. Write a full essay plan for the question: "In the poems you have studied, how do poets use questions?" Choose two or three poems and plan point by point.
35. Take a dramatic monologue or a poem with a strong speaker. Write two paragraphs: the first presenting the speaker's case fairly, in the speaker's own terms; the second judging that case from the poem's evidence.
36. Revise a paragraph of your own earlier work using the claim–evidence–analysis–link pattern. Note, in brackets after the paragraph, what you changed and why.

Answer guidance

37. Strong plans group poems by function of the question — questions that pray, questions that accuse, questions that confess ignorance — rather than treating one poem at a time.
38. Fairness first is essential: a judgement that has not understood the speaker's case will look shallow. In the second paragraph, prefer the speaker's smallest revealing words — a casual "even", a repeated adjective — to large general charges.
39. Most revisions need more analysis, not more quotation. If a quotation is followed by fewer than two sentences exploring its language, expand the analysis before adding anything new.

Glossary of Poetic Terms

Alliteration — repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of nearby words. **Assonance** — repetition of vowel sounds. **Ballad** — a narrative song, traditionally in quatrains with a refrain. **Blank verse** — unrhymed iambic pentameter. **Caesura** — a pause within a line. **Conceit** — an extended, ingenious comparison. **Couplet** — two rhymed lines. **Diction** — a poet's word choice. **Elegy** — a poem of mourning moving towards some form of consolation. **Enjambment** — sense running over a line ending. **Foot** — a unit of metre. **Free verse** — verse without regular metre or fixed rhyme, organised by other disciplines. **Half-rhyme** — partial rhyme. **Image** — language appealing to the senses. **Metaphor** — a direct comparison without "like" or "as". **Metre** — the organised pattern of stresses. **Ode** — an elevated poem of address. **Personification** — giving human qualities to the non-human. **Quatrain** — a four-line stanza. **Refrain** — a repeated line or phrase. **Simile** — an open comparison using "like" or "as". **Sonnet** — a fourteen-line poem. **Speaker** — the voice speaking a poem, distinct from the poet. **Symbol** — an image carrying meanings beyond itself. **Tenor and vehicle** — the two terms of a comparison: the thing described and the thing it is described as. **Tone** — the speaker's attitude. **Volta** — the turn in a sonnet or argument.

Further Reading and Next Steps

Re-read the poems quoted in this book in full, in any public-domain collection, and read them aloud. Then widen the circle: one poet per period, read slowly, with this book's three questions beside you. Keep a notebook of image diaries and volta-hunts. In the next books of this library you will meet drama and the novel; the habits built here — attention to voice, form and image — will serve

you in both, because every literary kind is, in the end, language arranged to mean more than it says.

End of English Poetry — From the Library of Maggie Enow.