Approaching poetry
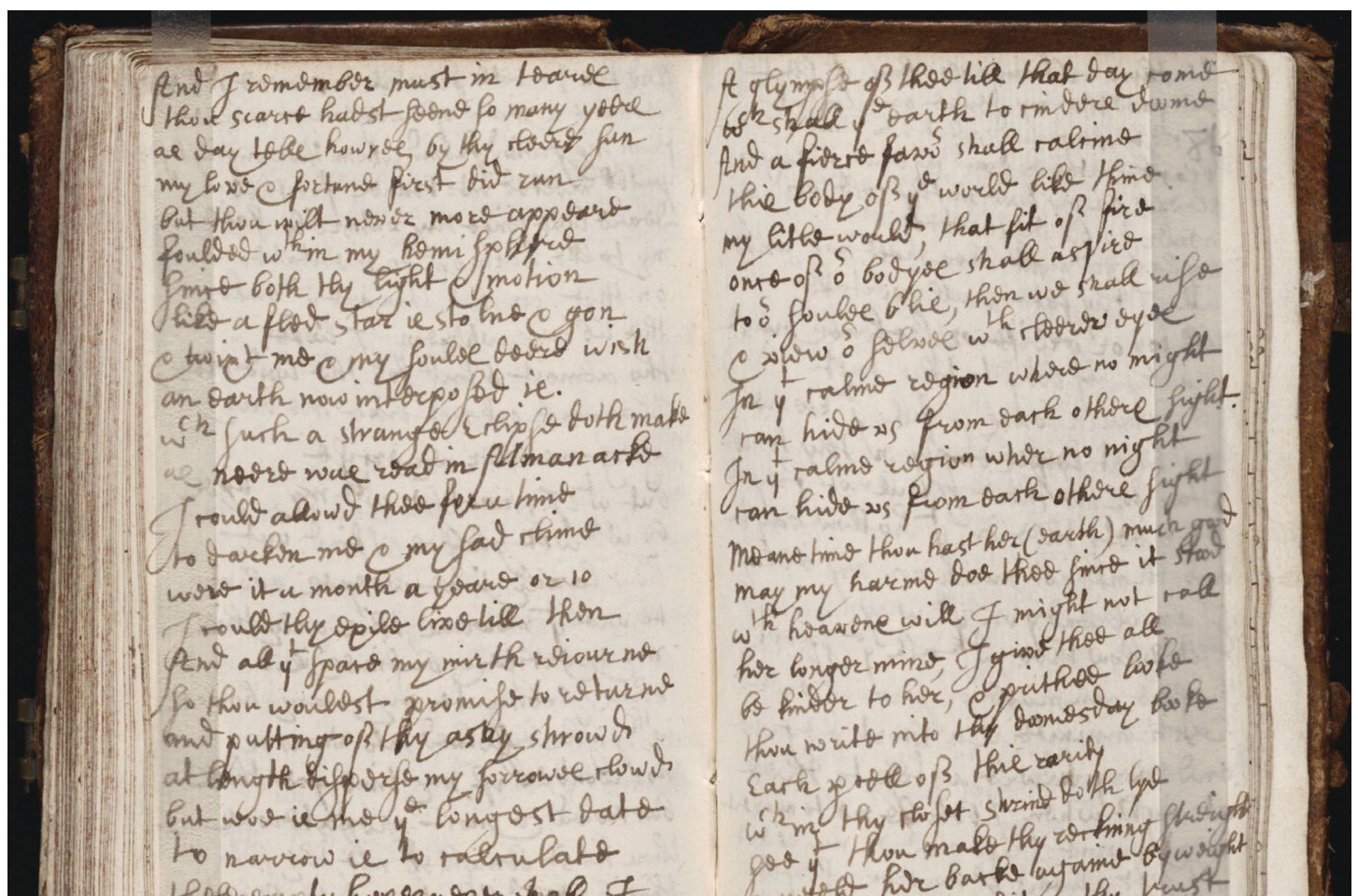
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Introduction

This course is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary texts. You will learn about rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, poetic inversion, voice and line lengths and endings. You will examine poems that do not rhyme and learn how to compare and contrast poetry.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 2 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- demonstrate an awareness of the role analysis plays in informing appreciation and understanding of poetry
- identify and discuss the main analytical concepts used in analysing poetry.

1 Approaching poetry

What is the point of analysing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we're reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it. But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a **sonnet** rather than an **ode**, a **ballad**, or a **villanelle**? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

Activity 1

Click on the link below to read and compare the two versions of William Blake's 'Tyger'. The one on the left is a draft, the other is the final published version.

View document: William Blake's 'Tyger'

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, 'When the stars threw down their spears', appears in the finished poem. Significantly this introduces the idea of 'the Lamb', a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a 'he' who made the lamb. One similarity between draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from 'What' to 'Where', and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two rhyme words are decided – grasp/clasp – but in which order should they come? 'Clasp' is a less aggressive word than 'grasp'; 'clasp' is not quite as gentle as an embrace, but it is closer to embracing than 'grasp' is – so it must be for deliberate effect that we end up with 'What dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

It is rare to have manuscript drafts to examine in this way, but I hope that this convinces you of the kind of attention writers pay to word choice. Let us take one more example. Think about this first stanza of Thomas Hardy's 'Neutral Tones' (1867):

We stood by a pond that winter day,

And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,

And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;

– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

(Gibson, 1976, p. 12)

Notice that, in the last line, 'oak' or 'elm' would work just as well as far as the **rhythm** or music of the line is concerned, but 'ash' has extra connotations of greyness, of something burnt out, dead, finished ('ashes to ashes', too, perhaps?), all of which contribute to the mood that Hardy conveys in a way that 'oak' or 'elm' wouldn't.

To return to my original question then, 'what is the point of analysing poetry?', one answer is that only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognise the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning. General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why. But *studying* poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

You may write poetry yourself. If so, you probably know only too well how difficult it is to produce something you feel really expresses what you want to convey. Writing an essay presents enough problems – a poem is a different matter, but certainly no easier. Thinking of poetry as a discipline and a craft which, to some extent, can be learned, is another useful way of approaching analysis. After all, how successful are emotional outpourings on paper? Words one might scribble down in the heat of an intense moment may have some validity in conveying that intensity, but in general might they not be more satisfactory if they were later revised? My own feeling is that a remark Wordsworth made 200 years ago has become responsible for a number of misconceptions about what poetry should do. In the Preface to a volume of poems called *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he wrote that 'all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' (Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.85,11.105–6). The second time he uses the same phrase he says something that I think is often forgotten today: 'poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion *recollected in tranquillity'* (my italics) (ibid., p. 95, ll.557–8). Notice the significant time lapse implied there – the idea that, however powerful or spontaneous the emotion, it needs to be carefully considered before you start writing. He goes on:

> The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually reproduced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins.

You don't have to agree with Wordsworth about what poetry is or how best to achieve it. (Would you always want a poem to express powerful emotion, for example? I referred to Hardy's 'Neutral Tones' above, where the whole point is that neither of the two characters described feels anything much at all.) But the idea of contemplation is a useful and important one: it implies distance, perhaps detachment, but above all re-creation, not the thing itself. And if we try to re-create something, we must choose our methods and our words carefully in order to convey what we experienced as closely as possible. A word of warning though: writers do not always aim to express personal experiences; often a persona is created (see discussion of 'Voice' in Section 8).

The poet Ezra Pound offered this advice to other poets in an essay written in 1913: 'Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something' (Gray, 1990, p. 56). And in the 1950s William Carlos Williams advised, 'cut and cut again whatever you write'. In his opinion, the 'test of the artist is to be able to revise without showing a seam' (loc. cit.). That sewing image he uses appeals to me particularly because it stresses the notion

of skilled craftsmanship. Pound and Williams were American, writing long after Wordsworth, but, as you can see, like countless other poets they too reflected very seriously on their own poetic practice. I hope this helps convince you that as students we owe it to the poems we read to give them close analytical attention.

2 Using this course

In what follows, section headings like 'Rhyme', 'Rhythm', 'Line lengths and line endings', 'Alliteration', and so on, are intended to act as signposts to help you use this course (if terms are unfamiliar, look them up in the glossary at the end of this free course). But these headings indicate only the *main* technique being discussed. While it is something we need to attempt, it is very difficult to try to isolate devices in this way – to separate out, for example, the effects of rhythm from rhyme. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't look for particular techniques at work in a poem, but we need to be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

As you work through this course, don't be discouraged if your response to exercises differs from mine. Remember that I had the advantage of choosing my own examples and that I've long been familiar with the poems I've used. On a daily basis, we probably read much less poetry than we do prose. This is perhaps one reason why many people say they find poetry difficult – unfamiliarity and lack of practice. But, like anything else, the more effort we put in, the wider the range of experiences we have to draw on. I hope that when you come across an unfamiliar extract in the discussions that follow you might decide to look up the whole poem on your own account, widening your own experience and enjoying it too.

Remember that language changes over the years. I've deliberately chosen to discuss poems from different periods, and given dates of first publication. Do keep this in mind, especially as you may find some examples more accessible than others. The idiom and register of a poem written in the eighteenth century will usually be quite different from one written in the twentieth. Different verse forms are popular at different times: while sonnets have been written for centuries, they were especially fashionable in Elizabethan times, for example. Don't expect to find free verse written much before the twentieth century.

If you are working on a poem, it can be a good idea to print it, maybe even enlarge it, and then write anything you find particularly striking in the margins. Use highlighters or coloured pens to underline repetitions and link rhyme words. Patterns may well emerge that will help you understand the way the poem develops. Make the poems your own in this way, and then, if you are the kind of person who doesn't mind writing in books, you can insert notes in a more restrained way in the margins of your book.

If you prefer to work on your computer, you can do a similar thing by using an annnotation tool on your word processor.

Whatever you do, always ask yourself what the effect of a particular technique that you identify is. Noticing an unusual choice of words, a particular **rhyme scheme** or use of **alliteration** (see Section 4 on alliteration below) is an important first step, but you need to take another one. Unless you go on to say why what you have noticed is effective, what it contributes to the rest of the poem, how it endorses or changes things, then you are doing less than half the job. Get into the habit of asking yourself questions, even if you can't always answer them satisfactorily.

3 Rhythm

All speech has rhythm because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. The rhythm can sometimes be very regular and pronounced, as in a children's nursery rhyme – 'JACK and JILL went UP the HILL' – but even in the most ordinary sentence the important words are given more stress. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects. The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its metre, and we can analyse, or 'scan' lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark '/' is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and 'x' to indicate an unstressed syllable. Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a 'foot', which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

The most common foot in English is known as the **iamb**, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x /). Many words in English are iambic: a simple example is the word 'forgot'. When we say this, the stresses naturally fall in the sequence:

x /
'forgot'.

Iambic rhythm is in fact the basic sound pattern in ordinary English speech. If you say the following line aloud you will hear what I mean:

x / x /   x /   x /   x / x /
I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes.

The next most common foot is the **trochee**, a stressed syllable (or 'beat', if you like) followed by an unstressed one (/x), as in the word

/   x
'mountain'.

Both the iamb and the trochee have two syllables, the iamb being a 'rising' rhythm and the trochee a 'falling' rhythm. Another two-syllable foot known as the **spondee** has two equally stressed beats (/ /), as in

/   /
'blue spurt'.

Other important feet have three syllables. The most common are the **anapest** (x x /) and the **dactyl** (/ x x), which are triple rhythms, rising and falling respectively, as in the words

x x   /   / x x
'unimpressed' and 'probably'.

Here are some fairly regular examples of the four main kinds of metre used in poetry. (I have separated the feet by using a vertical slash.) You should say the lines aloud, listening for the stress patterns and noting how the 'beats' fall on particular syllables or words.

Iambic metre

x   / | x   / | x   / | x   / | x   /
The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of part- | ing day

Trochaic metre

/ x | / x | /   x | /
Tiger | tiger | burning | bright

Anapestic metre

x x / | x x / | x x   / | x x /
She is far | from the land | where her young | hero sleeps

Dactylic metre

/ x   x | /   x   x | / x x | / x x
Woman much | missed how you | call to me, | call to me

The other technical point that you need to know about is the way the lengths of lines of verse are described. This is done according to the number of feet they contain, and the names given to different lengths of lines are as follows:

monometer	a line of one foot
dimeter	a line of two feet
trimeter	a line of three feet
tetrameter	a line of four feet
pentameter	a line of five feet
hexameter	a line of six feet
heptameter	a line of seven feet
octameter	a line of eight feet.

By far the most widely used of these are the tetrameter and the pentameter. If you look back at the four lines of poetry given as examples above, you can count the feet. You will see that the first one has five feet, so it is an iambic pentameter line; the second one has four feet, so it is a trochaic tetrameter line; the fourth and fifth also have four feet, so are anapestic and dactylic tetrameter lines respectively. Lines do not always have exactly the 'right' number of beats. Sometimes a pentameter line will have an extra 'beat', as in the famous line from *Hamlet*, 'To be or not to be: that is the question', where the 'tion' of question is an eleventh, unstressed beat. (It is worth asking yourself why Shakespeare wrote the line like this. Why did he not write what would have been a perfectly regular ten-syllable line, such as 'The question is, to be or not to be'?)

Having outlined some of the basic metres of English poetry, it is important to say at once that very few poems would ever conform to a perfectly regular metrical pattern. The effect of that would be very boring indeed: imagine being restricted to using only iambic words, or trying to keep up a regular trochaic rhythm. Poets therefore often include trochaic or anapestic or dactylic words or phrases within what are basically iambic lines, in order to make them more interesting and suggestive, and to retain normal pronunciation. Here is a brief example from Shakespeare to show you what I mean. I have chosen a couple of lines spoken by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2, and have marked this first version to show you the basic iambic metre:

```
        x  /  | x  /  |   x  /  |   x  /  |  x  /
My fa- | ther loved | Sir Row- | land as |  his soul,
x  /  |  x  /  |  x  /  |  x  /  |  x  /
And all | the world | was of | my fa | ther's mind.
```

If you say the lines out loud in this regular way you can hear that the effect is very unnatural. Here is one way the lines might be scanned to show how the stresses would fall in speech (though there are other ways of scanning them):

```
       /  /  x  /    x   x   x   x  x  /
My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,
x   /  |  x  /  x  x  x  /  |  x  /
And all the world was of my father's mind.
```

It must be emphasised that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms I have been introducing here. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words. The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, 'Rhythm MUST have meaning': 'It can't be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and

sense, a tumty tum tumpty tum tum ta' (quoted in Gray, 1990, p. 56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate, and 'have meaning'. When Tennyson wrote 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of 'Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred'. But for a very different example we might take a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed metre: like much twentieth-century poetry, this poem is in 'free verse'. Its title is 'In a Station of the Metro' (the Metro being the Paris underground railway), and it was written in 1916:

x x xx x   x   /   /   x x   /
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
/ x x x   /   / x   /
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen on to a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the key words in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm I've chosen a passage from Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).

Activity 2

Click on the link below to open the excerpt from An Essay on Criticism. Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why it is appropriate for the meaning.

View document: Pope's 'An Essay on Criticism'

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope's lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn't matter if you don't recognise the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you'll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.

There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated 's' sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax's lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed.

This extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, like the whole poem, is written in rhyming **couplets** (lines rhyming in pairs). They confer a formal, regular quality to the verse. The punctuation helps to control the way in which we read: notice that there is a pause at the end of each line, either a comma, a semi-colon, or a full stop. This use of the end-stopped

line is characteristic of eighteenth-century **heroic couplets** (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), where the aim was to reproduce classical qualities of balance, harmony, and proportion.

Get into the habit of looking at rhyme words. Are any of Pope's rhymes particularly interesting here? One thing I noticed was what is known as **poetic inversion**. The rhyme 'shore'/'roar'is clearly important to the sound sense of the verse, but the more natural word order (were this ordinary speech) would be 'The hoarse rough verse should roar like the torrent'. Had he written this, Pope would have lost the sound qualities of the rhyme 'shore'/'roar'. He would have had to find a word such as 'abhorrent' to rhyme with 'torrent' and the couplet would have had a very different meaning. He would also have lost the rhythm of the line, in spite of the fact that the words are exactly the same.

Before we leave *An Essay on Criticism*, did you notice that Pope's subject in this poem is really poetry itself? Like Wordsworth, Pound, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom I've quoted earlier, Pope too was concerned with poetry as a craft.

4 Alliteration

Alliteration is the term used to describe successive words beginning with the same sound – usually, then, with the same letter.

To illustrate this I would like to use a stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, 'Natura naturans'. There is not enough space to quote the whole poem, but to give you some idea of the context of this stanza so that you can more fully appreciate what Clough is doing, it is worth explaining that 'Natura naturans' describes the sexual tension between a young man and woman who sit next to each other in a railway carriage. They have not been introduced, and they neither speak nor exchange so much as a glance. The subject matter and its treatment is unusual and also extraordinarily frank for the time of writing (about 1849), but you need to know what is being described in order to appreciate the physicality of the lines I quote.

Activity 3

Read the attached stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, 'Natura naturans' and consider the following questions.

(a) What is the single most striking technique used, and what are the effects?

(b) How would you describe the imagery, and what does it contribute to the overall effect?

Click on the link below to view Arthur Hugh Clough's poem, 'Natura naturans'.

View document: Arthur Hugh Clough's 'Natura naturans'

(a) Visually the use of alliteration is striking, particularly in the first line and almost equally so in the second. If you took the advice above about paying attention to the physical business of articulating the words too, you should be in a good position to discriminate between the rapidity of the flies and the heavier movement of the bees, and to notice how tactile the language is. The effect is actually to create sensuality in the stanza.

(b) Notice that though we begin with flies, bees and rooks, all of which are fairly common flying creatures, we move to the more romantic lark with its 'wild' song, and then to the positively exotic gazelle, leopard, and dolphin. From the rather homely English air (flies, bees, birds), we move to foreign locations 'Libyan dell' and 'Indian glade', and from there to 'tropic seas'. (Cod in the North Sea would have very different connotations from dolphins in the tropics.) Air, earth, and sea are all invoked to help express the variety of changing highly charged erotic feelings that the speaker remembers. The images are playful and preposterous, joyfully expressing the familiar poetic subject of sexual attraction and arousal in a way that makes it strange and new. Notice that in each case the image is more effective because the alliteration emphasises it.

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5 Rhyme

If a poem rhymes, then considering how the rhyme works is always important.

Rhyme schemes can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

Activity 4

Click on the link below to read 'Love From the North' (1862) by Christina Rossetti. What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

View document: 'Love From the North'

'Love From the North' tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is 'nay', there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren't there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 where 'say' 'nay'; 'nay' 'nay'; 'say' 'nay'; 'yea' 'nay'; and 'say' 'nay' appear. In the second stanza, 'gay' occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have 'yea' in line 3. What is the effect of this?

Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south's devotion: he 'never dared' to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he 'saddens' when she does, is 'gay' when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: 'It's quite too late to think of nay'. But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the 'links of love' imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has 'neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish' to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the 'book and bell' with which she's made to stay? Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words 'Till now' particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight **quatrains** (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren't feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don't go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word 'nay'

chiming throughout 'Love From the North' is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, 'nay' is the sound which gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes' (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn't a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti's quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity:

Activity 5

Click on the link below to see the first two stanzas of Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes. How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

View document: Keats' 'Eve of St Agnes'

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don't they? While 'was'/'grass' in the first stanza and 'man'/'wan' in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I'd really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

Activity 6

The extract attached below (click on the link to open) is from Tennyson's 'Mariana' (1830). Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

View document: Tennyson's 'Mariana'

Read the extract and consider the following questions:

(a) Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson's 'Mariana'.

(b) What is the first stanza about?

(a) As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as 'a b a b c d d c e f e f. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasise lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line 'I would that I were dead' (this is known as a **refrain)** so – as in Christina Rossetti's 'Love From the North' – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

(b) We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The 'dreary'/'aweary' and 'dead'/'said' rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats's 'Eve of St Agnes', there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana's mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

6 Poetic inversion

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope's poetic inversion in *An Essay on Criticism* and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song 'Dancing in the Street', first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme – 'There'll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet' – but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There's a convention that we recognise, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as 'a chance to meet new people'. ('People' rather than 'folk' would be more usual usage for me, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

7 Poems that don't rhyme

Are poems that don't rhyme prose? Not necessarily. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as 'prose poems'. These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page, as there was, for example, in 'Mariana'. When you study Shakespeare you will come across **blank verse**. 'Blank' here means 'not rhyming', but the term 'blank verse' is used specifically to describe verse in unrhyming iambic pentameters.

Although iambic pentameters resemble our normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You'll notice if you look through Shakespeare's plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes and heroines. They may *also* speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don't ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate status. It is important to recognise this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries – writers, readers, and audiences alike. So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision: it will elevate the subject. One such example is Milton's **epic** *Paradise Lost* (1667), a long poem in twelve Books describing Creation, Adam and Eve's temptation, disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in Wordsworth's mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

Activity 7

Click on the link below to compare the extract from Book XIII of The Prelude, where Wordsworth is walking up Mount Snowdon, with the extract from 'The Idiot Boy', one of his Lyrical Ballads. What effects are achieved by the different forms?

View document: 'The Prelude' and 'The Idiot Boy'

Both poems use iambic metre – an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The extract from *The Prelude* uses iambic pentameters, five metrical feet in each line, whereas 'The Idiot Boy' (like the ballad, 'Love From the North') is in tetrameters, only four, establishing a more sing-song rhythm. Other stylistic techniques contribute to the difference in tone too: the language of *The Prelude* is formal (Wordsworth's 'Ascending' rather than 'going up'), whereas 'The Idiot Boy' uses deliberately homely **diction**, and rhyme. Three simple rhyme words ring out throughout the 92 stanzas of the latter: 'Foy', 'boy' and 'joy' stand at the heart of the poem, expressing the mother's pride in her son. The moon features in each extract. In *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth climbs, the ground lightens, as it does in The Old Testament before a prophet appears. Far from being a meaningless syllable to fill the rhythm of a line, 'lo' heightens the religious parallel, recalling the biblical 'Lo, I bring you tidings of great joy': this episode from *The Prelude* describes a moment of spiritual illumination. Wordsworth's intentions in these two poems were quite different, and the techniques reflect that.

Other poems that don't use rhyme are discussed later in this course ('Wherever I Hang'; 'Mona Lisa'; 'Poem'). Notice that they use a variety of rhythms, and because of that none can be described as blank verse.

8 Voice

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew's poem, 'The Farmer's Bride' (1916) begins like this:

> Three summers since I chose a maid,
>
> Too young maybe – but more's to do
>
> At harvest-time than bide and woo.
>
> When us was wed she turned afraid
>
> Of love and me and all things human;

(Warner, 1981, pp. 1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are Browning's dramatic monologues.

Activity 8

Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems (click on the link below). Who do you think is speaking?

View document: Robert Browning poems

Well, the first speaker isn't named, but we can infer that, like Brother Lawrence whom he hates, he's a monk. The second must be a Duke since he refers to his 'last Duchess' and, if we read to the end of the third poem, we discover that the speaker is a man consumed with such jealousy that he strangles his beloved Porphyria with her own hair. Each of the poems is written in the first person ('*my* heart's abhorrence'; 'That's *my* last Duchess'; *I* listened with heart fit to break'). None of the characters Browning created in these poems bears any resemblance to him: the whole point of a dramatic monologue is the creation of a character who is most definitely not the poet. Charlotte Mew's poem can be described in the same way.

Activity 9

Click on the link below below to read the extracts attached below from Anne Brontë's 'Home' and Grace Nichols's 'Wherever I Hang'.

View document: 'Home' and 'Wherever I Hang'

(a) What do you make of the speaking voices in these stanzas?

(b) Are these poems personal private statements, or have the writers adopted personae, as Browning did in the examples above?

(a) Both poems are about exile, or quite simply, homesickness. They were written nearly 150 years apart, and that is reflected in the tone of speaking voice in each poem, in the diction, and in the choice of different verse forms. But what do you know about Anne Brontë, or Grace Nichols?

(b) Well, as far as their lives are concerned, we have this information. Anne Bronte was born in 1820. She went away to school and worked as a governess, but returned to her home between appointments, and died there in 1849. Grace Nichols was born in Guyana in 1950 and emigrated to Britain when she was 27. While they may have drawn on their experiences, there is no evidence to suggest that these are autobiographical poems. Both may well have felt homesickness, but it would be rash to make the assumption that either writes in her own voice in these poems. When scholars examined manuscripts of Emily and Anne Brontë's poems, they discovered that many that had always been considered autobiographical had in fact been part of an epic story that the sisters wrote – their 'Gondal Saga' – and were spoken by characters in the story. When they published their poems, they simply removed references to the saga. This should be a salutary warning against assuming too quickly that the speaker of a poem is to be identified with the author.

Activity 10

What of Grace Nichols and 'Wherever I Hang'? Read the poem again carefully (open by clicking 'View document' below), paying attention to word choice and use of grammar, then ask what kind of character has been created.

View document: 'Wherever I Hang'

The speaker is cheerful, adaptable, and not without a sense of humour. She's 'not too sure' why she left 'me people, me land, me home' which she remembers for its 'humming-bird splendour' but also for the less pleasant 'big rats in de floorboard'. There's a sense of amazement at 'de people pouring from de underground system', but the comment 'Like beans', given the emphasis of a line to itself, suggests that this is something that won't faze her. She continues to take things in her stride, changing her 'calypso ways' to learn English customs, such as not visiting 'Before giving them clear warning' and waiting 'me turn in queue'. There's a wry tone to 'clear warning' – a humorous suggestion that a visit might be a threat rather than a pleasure. Try reading both those lines with a standard English accent. It works well for the first line because of the use of grammar; but the Creole idiom of the next makes an English accent ridiculous. Instead of being preceded by 'the' (or 'de'), 'queue' appears without a definite article, making it sound slightly pompous and hinting at the speaker's amused contempt, even while she's prepared to conform to this English national characteristic.

Use of standard and Creole English dramatises the poem's tensions. The speaker says she doesn't really know 'where I belaang' – 'belaang' here deliberately asserting her difference. In the last line, 'me knickers' instead of '*my* knickers' takes us back to 'me people, me land, me home' of the first line. But the very last phrase ' – that's my home' – comes down firmly in favour of standard English and the adopted country. She hangs her knickers up (on a washing line?) in England, so that is where she belongs.

Is the speaker one and the same as Grace Nichols? It would be a very rash assumption to make. The speaker of 'Wherever I Hang' has a flexible approach to difficulties as well as a sense of humour, qualities she may well share with the poet, but the speaker is very much an individual. One aspect of the poem that you might also

> like to consider is the reference in the title and the last line to the song 'Wherever I Hang My Hat', recorded by a number of male vocalists, Paul Young among others. 'Wherever I Hang' was first published in a volume called *Lazy Thought of a Lazy Woman and Other Poems* (1989); Nichols also wrote *The Fat Black Women* poems (1984). She herself may be black, but these are not self-portraits. Get into the habit of thinking of speakers as carefully created characters.

Imagine that you do not know the gender of the writer and then ask if the speaker of a poem is male or female. Can you find evidence within the poem itself? Nichols's speaker refers to her underwear as knickers, so it seems to me safe to assume a female voice. But you may have automatically assumed that Anne Brontë's speaker was female simply because you know the poet is. Look back at 'Home' and see if you can find definitive evidence either way, remembering that this was a poem written for a character in the (no longer extant) 'Gondal Saga'. Could the speaker have been a man?

Poems written in the first person are just as likely to be fiction as poems written in the third person. It is important never to assume that the 'I' of any poem is the direct voice of the poet.

9 Line lengths and line endings

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater's discussion of the *Mona Lisa*, written in 1893, and then complete the activity:

> She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Activity 11

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no *regular* rhythm either, though I'm sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats's, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;

Like the Vampire,

She has been dead many times,

And learned the secrets of the grave;

And has been a diver in deep seas,

And keeps their fallen day about her;

And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;

And, as Leda,

Was the mother of Helen of Troy,

And, as St Anne,

Was the mother of Mary;

And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,

And lives

Only in the delicacy

With which it has moulded the changing lineaments,

And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Click the link below to view the poem as a pdf.

View document: W.B. Yeats poem

I wonder whether you used upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used 'And' at the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasising the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa. Two lines begin with 'She': while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater's punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as **enjambment**. The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While we may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses on our reading, less than the commas and semi-colons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats's arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater's long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age – she is 'older than the rocks' – and refers to 'Vampire', death, and 'grave' in the first lines. The decision to single out the two words 'And lives' in a line by themselves towards the end of the poem sets them in direct opposition to the opening; we have moved from great age and living death to life. The arrangement of lines 8–11 highlights her links with both pagan and Christian religions: the Mona Lisa was the mother of Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary. The wisdom and knowledge she has acquired is worn lightly, nothing more than 'the sound of lyres and flutes', apparent only in the 'delicacy' of colour on 'eyelids and hands'.

The aim of the preceding exercise was to encourage you to think about form and structure even when a poem does not appear to follow a conventional pattern. Because you have now 'written' a poem and had the opportunity to compare it with someone else's version of the same words, you should begin to realise the importance of decisions about where exactly to place a word for maximum effect, and how patterns can emerge which will control our reading when, for example, successive lines begin with repetitions. It should have made you think about the importance of the beginnings of lines, as well as line endings. What has been achieved by using a short line here, a longer one there? How do these decisions relate to what is being said? These are questions that can usefully be asked of any poem.

Earlier, discussing the extract from Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*, I asked you to concentrate on the sound qualities of the poetry. Here, I want you to consider the visual impact of the poem on the page. It is a good thing to be aware of what a complex task reading is, and to be alive to the visual as well as the aural qualities of the verse.

Activity 12

Further exercise: taking Grace Nichols's 'Wherever I Hang', discussed in Activity 10, you could reverse the process carried out in the previous exercise by writing out the poem as prose. Then, covering up the original, you could re-write it as verse and compare your version with the original.

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10 Comparing and contrasting

Often you will find that an assignment asks you to 'compare and contrast' poems. There's a very good reason for this, for often it is only by considering different treatments of similar subjects that we become aware of a range of possibilities, and begin to understand why particular choices have been made. You will have realised that often in the previous discussions I've used a similar strategy, showing, for example, how we can describe the rhyme scheme of 'Love From the North' as simple once we have looked at the more intricate patterning of Keats's 'The Eve of St Agnes' or Tennyson's 'Mariana'. Anne Brontë's 'Home' and Grace Nichols's 'Wherever I Hang' treat the subject of exile in quite different ways, and looking at one can sharpen our understanding of what the other does.

Activity 13

Click the link below and read the opening lines from two poems commemorating deaths. What can you identify to explain why they sound so very different?

View document: Poems commemorating deaths

If I had to identify one thing, I would say that the first begins more elaborately and with a more formal tone than the second. 'Felix Randal' tends to use language in an unusual way, but you would probably agree that the first sentence is quite straightforward and sounds colloquial (or informal), as if the speaker has just overheard someone talking about Randal's death and wants to confirm his impression. 'Lycidas' opens quite differently. It is not immediately apparent what evergreens have to do with anything (in fact they work to establish an appropriately melancholy atmosphere or tone), and it isn't until line 8 that we learn of a death. The word 'dead' is repeated, and the following line tells us that Lycidas was a young man. While 'Felix Randal' has an immediacy, the speaker of 'Lycidas' seems to find it hard to get going.

Both poems are **elegies** – poems written to commemorate death – and both poets are aware of writing within this convention, although they treat it differently.

Activity 14

What do the titles of the poems used in Activity 13 tell us about each poem, and how might they help us understand the different uses of the elegiac convention?

I think it would be apparent to most readers that 'Felix Randall' is simply a man's name, while 'Lycidas' is more mysterious. In fact Lycidas is a traditional pastoral name, but unless you know something about the classical pastoral tradition it might mean very little to you. The young man whose death Milton was commemorating was actually called Edward King, but, at the time he was writing, elegies were formal, public and impersonal poems rather than private expressions of grief. 'Lycidas' commemorates a member of a prominent family rather than a close friend of the poet's. Over two hundred years later, Hopkins, while working loosely within the same elegiac convention, adapts it. Felix Randal is an ordinary working man, not a public figure. In the seventeenth century it would have been unlikely that he would have been considered worthy of a poem like this.

If you were making a special study of elegies, there would be a great deal more to say. That's not the idea here, though. The point is that by comparing and contrasting the tone of the opening lines and the titles, and considering when the poems were written, we have come up with a number of significant differences.

Activity 15

Click the link below and read the attached poem by Robert Browning (1812–1889) carefully. Who is speaking, and who is being addressed?

View document: Robert Browning 'Memorabilia'

From the evidence of the poem we know that the speaker once walked across a moor, found an eagle's feather, and has a high regard for the poet Shelley (1792–1822). The person being addressed is not named, but we discover that he (or she) once met Shelley, and this alone confers status by association. The word 'you' ('your' in one instance) is repeated in 6 out of the first 8 lines. 'You' becomes a rhyme word at the end of the second line, so when we reach the word 'new' in line four – one of the two lines in the first stanzas that doesn't contain 'you' – the echo supplies the deficiency. 'You' clearly represents an important focus in the first half of the poem, but who exactly is 'you' ?

Thinking about this apparently straightforward question of who is being addressed takes us into an important area of critical debate: for each one of us who has just read the poem has, in one sense, become a person who not only knows who Shelley is (which may not necessarily be the case) but lived when he did, met him, listened to him, and indeed exchanged at least a couple of words with him. Each of us reads the poem as an individual, but the poem itself constructs a reader who is not identical to any of us. We are so used to adopting 'reading' roles dictated by texts like this that often we don't even notice the way in which the text has manipulated us.

Activity 16

Now read the Robert Browning poem again, this time asking yourself if the speaking voice changes in the last two stanzas, and if the person who is being addressed remains the same.

View document: Robert Browning 'Memorabilia'

If the first half of the poem is characterised by the repetition of 'you' and the sense of an audience that pronoun creates, then the second half seems quite different in content and tone. The speaker is trying to find a parallel in his experience to make sense of and explain his feeling of awe; the change of tone is subtle. Whereas someone is undoubtedly being addressed directly in the first stanza, in the third and fourth, readers overhear – as if the speaker is talking to himself.

At first the connection between the man who met Shelley and the memory of finding an eagle's feather may not be obvious, but there is a point of comparison. As stanza 2 explains, part of the speaker's sense of wonder stems from the fact that time did not stand still: 'you were living before that, / And also you are living after'. The moor in stanza 3, like the listener, is anonymous – it has 'a name of its own … no doubt' – but where it is or what it is called is unimportant: only one 'hand's-breadth' is memorable, the spot that 'shines alone' where the feather was found. The poem is about moments that stand out in our memories while the ordinary daily stuff of life fades. It also acknowledges that we don't all value the same things.

Activity 17

Take another look at the poem. How would you describe its form?

[View document: Robert Browning 'Memorabilia'](#)

The structure of the poem is perfectly balanced: of the four quatrains, two deal with each memory, so, although the nature of each seems quite different, implicitly the form invites us to compare them. Think about the way in which Browning introduces the eagle feather. How does he convince us that this is a rare find?

To begin with, the third and fourth stanzas make up one complete sentence, with a colon at the end of the third announcing the fourth; this helps to achieve a sense of building up to something important. Then we move from the visual image of a large space of moor to the very circumscribed place where the feather is found, but the reason why this 'hand's-breadth' shines out is delayed for the next two lines 'For there I picked up on the heather' – yes? what? – 'And there I put inside my breast' – well? – 'A moulted feather', ah (and notice the internal rhyme there of 'feather' with 'heather' which draws attention to and emphasises the harmony of the moment), and then the word 'feather' is repeated and expanded: 'an eagle-feather' Clearly the feather of no other bird would do, for ultimately the comparison is of eagle to the poet; Browning knows Shelley through his poetry as he knows the eagle through its feather, and that feather presents a striking visual image.

There is an immediacy about the conversational opening of the poem which, I have suggested, deliberately moves into a more contemplative tone, possibly in the second stanza (think about it), but certainly by the third. We have considered some of the poetic techniques that Browning employs to convince us of the rarity of his find in the third and fourth stanzas. You might like to think more analytically about the word sounds, not just the rhyme but, for example, the repeated 'ae' sound in 'breadth' 'heather' 'breast' and 'feather'. What, however, do you make of the tone of the last line? Try saying the last lines of each stanza out loud. Whether you can identify the metre with technical language or not is beside the point. The important thing is that 'Well, I forget the rest' sounds deliberately

lame. After the intensity of two extraordinary memories, everything else pales into insignificance and, to reiterate this, the rhythm tails off. While the tone throughout is informal, the last remark is deliberately casual.

In order to come to an understanding of the poem, and to see how the sense of a reader in the text is constructed, we have discussed Browning's use of repetition, rhyme, rhythm, structure, and visual **imagery**. Our analysis has not by any means exhausted the poem's potential, but, as it is only through practice that we become confident readers of poetry, this is the moment to turn to something very different and see whether similar questions apply. 'Poem', by the American Frank O'Hara (1926–1966), was written in 1962, more than a hundred years after 'Memorabilia'.

Activity 18

Read the attached 'Poem' by Frank O'Hara two or three times (click the link below to open it), first to get a sense of what it's about, then as you re-read ask yourself if it has anything at all in common with 'Memorabilia'.

View document: Frank O'Hara 'Poem'

Your first thought may well have been that there are no similarities between the poems, and certainly in the long run there are probably more differences. Nevertheless, 'Poem' is also about hero worship of a kind – of a film star rather than a poet this time – and it too has a conversational tone as well as at least one reader in the poem, the 'you' who says it is hailing, the 'you' that the speaker is in 'such a hurry/ to meet', and Lana Turner herself, to whom the last line is, comically, addressed.

One of the ways in which Browning achieved a sense of a speaking voice was in the repetition of 'and', stringing clauses of his sentences together so that they resemble spoken rather than written language. O'Hara also uses 'and' (seven times) as well as 'so' and 'but', which function in a similar way, joining ideas and clauses. We can't, however, talk of sentences in the same way here for, with the exception of two exclamation marks, there is no punctuation at all and, unlike Browning, O'Hara has not used capital letters to begin his lines. There is no rhyme either and, since we don't use rhyme schemes when we speak to each other in daily life, this too helps to create an informal tone. How is it that O'Hara has confidently conferred the title 'Poem' on his work, then? What techniques has he used to ensure that we recognise that language is being used in a special way, or is this simply prose in disguise?

First, visually the words make a neat block of text on the page that we would not expect to find were we reading prose. In the absence of rhymes to govern line endings, though, are beginnings and endings of lines quite arbitrary? (If you have time, write out the poem as if it were prose, cover up the original, and then try to turn it back into verse as you did earlier with 'Mona Lisa'. The same exercise would not work with 'Memorabilia', because the rhyme scheme there dictates the pattern.

How, then, is 'Poem' structured? Thinking about repetition helps, for once you notice repetition you begin to discern pattern. The arresting opening line, 'Lana Turner has collapsed', is repeated two-thirds of the way through, and the second time the upper case lettering of a news vendor's board is reproduced for our special attention, recreating the moment when the speaker sees it. The first part of the poem deals with 'now'. There is a lot of weather, and I can't help feeling that had O'Hara used the word 'sleet', there would have been no poem, for the deliberate patterning of

'raining/snowing/hailing/hailing/snowing/raining'

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in lines 3–7 is one of its great pleasures. Notice too the alliteration – 'hailing', 'hit', 'head' and 'hard' – recreating the effects of hail, especially as 'hard', coming at the beginning of a line, gets extra emphasis. Alliteration, like rhyme, is a special kind of patterning. The inventive image of the traffic 'acting exactly like the sky' – busy, unpleasant, coming from all directions – adds to the sense of movement, when suddenly in the midst of all the confusion the headline arrests the speaker's progress, and the poem. The last six lines are reflective, implicitly comparing 'there' with 'here' – there's no rain or snow in California, and the repeated sentence construction at the start of those two lines plays its part in slowing down the verse movement. The **pun** on meanings of 'collapsed' provides the comic ending to the poem.

The kind of analysis we've been doing helps us to see how poems work. In each case, the apparently informal tone has been carefully achieved; in spite of the casual effect, each is highly organised. We have also begun to notice the way in which readers are constructed by the text, and this will always be important, whether we are reading poetry or prose.

Conclusion

This free course provided an introduction to studying the arts and humanities. It took you through a series of exercises designed to develop your approach to study and learning at a distance and helped to improve your confidence as an independent learner.

Glossary

Alliteration

repetition of sounds, usually the first letters of successive words, or words that are close together. Alliteration usually applies only to consonants.

Anapest

see under **foot**.

Assonance

repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds.

Ballad

originally a song which tells a story, often involving dialogue. Characteristically, the storyteller's own feelings are not expressed.

Caesura

strong pause in a line of verse, usually appearing in the middle of a line and marked with a comma, semi-colon, or a full stop.

Couplet

pair of rhymed lines, often used as a way of rounding off a **sonnet**; hence the term 'closing couplet'.

Dactyl

see under **foot**.

Dialogue

spoken exchange between characters, usually in drama and fiction but also sometimes in poetry.

Diction

writer's choice of words. Poetic diction might be described, for instance, as formal or informal, elevated or colloquial.

Elegy

poem of loss, usually mourning the death of a public figure, or someone close to the poet.

Ellipsis

omission of words from a sentence to achieve brevity and compression.

Enjambment

the use of run-on lines in poetry. Instead of stopping or pausing at the end of a line of poetry, we have to carry on reading until we complete the meaning in a later line. The term comes from the French for 'striding'.

Epic

a long narrative poem dealing with events on a grand scale, often with a hero above average in qualities and exploits.

Epigram

witty, condensed expression. The closing **couplet** in some of Shakepeare's **sonnets** is often described as an epigram.

Foot

a unit of metre with a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the examples that follow, a stressed syllable is indicated by '/', and an unstressed syllable by 'x': anapest: xx/; dactyl: /xx; iamb: x/; spondee: //; trochee: /x

Heroic couplet

iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs, most commonly used for satiric or didactic poetry, and particularly favoured in the eighteenth century.

Iamb

see under **foot**.

Iambic pentameter

a line consisting of five **iambs**.

Imagery

special use of language in a way that evokes sense impressions (usually visual). Many poetic images function as mental pictures that give shape and appeal to something otherwise vague and abstract; for example, 'yonder before us lie/Deserts of vast Eternity'. **Simile** and **metaphor** are two types of imagery.

Metaphor

image in which one thing is substituted for another, or the quality of one object is identified with another. The sun, for Shakespeare, becomes 'the eye of heaven'.

Metre

(from the Greek *metron*, 'measure') measurement of a line of poetry, including its length and its pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. There are different metres in poetry. Most sonnets, for example, written in English are divided into lines of ten syllables with five stresses – a measure known as pentameter (from the Greek *pente* for 'five'). The sonnet also tends to use a line (known as the iambic line) in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one, as in this line: 'If I should die, think only this of me'. Most sonnets, then are written in **iambic pentameters**.

Narrative

the telling of a series of events (either true or fictitious). The person relating these events is the narrator. However, it is often more usual in poetry to refer to 'the speaker'.

Octave

group of eight lines of poetry, often forming the first part of a **sonnet**.

Ode

a poem on a serious subject, usually written in an elevated formal style; often written to commemorate public events.

Onomatopoeia

a word that seems to imitate the sound or sounds associated with the object or action, for example, 'cuckoo'.

Ottava rima

a poem in eight-line stanzas, rhyming a b a b a b c c.

Personification

writing about something not human as if it were a person, for example 'Busy old fool, unruly Sun,/Why dost thou thus,/Through windows and through curtains call onus?'.

Poetic inversion

reversing the order of normal speech in order to make the words fit a particular rhythm, or rhyme, or both.

Pun

double meaning or ambiguity in a word, often employed in a witty way. Puns are often associated with wordplay.

Quatrain

group of four lines of poetry, usually rhymed.

Refrain

a line or phrase repeated throughout a poem, sometimes with variations, often at the end of each stanza.

Rhyme

echo of a similar sound, usually at the end of a line of poetry. Occasionally, internal rhymes can be found, as in: 'Sister, my sister, O *fleet, sweet* swallow'.

Rhyme scheme

pattern of rhymes established in a poem. The pattern of rhymes in a **quatrain**, for instance, might be 'a b a b' or 'a b b a'.

Rhythm

the pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement. Sestet: group of six lines of poetry, often forming the second part of a **sonnet**.

Simile

image in which one thing is likened to another. The similarity is usually pointed out with the word 'like' or 'as': 'My love is like a red, red rose'.

Sonnet

fourteen **iambic pentameter** lines with varying **rhyme schemes**.

Spondee

see under **foot**.

Syllable

single unit of pronunciation. 'Sun' is one syllable; 'sunshine' is two syllables.

Tercet

group of three lines in poetry, sometimes referred to as a triplet. **Trochee**: *see under* **foot**.

Turn

distinctive movement of change in mood or thought or feeling. In the **sonnet**, the turn usually occurs between the **octave** and the **sestet**, though the closing **couplet** in Shakespeare's sonnets often constitutes the turn.

Villanelle

an intricate French verse form with some lines repeated, and only two rhyme sounds throughout the five three-line stanzas and the final four-line stanza.

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