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**Notes for Teachers**  
**on Poetry Anthology for**  
**IGCSE Literature (English) (0486)**

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL EXAMINATIONS

**IGCSE LITERATURE (ENGLISH): SYLLABUS 0486  
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**NOTES FOR TEACHERS ON POEMS SET FOR STUDY FROM  
SONGS OF OURSELVES: THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE INTERNATIONAL  
EXAMINATIONS ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY IN ENGLISH  
FOR EXAMINATION IN JUNE AND NOVEMBER  
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## Introduction: how to use these notes

There are three key principles on which the format of these support materials is based.

First is the fundamental assumption that no such materials can replace the teacher. It is the teacher's task to introduce the poem to the students and help them to form their own personal responses to what they read. Examiners can easily differentiate between students who have genuinely responded to literature for themselves and those who have merely parroted dictated or packaged notes. Teachers, establishing their dialogues in the classroom, need to encourage and trust students to arrive at their own points of view, insisting only that these shall be based firmly on what is being studied. This of course immediately rules out any thought of notes of 'prepared' answers to be memorised.

Secondly, the notes take for granted that each poem is unique and must be treated in a unique fashion. Examiners are often dismayed at the way some students seem to have been trained to follow strict agendas when dealing with poems, such as dealing first with imagery, then sentence structure, then prosody and so on, whatever the poem and whatever the question. Approaches such as this are almost always simplistic and superficial. By contrast, we wish to encourage students to identify what is *special* about a poem, what impact it makes on *them*, and work outwards from that perception. They shouldn't think of 'content' and 'style' as discrete areas to be ticked off a list; but instead should be encouraged to think of them together. So in these Notes students are constantly being enjoined to look simultaneously not only at *what* is said, but *how* it is said.

Thirdly, each poem is considered to have a universal appeal, and the Notes try only to introduce extraneous knowledge insofar as it might help students to appreciate the poem. If there is an underlying private concern, as for example in the case of Lamb's *The Old Familiar Faces*, biographical references are mentioned but deliberately downplayed to prevent this interfering with the direct communication between the poet and the twenty-first century reader in whatever part of the world he or she happens to be.

With this in mind, the notes on each poem – which are addressed to the teacher – are divided into four sections:

Background aims to put the poem briefly into some sort of context. This can be embroidered as much or as little or as the teacher sees fit. It is most important, however, that it should be dealt with quite quickly. Precious time should rather be spent on the poem itself. Teachers should remember that knowledge of historical/biographical context is not a formal assessment objective in this syllabus; students are not expected to show knowledge of it in the exam (not least as there is always the risk of their wasting valuable time in regurgitating second-hand details).

Teacher notes to assist a first reading aims to clarify some areas of potential difficulty/obscure mainly by simple glosses.

Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole is the most important section. It gives some suggestions to teachers for ways to get students to work individually or in pairs/groups on aspects of the poem and then discuss together. In the spirit of the syllabus, its aim is always to encourage students to deepen *their own* response to what they read. So, much of this section is a series of questions. These might be used in different ways. Teachers might allow the

students to work through the questions (or their own modified version of them) as preparation for a lesson when answers can be compared and a discussion developed. Alternatively, the questions might be used as a basis for group or pair work within the lesson. They could also be used as a revision exercise *after* the teaching had been done. They are, in short, to be used at the teacher's discretion according to the individual circumstances of the class.

The final section, *Thematic links between set poems in the anthology* might be used as a route finder, to determine the order in which the poems are studied. This syllabus does not specifically require a comparison of poems, but sometimes exam questions might ask for treatment of *two* poems within one answer. Teachers might also use the thematic links guidance for encouraging such joint treatment. (For a few poems some suggestions for possible 'wider' reading have also been added.)

## Maya Angelou: 'Caged Bird'

### Background

The trials that Maya Angelou (b. 1928, St Louis, Missouri, USA) had to endure in her early days in Arkansas, USA are well documented in her first autobiographical book entitled *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. The title comes originally from the poem by the Ohio poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, who was the son of two former slaves. Though living rather later, in her childhood Angelou still faced the hardships and frustrations of living in a segregated black community dominated by the rules of white people. So, she could share and develop the sentiments of Dunbar's image of the caged bird singing:

I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,  
    When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore, –  
When he beats his wings and he would be free;  
It is not a carol of joy or glee,  
    But a prayer that he sends from his heart's deep core,  
But a plea, that upward to Heaven he flings –  
I know why the caged bird sings!

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 4: *stalks*: walks with stiff, high, measured steps like a long-legged bird. (Students might consider whether the verb has any connotations – e.g. haughtiness or sullenness or pride.)

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Some suggested areas for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to concentrate on the **structure** of the verse, e.g. dividing the poem in half and exploring the symmetry between the two halves. As part of this exercise, they should try to see which lines or part-lines are repeated. What is the effect of this patterning?
- What can students say about **rhyme** here – including words which nearly rhyme – **half-rhymes** and words where the vowels rhyme, but the consonants do not correspond? Get them to look at instances where words do not rhyme at all but where the reader might expect them to. Can students identify other patterns of sound here and there? After they have considered all these they should try to say what importance (or not) all this has for the message the poet is getting across.
- Get students to look at the descriptions of the 'free' bird in stanzas 1 and 4. (They could read the stanzas out aloud.) In the first stanza, is there any word in each line would they wish or tend to accent most? What impressions of movement do the verbs bring? And how do they bring out the character of the bird?

- Ask students to write down one or two phrases from these stanzas which evoke the beauty of the natural world. Students should try to explain *why* they have chosen these for the benefit of other students.
- Get students to consider the impact of the phrases relating to the sky in verses 1 and 4. They should think not only of the image itself but its positioning at the end of each stanza.
- Ask students to look back over the notes they have been making during their reading and try and relate them to the theme of freedom. They should then look at the other stanzas relating to the caged bird, and write down any ways that they can see how the contrast between them and the stanzas relating to the free bird is emphasised. (Some of their comments on the structure and sounds might be relevant here.)
- Get students to make a list of four or five words that evoke the dismal circumstances of this bird, and say a little bit about why they have chosen each.
- What do students understand by the phrase “*bars of rage*”? They should try to explain the whole **metaphor**. What do they understand by the phrase “*grave of dreams*”? What is the *impact* of both these phrases on them?
- Angelou understands why the caged bird sings... Do *they*? Students should remember that there is not necessarily a simple, single answer, and should compare their views with those of fellow students.
- Angelou has not used a speech or taken part in a protest march or a TV interview to get over her point of view here. She has used the medium of *poetry*. How has she skilfully used this medium here for this purpose.....and is it the *only* purpose involved?

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Social injustice/lack of freedom: *Carpet-weavers, Morocco; Song to the Men of England; Spectator ab Extra; Muliebrity*

### **Some suggestions for wider reading**

From *Songs of Ourselves*: Poem 63: Mary Alcock – The Chimney-Sweeper’s Complaint; Poem 64: William Blake – The Chimney-Sweeper

Paul Laurence Dunbar *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (poem)

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (novel)

## Norman Nicholson: 'Rising Five'

### Background

Norman Nicholson (1914-1987) was born in the small town of Millom near the Lake District in England. He had tuberculosis when he was 16 and was sent away to a sanatorium to recover. He was unable to take a job on his return and devoted himself to writing poetry and plays. He also studied the natural life of the area in which he lived. Some of his love of nature is evident in the set poem, as is also his reverence for life perhaps made more precious in his eyes because of the earlier state of his health.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: The phrase *rising five* was often used of children shortly to be admitted to infants' school, but who had not quite reached the age of five.

Line 4: The boy's spectacles must have been of strong magnification because they made his eyes seem so very large.

Line 5: The spectacles are still being described in the phrase, *reflected cones of light*. The literal meaning is reasonably clear, that is that they are reflecting the light (either sun or house lights) in front of him. The metaphorical meaning cannot really be appreciated until the whole poem is read.

Line 6: *Toffee-buckled cheeks*: his cheeks are distorted by the jaws' grip on the toffee he is chewing.

Line 13: *swilled*: rinsed

Lines 16-17: Nicholson applies the *rising five* idea to his first metaphor in the phrase: *not May, / But rising June*.

Line 19: *dissected*: cut into parts; *tangential*: issuing at an angle

Lines 24-31: The last stanza brings together the images of the poem. The following exercises are designed to help students to explore the connections between these and encourage them to appreciate the changes of tone within the poem.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- After a first reading, students might have understood (or begun to understand) a main theme of the poem. Get them to try to write down briefly what they think that is. Then they should note down the various images or **metaphors** by which the poet explores these ideas. Is the small boy himself a metaphor?

- An artist in the class might try to draw a cartoon of the boy. What sort of impression of his personality do the students have? How has Nicholson managed to portray the boy so vividly in a few short lines?
- Do the students know little children like this who always look forward to being older than they are? Is it true of older children and teenagers? Is it true of the students in the class?
- How would the students describe the **tone** of the first stanza? Does the tone change during the stanza? (Students should think whether they would say the first two lines in a different tone to lines 8 and 9. They should read it out aloud. How would they change their tone of voice and why?)
- Are there any allusions in lines 1-9 to other images on their list (which will only have full significance when the whole poem had been studied)?
- A student (or students) should read out aloud lines 10 to 17 and the group encouraged to try to enjoy the sounds of the words. What patterns of sound can they find? They should look, for instance, for **alliteration** and **assonance**. Encourage them to notice the energy they need to bring to reading out loud. Why is this? How else does the poet suggest the energy of Spring? When does the stanza quieten down a little? How does the concluding phrase link the theme up with the first stanza?
- The next image (“dust dissected tangential light”) is not developed as fully. What is the effect of this?
- This takes us into the last stanza. Students should take some time to link each of the images here to where they were introduced in the earlier part of the poem and try to show how these last references develop the poet’s ideas a little further on each occasion and change the tone and perspective of the poem as a whole.
- Students might now look back over the whole poem and read it out aloud expressively, bringing out the gradual deepening of the poet’s mood.

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Changes in perception between childhood and adulthood: *Little Boy Crying; Plenty;*

Portrayal of children: *Little Boy Crying; Plenty; Carpet-Weavers; Morocco; Before the Sun*

Mortality: *She dwelt among the untrodden ways; Before the Sun; The Old Familiar Faces*

The use of metaphors in poetry might be usefully related to Sujata Bhatt’s concerns in *Muliebrity*.



## Mervyn Morris: 'Little Boy Crying'

### Background

Mervyn Morris was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1937, and gained fame as Professor of Creative Writing and Literature at the University of the West Indies. As a schoolboy, he wrote poetry for fun and for satirical reasons. Later, he said, he used poetry more seriously to ask questions about aspects of his life. He is known for the economy with which he uses words. This might be borne in mind when students approach this set poem.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: *contorting*: twisting violently

Line 2: *metamorphosed*: changed or transformed

Line 3: *frame*: body. (Students might consider – or act out – how a small boy might hold himself when his body is made rigid in a severe tantrum.)

Line 4: *bright* either because of the effect of the tears or because he is young and lively.

Line 6: *angling*: the use of the word is metaphorical, based on fishing. The boy is trying to use his cunning to achieve some sign of regret from the adult for his action.

Lines 8-13: The second stanza is based on the familiar fairy-tale of 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. (A few light-hearted moments might safely ensure that all students know the tale. Closer discussion will bring out an awareness that such fairy-tales are often a projection of childhood fears and dreams.)

Line 9: *a colossal cruel*: the word 'cruel' appears here unexpectedly as a noun.

Line 15: *can scald him with*: tears are often described as 'scalding' but only in the sense that they are hot and the product of 'hot' feelings – but here the poet gives an extra twist by changing the familiar grammatical function to suggest that they injure the man rather than the boy himself.

Line 16: *The mask* belongs to the man.

Line 20: Students who are baffled by the line should be assured that it might take a few readings, private thoughts and class discussion to gain confidence in interpreting it.

## Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- After reading again lines 1-7 describing the small boy, students should try to assess how far his grief is genuine. Encourage them to look very closely at the words to support their case. (They should remember that emotions do not have to be straightforward, even in a three-year-old.)
- Secondly, they should look at *how* the boy and the incident are described. (This might give a clue as to the feelings of the poet as we are seeing the whole thing from *his* perspective.) They might think of: (a) the use of the **second person** ('Your... you..'); (b) the sounds of line 2; (c) the **hyperbole** in line 3; (d) the effect of the **monosyllables** at the end of line 7; (e) anything else which is interesting about the way the boy is described. From all of this, can they make any preliminary, tentative conclusions about how the adult feels about the boy and the punishment?
- The first glimpse of the adult is as a **third person**, through the child's eyes. Students should consider *how* the poet thinks the child will be looking at the adult. They might consider (a) the way the fairy-tale has been used; (b) the sounds of the words; (c) the way he presents the child's plans for revenge.
- Students should remember throughout that *this is how the poet perceives the child's viewpoint* and that this will be affected by his feelings for the child and the child's grief and anger after the punishment. Is there any suggestion of humour in the way he has presented the child's response? Is there any unhappiness about the loss of rapport between them, however short-lived it might be? Why doesn't he call himself *I* or *me* at any time in the poem?

There are no simple right and wrong answers to such questions – but students should be prepared to back up their answers with close reference to the words of the poem reinforced by their own knowledge of adults and children.

- Get students to mull over the way some key words are used in the final stanza in order to take them more deeply into what the poet's feelings are. They should consider the force of the feelings behind 'hurt', 'easy', 'fierce', 'longs', 'anything', 'dare'.
- Morris has said that his poems were often asking questions about some aspect of his life. Do students think this is true of this poem.....or do they think they have the answers? Do *they* think it is sometimes necessary to be cruel to be kind?
- This brings us to the very last line, standing by itself. (Students could consider what the effect of that standing alone is.) What does it mean in its very simplest, **literal** sense? Given its position at the end and the way it is expressed, we have a clue that it might mean more than this, however. ('You' has so far referred to the child; it can also be used impersonally and generally to refer to anyone). We have (in line 5) had a comparison of tears to rain. What **metaphorical** meanings can students see in the words and how does this help them to gain a perspective on the whole poem?

- After all the search for meanings and significance in the poem, students should still appreciate that this is a very *human* poem. If they like to read literature as an expression of human emotion, not just as an intellectual exercise, they can be encouraged to go back and *enjoy* the adult's love overflowing in the poem. If they have detected this, they have appreciated something important – but they need to bring to any discussion *how* they have seen that is there.

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Relationships between adults and children: *Plenty*;

Portrayal of children: *Rising Five*; *Plenty*; *Carpet-weavers*; *Morocco*; *Before the Sun*

Fairy tales: *Storyteller*

## Carol Rumens: 'Carpet-weavers, Morocco'

### Background

Carol Rumens was born in 1944 in London, England. Much of her poetry has been inspired by the places she has visited, about which she has said: 'Whatever I wrap my imagination around that's my home.' What did she see in Morocco? Tourists can see carpet-weavers working in the crowded maze of alleyways, probably occupying the same space as countless generations of their forebears did. This is the attractive surface of the trade. But in some parts of the world, there is much poverty and single mothers are often forced to send their children from the age of five to be apprentices to carpet-weavers, where they know that at least they will be fed.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: *loom* most obviously refers to the machine by which the carpet is woven. However, though used as a noun, it has the secondary meaning of the verb, *loom*, referring to another world coming into view.

*another world*: there are several possible meanings here and students may have to be counselled to keep an open mind on them until they have explored the poem further. Does the phrase refer to a world of the future? Or to another world before them on the loom, the idyllic garden of Islam?

Line 3: the image is of a chime of bells of different sizes for different pitches.

Line 5: *garden of Islam*: i.e. the carpet's abstract pattern. One of the familiar motifs of Islamic carpets was the garden, representative of paradise with its fragrant flowers and flowing fountains.

As the carpet nears completion, the bench they are sitting on has to be raised to allow the small children to reach the top of the design.

Line 9: *give*: one meaning is that the carpet will yield to the pressure of the weight of the worshippers; another *may* be that the prayers of the worshippers will *give* generously to the welfare of the children.

Line 10: *the school of days*: the phrase sadly echoes or parodies the familiar word, "schooldays".

Lines 11 and 12 should be the subject of much discussion on subsequent readings. On a first reading, the literal meaning might be clarified – i.e. that the wool making up the patterns of the carpet is quickly put into place in the long-established frame. Reference might also be usefully made to the contrast between the alliterative words, *fly* and *freeze*.

## Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Students should re-read the first stanza to themselves, and note down what the poet sees. (If they are artists, they might attempt to sketch or paint the scene.)
- They should discuss the possible meanings of the first line. What is the children's own world like at the present? What *is* the other world ('another world')? There may be more than one answer to this question. They should consider the word 'loom' – does it have any connotations beyond its literal meaning?
- What thoughts does the simile of the television provoke? Why might it seem strange or unexpected? Encourage students not be content with one simple reaction – it might work at different levels. They should share any thoughts that they have.
- What thoughts does the image in lines 5 and 6 inspire in them?
- Students should look at what happens to the carpet in the third stanza after the children in the poem have completed their work. As with all the lines so far, they are **end-stopped**; the sentence, in each case, is equivalent to the line of verse. What is the effect of this when it is read it out loud? Why is the merchant's truck mentioned? Does it contribute to the way the students feel about the children and their work?
- Rumens does not say 'worshippers'; she says 'prayer'. Do students think that is significant?
- The final stanza picks out themes from the rest of the poem and places a new emphasis on them. Students should think about the meaning of line 10: "The children are hard at work in the school of days." How is this different from the school they are attending? What are the implications of this difference?
- Students should spend some time considering the two phrases *all-that-will be* and *all-that-was*; and the contrasting words: *fly* and *freeze*. How do they relate to the rest of the poem? The letters that begin the word, *fly*, are the same as those beginning the word, *flickering*: do students think this is intentional, and what is its effect? What features of the world of *all-that-was* are implied in the rest of the poem? What other references in the poem can be found to colours, the future, and speed of movement?
- Students should be encouraged not to look for too simplistic or moralistic a response. They should be prepared to accept a partial, but growing, understanding of what the poet communicates to them.

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Social injustice/poverty: *Caged Bird; Song to the Men of England; Spectator ab Extra; Muliebrity; Monologue*

Childhood: Rising Five; Little Boy Crying; Plenty; Before the Sun

Work: Monologue; Muliebrity

## Percy Bysshe Shelley: 'Song to the Men of England'

### Background

One of the great English Romantic poets, Shelley was born into an aristocratic family in 1792 but later rebelled against the conservative values of his class. In 1819, when this poem was written, much of his work had a radical political agenda. A note from his wife Mary Shelley (the author of *Frankenstein*) sums up his viewpoint: 'Shelley loved the People; and respected them as often more virtuous, as always more suffering, and therefore more deserving of sympathy, than the great. He believed that a clash between the two classes of society was inevitable, and he eagerly ranged himself on the people's side. He had an idea of publishing a series of poems adapted expressly to commemorate their circumstances and wrongs.'

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 1: *wherefore..?*: why..? (for what reason / for what purpose)

Line 2: *ye*: you (a usage that is archaic today; cf. 'wherefore')

Line 4: *tyrants*: suggests the people who are in authority are oppressive

Line 7: *drones*: idlers (literally non-working, male honey bees). This introduces the metaphor developed in the next verse.

Line 10: *scourge*: a whip or lash

Line 24: this line should not be overlooked: it could be construed as a call to armed action, although it does cite the cause as being 'defence'.

Line 26: *deck*: decorate

Line 27: *wrought*: literally – worked (or forged)

Line 28: *steel ye tempered*: the steel you made hard by heating it (to the required temperature).

*glance*: strike at an angle

Line 31: *winding-sheet*: shroud

Line 32: *sepulchre*: burial-place

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Who exactly *are* the Men of England? Does 'men' mean 'men' in the sense we might use it today? Are they *all* the men of England? Or a segment of the population? Why does Shelley call them by this title? How does he achieve directness in addressing them?

- Get students to read the first three stanzas out aloud. Why do they think the poet repeats 'Wherefore'? Is there any other way he manages to emphasise this word? How else in these verses does he emphasise the drudgery and toil of the Men of England? Students should look particularly at features of the second stanza which help to do so.
- Get students to consider the mounting anger in the poem – how is it apparent? They might consider the rhythm of the verse in answer to this question.
- Students should consider what image of the “tyrants” the poet gives them in the first verse. How does the **metaphor** of the drones reinforce this image? They should comment on the effect of the adjectives used to describe the drones.
- Students should consider whether the questions of the first four stanzas are **direct questions** or **rhetorical questions**. What effect does the repetition of the questioning (and the rhythm) have on them here?
- Get students to try imagine they are one of the Men of England. How would they react to some of the things Shelley says in the first four stanzas? Would they like the last word of the fourth stanzas ('fear') being applied to them? Why do they think Shelley used it?
- Students should explore what makes stanza 5 so effective by thinking not only of what is said but *how* it is said. How does it mark a transition from the previous stanzas?
- Get students to compare the patterns in stanzas 5 and 6, considering changes in the **tone** of the verse. When exploring *how* it changes, they should consider the different arrangement of **stresses** within the line. How does this change and what is the effect of it for them? What is the effect of the use of the **imperative** in stanza 6?
- Do students find stanzas 7 and 8 surprising? Do they find anything different about the **tone**? Does Shelley really want what he is saying (“run away to your slums and hovel”); if he doesn't, *why* is he saying it? To what extent do students find it effective? Students should discuss whether Shelley is really contemptuous of the Men of England.
- To what extent do students think the last stanza is a fitting end to the poem? In exploring this, they should also remember features of the poem they have already explored.

### Thematic links with set poems

Social injustice/poverty: *Caged Bird; Carpet-Weavers, Morocco; Spectator ab Extra; Monologue; Muliebrity; Plenty*



## Arthur Hugh Clough: 'Spectator ab Extra'

### Background

Arthur Hugh Clough was born in Liverpool, England 1791 and died in 1861. He was a radical both in his religious and political beliefs. When one reads this apparently jolly poem, one should remember that it doesn't express Clough's personal sentiments: he went to France to support the French working people in the February Revolution of 1848 when they fought to overthrow the Orleanist monarchy. (The set extract is the first section of a longer poem.)

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Title: *Spectator ab extra*: literally: a spectator from outside, i.e. an onlooker or an uninvolved third-party observer

Line 2: *pelf*: money, riches, material goods (perhaps with the rather disparaging connotation of 'filthy lucre')

Line 7: *en grand seigneur*: (*French*) in the manner of a gentleman, with the demeanour of a person of a distinguished rank

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to read the first stanza out aloud, trying to emphasise the **rhythm** of the lines. What is the effect of the rhythm? What makes it so jolly and song-like?
- Do students agree with the sentiments expressed here? What impression of the people he overhears do they get? Remembering that it is the **persona** in the poem who is giving this impression, students should explore *how* he does so.
- Students should look at the persona himself and make up their minds what they think of him. They should look especially here at stanza 2 to support their view.
- After they have made up their mind, they should try reading the whole poem exaggerating the character they have imagined.
- Get students to write down what words or phrases led them to respond to the poem as they have done, those which they would want to emphasise above the others. They should listen to other students' responses and then decide which of these descriptions best sum up the persona: *happy, cynical, selfish, generous, good-living, solitary, uncaring*. Are there other words to add to the list?
- Do they find the poem amusing? Why – or why not?

**Thematic links with set poems**

Social injustice/ poverty: *Caged Bird; Carpet-weavers; Morocco; Song to the men of England; Monologue; Muliebrity; Plenty*

**Suggestion for wider reading**

The whole of 'Spectator ab Extra'.

## Hone Tuwhare: 'Monologue'

### Background

Hone Tuwhare was born in Kaikhoe, New Zealand in 1922. As well as poetry he has written plays and fiction. He has been the scourge of injustices everywhere; he is particularly well known for his support of Maori land claims and for his committed socialism. It is important, however, not to leap to conclusions on the basis of his Maori background. Those who have been at his poetry readings have observed that when he has read this poem, *Monologue*, he has adopted the voice of an elderly Scotsman. This is the character it is based on, a man with whom he once worked in a railway workshop when he was a boilermaker.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 11: *kneading*: a word usually used to describe the action of working flour to make bread. Here it is the same action but in an engineering setting.

Lines 18-19: the *casual recognition* shows his awareness of a sort of brotherhood of workers, crossing all barriers.

Line 31: notice that the word is *dying* not death, which would have been very ironic. *Dying*, however, is not a permanent state. It suggests, perhaps, that the industry is dying.

Line 42: the words, *you know* at the end might be interpreted or spoken in a variety of ways. It could be seen as just emphasising the conversational style, to seek to engage the reader, as a plea for understanding, or it could be seen as an aggressive challenge to anyone who would dare contradict the speaker. Students should be encouraged to explore these (and other) possibilities.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- The following activities are designed to encourage students to build up impressions of the character in the poem by close attention both to *what* he says and *how* he says it. Students should read the poem out aloud one or two times first. Encourage them to vary tone of voice as they read, perhaps changing it at each new section, as different aspects of thoughts and feelings emerge. They should try to imagine he is just talking in ordinary conversation in a work-break with *them*.
- Students should then write down their first impressions of this man. *Why* do they think he wants to be near the door in reality?
- Students should consider the place of work and his feelings towards it. What is the atmosphere in the workshop that the **persona** is trying to recreate? Do students think he likes it, tolerates it, hates it, or has mixed feelings?

Students should look at the language used in this verse and their observations to support their viewpoint.

- Students should look at the last sentence here and the description of those who are in authority: his supervisors/fireman perhaps. How does the way this is phrased add to their impressions of his personality and his reasons for wanting to be near the door? Do they find any humour in this? Students should add their observations to their first impressions already noted down.
- What do the words 'drift' and 'looking' show about the prospective workers and their hopes? The way the **persona** interacts with them also needs some attention. Students should think about this and add observations to the notes that they are compiling, remembering to consider not only *what* is said but also *how* it is said.
- How does Tuwhare communicate the impact of seeing the look of hopelessness in their eyes on the narrator in the poem? Students should look very closely at the structure of the sentence (the order of the words) beginning 'The look on the faces of the unlucky...'
- Students should spend time thinking about what the attitude of this man is to his work. What does it mean to him in his life? They should discuss their responses with others in the group.
- Does the next stanza (the first to be conventionally laid out in lines) say something about the nature of industry or the personality of the narrator or both? What is the effect of the word *dying*, and the sentence that leads up to it, and the three dots after it? Students should discuss each others' responses.
- What evidence is there *in the way* he continues to narrate his story that he has a need to block out these thoughts from his mind?
- The last stanza gives yet another reason for working near the main door. Is this a convincing reason? What does it show about his state of mind? Is he insecure? Does he need an escape? What is the tone of voice that should be used to read this out? How should the final question (*you know?*) be read? What is the effect of this final question?
- Encourage students to explore and discuss some of the ways (e.g. layout and length of lines) in which *Monologue* might seem different from a 'conventional' poem. What do they think of these and how does this effect the way they read (and read out) the poem?

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Work: *Carpet-weavers; Morocco; Song to the Men of England; Muliebrity; Farmhand*

Portrait of a character: *Muliebrity; Plenty; Farmhand; She dwelt among the untrodden ways*

First person narration: *Little Boy Crying; Spectator ab Extra; Plenty*

## Charles Mungoshi: 'Before the Sun'

### Background

As well as for his poetry, Charles Mungoshi, born in the Chivhu area of Zimbabwe in 1947, is known for his novels and short stories, including prize-winning children's stories. He was the son of a farmer and in his boyhood he spent much of his time helping his parents in the fields. Often he would walk alone, herding cattle in the nearby forest. Later he worked with the Forestry Commission in Zimbabwe. Memory Chirere, of the University of Zimbabwe, writes: 'Almost always, the Mungoshi persona provides a private contemplative voice...with the aid of free verse and short, almost hesitant, cascading lines there is a sense of a persona who sees without being seen and talks without rushing to suggest.'

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The vocabulary of this poem is very simple and should need little or no explanation in class. The resonances of the words, however, are profound, as the boy, on the threshold of maturity but still a boy, communes with nature and the universe and intuits an understanding of life.

Stanza 5: the smoke rising is reminiscent of either a smoke signal or the smoke from a burnt offering. The idea of a sacrifice ('sacrificial prayer') is further developed in the boy's offerings of the cobs of maize to the sun.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- It is early morning before the sun has risen; the sky promises heat and then rain. What might the significance of this be for a boy on the threshold of adult life? Encourage students to think both at a **literal** level and at a **metaphorical** level.
- Get students to consider the **persona's** description of the chopping of the wood in the second stanza. They should read it aloud, slowly. How does the shape of the verse communicate the impact of the activity on the young boy? What is the effect of the very short line 8?
- Students should look at the way the poet describes the smell and sight of the smoke. How does it reflect his mood and how does the poet communicate this to the reader?
- The smoke drifting upwards is like '*signal of some sort, or a sacrificial prayer*'. Students should discuss their views about what the significance of this is. Does it bring in a religious dimension? Is this developed elsewhere in the poem?

- Students should consider how the boy interacts with the sun when it rises, looking at the way he speaks to it. What do they make of his wish to share the cobs with the sun? How does this action relate to the idea of sacrifice?
- The eaten cobs are 'two little skeletons'. What is the effect of this image? Is it an effective metaphor for how the cobs look to the boy? Are there darker meanings at work? Students should compare their viewpoints with others in the group.

### **Thematic Links with set poems**

Childhood:	Rising Five; Little Boy Crying; Carpet-Weavers; Morocco; Plenty
Nature and mortality:	Rising Five; She dwelt among the untrodden ways
Relationship with environment:	Farmhand; She dwelt among the untrodden ways

## Sujata Bhatt: 'Muliebrity'

### Background

Sujata Bhatt was brought up in the early 1960s in Pune, near Mumbai, India. Although she has since emigrated, the experiences of her childhood are often the subjects of her poetry. She saw the girl who is the subject of *Muliebrity* on a daily basis. Bhatt writes: 'For some reason (I'm not sure why) my imagination seems to be continually sparked by those early years in India. I think, for many writers, their childhood is something very magical and special and they keep drawing from that for their work. For me the fact that I had to leave India certainly made me think about it more.'

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Title: *Muliebrity*: womanhood, the status of being a woman, of possessing full womanly powers. The connotations of this word are reflected in the use of the words *greatness* and *power* in lines 15 and 16.

Line 2: *cow-dung* would normally be used for fuel or perhaps fertiliser. It was (and is) not uncommon for women (or some men) to gather dung for these purposes.

Line 4: *Maninagar* is now a suburb of Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India, where Bhatt was born.

Line 7: *canna lilies* are plants, native to India, growing well in moist, tropical climates. They are related to banana and ginger plants and their flowers are highly prized.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Students should read the first 4 lines out loud and consider what is memorable about the way Bhatt presents the girl. How has Bhatt made the details special? What effect does the structure of the lines give?
- In lines 5 and 12 what is the effect of the repetition of 'I have thought'? Bhatt does not know the girl, has never talked to her. What then does she describe about her? What makes us aware that the poet is an onlooker – almost from a different world?
- Students should read out – and take time over the reading – lines 5 up to 'simultaneously' in line 12. They should consider the effect of some of these smells: are they attractive not? How are they linked together? Do they see any pattern in the selection of smells or are they totally random sensations?

- In line 13 she contemplates the prospect of using this image as a **metaphor**. Students should think carefully about this line: a metaphor of what? (They should bear the title of the poem in mind.) And are all the smells metaphors too? They should write their thoughts down to compare them with those of other students later. What is the force of the word, 'nice'? How does this help to decide why she rejects the idea of using the girl as a metaphor?
- Students should discuss the impact the words, 'greatness', 'power' and 'glistening' have on them. What is the effect of the final line – and its image? Why does Bhatt seem to leave the last line unfinished?
- After reading the whole poem again, students should discuss what the poem tells them about 'Muliebrity'. They should consider every detail both as metaphors *and* as reality, and then consider how Sujata Bhatt feels about the girl and how she has conveyed the impact the memory had on her.

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Women: *Plenty; She dwelt among the untrodden ways; Storyteller*

Characters: *Monologue; Farmhand*

Social injustice/Poverty: *Carpet-weavers; Morocco; Song to the Men of England; Spectator ab Extra; Monologue; Caged Bird*



## William Wordsworth: 'She dwelt among the untrodden ways'

### Background

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was born at Cockermouth, in the heart of the Lake District, England. This short, apparently simple poem has teased a succession of scholars and critics from the time it was written in 1798-9 to the present day. It might be best not to enquire too far into who Lucy was, if indeed she was a real person at all. Wordsworth wrote it when he and his sister, Dorothy, accompanied his poet friend, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, to Germany shortly after they had collaborated in the writing of their amazingly original *Lyrical Ballads*. It is one of a group of poems, known as the *Lucy* poems.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 2: *Dove*: name of a river. It is probably not profitable to specify which *Dove* this is. The Wordsworths went back to live in Dove Cottage in Grasmere in the English Lake District. There is a Dovedale in the Lake District, but there is a more famous River Dove in Derbyshire. Clearly the poet wishes the reader to imagine a very remote area. The symbolic associations of the dove might also be borne in mind.

Line 3: *Maid*: a girl; a young (unmarried) woman.

Line 7: the star might be Venus which often as the Evening Star is the only one shining in the sky, because of its relative brightness.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to look carefully at the rhyme scheme, the line lengths, the vocabulary and structure of the sentences and then to discuss what is, or seems, simple about it in their view. (Make sure that students understand the difference between *simple* and *simplistic*. Wordsworth might have been striving for a simple effect; but this does not mean he wished his verse to be simplistic.)
- Students should read the first verse again, and then consider these questions and discuss their responses: What details emphasise her remoteness? Is this a sad picture? Why have some critics called her 'a child of Nature'?
- Students should scrutinise the small words in the first line, which might easily be taken for granted and consider the following questions and discuss their responses: Why does Wordsworth write *among*, for example, rather than *by*? How can *ways* be *untrodden*?
- Students should consider the **images** in the second stanza. What qualities of the violet does Wordsworth emphasise by his description of it? What other associations might a 'mossy stone' have? In what ways is the image of the star different to the image of the violet, and what is the effect of this contrast

in the poem? Students should look back at their feelings from their reading of the first stanza. How are they affected by the second stanza?

- Instead of saying 'died', Wordsworth uses the phrase, 'ceased to be'. Does this phrase make a greater impact? Students should discuss and explain their thoughts.
- What is the effect of the positioning of 'oh' at this point in the poem? What is the meaning of the phrase, 'The difference to me'? Does it say more than that he misses her? Students should discuss and explain their thoughts.
- Students should read the poem again two or three times to themselves and try to express in their own way what makes it a special and haunting poem, and why they think so many readers over more than two hundred years have found it so memorable.

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Mortality: *Rising Five; Before the Sun*

Nature and humanity: *Before the Sun; Farmhand*

### **Suggestion for wider reading**

Wordsworth's other 'Lucy' poems are worth reading with this as they are interlinked. The others start 'Strange fits of passion have I known...'; 'I travelled among unknown men...' and 'A slumber did my spirit seal...'.

## James K. Baxter: 'Farmhand'

### Background

James Keir Baxter (1926-72), was born in Dunedin, New Zealand. There is much of interest in his extraordinarily colourful and controversial life. He was brought up in the 1920s in a quiet and bleak south-east corner of New Zealand on a farm. He himself said that his adolescence was fraught with tensions and while we must recognise that the farmhand in the poem is a very ambivalent figure, unhappy in certain situations and gloriously happy in others, perhaps the 'old wound' or 'the secret night' might be related to some of his feelings then, when the emblems of adolescence were, in his words, 'the private demon, the spider on the wall, and rat-eaten books in old cupboards.'

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 2: *careless*: meaning literally 'without a care'.

Line 4: *looking out into the secret night*: this can, of course, be taken literally, but taken with the last line of the next verse, might express something of the uncertainties that haunt his mind.

Lines 7-8: What the old wound is that opens again when he hears the music should perhaps be left to the imagination, though it may partly be explained by the content of the next two stanzas.

Line 16: *yarn*: spin thread (or a story).

Line 18: *stooks*: bundles of hay; straw stacks.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to write their first ideas of what the farmhand looks like as he stands at the entrance to the village hall where there is a local dance. They should look for details which back up their initial impressions and note them down.
- Is the farmhand having a good time? Does he get on with male friends well? How does he feel towards the girls there?
- What do they think the poet means when he says that the music '*slowly in his mind tears an old wound open*'? When he is '*looking out into the secret night*', what do they think he is thinking about? There are no obvious or easy answers here – but students should back up their thoughts with good reasons based on references to the text and listen to what others have to say about it.
- Why is it that he has no girl-friend? Do they think he would like one? Would he make a good boy-friend?

- What does the imagery in stanza 3 suggest about the environment he feels most comfortable in? How do these words contrast with the descriptions of the activities at the dance? Do they make the farmhand himself seem strong or weak?
- 'Hopes' and 'dreams' suggest ambitions, but here they are qualified by words (*awkward* and *envious*) which rather sour their connotations. How do the whole phrases reflect on the feelings of the young man?
- How does the last stanza contrast with his behaviour at the dance? How does the first line of this verse introduce this picture of him? What is the effect of this? Students might try reading out the stanza aloud to see if the rhythms are different to what has gone before – and what the effect of that is.
- In the light of the whole poem, students should comment on the **simile**, 'like a lover'. Then they should look at the object of his affections – the tractor – and how it is described. What does the farmhand love about it?

Students should look back over the whole poem again and ponder over the complexities of this portrait of the farmhand and try to understand him.

### **Thematic Links with set poems**

Characters: *Monologue; She dwelt among the untrodden ways; Plenty; Storyteller*

Work: *Monologue; Muliebrity; Carpet-weavers; Morocco*

Characters within their environment: *Before the Sun; She dwelt among the untrodden ways*

## Isobel Dixon: 'Plenty'

### Background

Isobel Dixon, born in 1969, was brought up in the Karoo in South Africa. The Karoo is the central high-plateau of South Africa. The grasslands of the area seem to be endless and it gets relatively little rain each year. Most of this falls in the Summer; the Winter is almost completely dry. In the upper Karoo, there is even less rainfall and the land is semi-desert. No wonder that the mother in the poem regarded water as a valuable commodity.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 3: *pocked*: after a long period, enamel often show blemishes due to rust, chipping and hard water. (Dixon refers to the tub as *pocked* or pitted as the skin is when scarred by small pox.)

Line 4: *griffin*: a mythical creature, a lion with an eagle's head and wings. (The bath was probably cast-iron with an enamel finish and standing on feet in the shape of claws – the 'griffin claws'.)

Lines 5-6: Relate these lines to the information regarding the climate of the Karoo in the Introduction.

Lines 7-8: Students should pay close attention to the way the mother's smile is described. There is a mixture of literal and metaphorical description here. Perhaps *her lips stretched back* is basically literal – though does it have metaphorical associations? – while *anchored down* is probably a metaphor – though might it be partly literal?

Line 10: *clasp*: fastening clip (for example of a handbag. But it might also be used to describe a 'hug' or 'embrace'). The image of the clasp is extended into the next lines (11 and 12). The mother is 'snapping locks and straps' to prevent 'the spilling' (compare the chaos of line 10). The image is brought to its completion in line 16 and this also brings this section of the poem to an end.

Line 15 might need to be explained. It would seem the mother budgeted by the month and always found supplies to be running out before it was over.

Line 18: *swiped*: slang for 'stole' but without suggesting it was serious.

Line 20: The *inch* relates to the water in the tub. (Here she does use the word *stole* – compare note on l.18 – but, like the word *sin* in the next stanza, it is used ironically.)

Line 23: *disgorged*: literally means 'discharged from the throat of'.

Line 24: *compliant*: in agreement with - as allies.

Line 25: The word 'now' signifies a shift into the present. Dixon 'now' lives in England where the water supply is no longer a problem.

Line 25: *Sybarite*: an inhabitant of Sybaris, a city in ancient Italy notorious for its luxury.

Line 26: *cascade*: a fast-flowing waterfall.

### **Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole**

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- What pictures arise in students' minds when they read the phrase, 'in our expanse of drought'?
- Students should read the first two lines of the second stanza out loud noticing how the verse, which has been running freely up to this point, seems to stall. Why might the poet want this? – how has this effect been achieved? Why do they think an inclusion of this description is essential for an understanding of their family life?
- Students should concentrate for a while on the character of the children's mother. Get them to write down a list of what *she* would probably have said were her major problems in life, and then pick up features of the *way* Dixon writes which help to make us *feel* her problems. Concentrate here on stanzas 3 and 4.
- If students were being extra critical, what would they say would have made her an even better mother? As before, they should find features of the verse which support their ideas.
- What was her interpretation of the smile when she was a child and why did she see it that way?
- Do students think that she enjoyed her family life? What signs are there in the poem that she felt happy as a child and what parts suggest she did not? Students must remember not only to look at *what* she says but also *how* she says it. After they have looked at both sides, they should try to come up with a carefully worded description of *exactly* how she felt.
- Students should look at the two descriptions of the poet enjoying relaxing in the bath or shower, the first as a child in stanza 6 and the second as an adult in stanza 7. How does she communicate her guilty pleasure? What "sound" features might be emphasised in reading these out loud? What images help to communicate it? (They should pay special attention to the way the taps are described.)
- What are the different circumstances of stanza 7? Is there a difference of **tone**? What differences do they notice when it is read out loud?

- What does she appreciate as an adult which alters her view of her childhood life? How does her view of her understanding of her mother's smile change and why? These are no clear and obvious answers here.
- After reading the whole piece again, which of these adverbs do students think best describe the way Dixon looks back? *Nostalgically; sadly; fondly; humorously; regretfully; self-pityingly; self-reproachfully; critically.* Again, there are no right and wrong answers to this question – but students should try to justify their thoughts;

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Relationships between adults and children in a family:	<i>Little Boy Crying</i>
Changes of perspective between childhood and adulthood:	<i>Rising Five; Little Boy crying</i>
Women:	<i>Muliebrity; She dwelt among untrodden ways; Storyteller</i>
Characters:	<i>Monologue; Muliebrity; Storyteller</i>

## Liz Lochhead: 'Storyteller'

### Introduction

Liz Lochhead was born in Motherwell, Scotland, in 1947. This poem introduces a series of narrative poems called *The Grimm Sisters*. As one might guess from this title, they are a collection of familiar fairy-tales, but told ironically from a female point of view.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

The whole poem contains frequent alliteration. This, together with the elliptical style (and in places antiquated effects – e.g. lines 12-14) – might be said to echo (or allude to) the sounds of the sagas of Old English and Old Norse poets of long ago. NB: Students are *not* expected to know this background. Far more important is that they are aware of the potency of storytelling in long, dark, winter evenings before electricity widened the scope of our entertainments.

Line 2: *scoured*: washed vigorously by scrubbing.

Line 4: *dresser*: kitchen shelves displaying dishes; *delft*: old earthenware.

Line 5: *salted away*: i.e. scrupulously stored.

Line 7: *clacked*: i.e. chattered (onomatopoeic).

Line 8: *five or forty*: Literally it would suggest the different size of the audience, but *forty* might simply suggest an indeterminate large number.

Line 9: *husk*: the dry outer shell of corn.

Line 10: *pieced*: suggests that the individual patches have been placed in position ready to be sewn together.

Lines 12-14: The unusual syntax here contributes to an antiquated effect. It also adds emphasis to the words, *never* and *daily* the latter perhaps suggesting her day-time rather than night-time job. The main sense of the three lines is that not one person would think of being judgemental about her housework as her real job is storytelling.

Line 12: *shiftless*: lazy.

Line 13: *sloven*: usually used as a noun meaning an untidy, dirty person.

Lines 16-18: Students might need an explanation of the process of spinning to appreciate the simile in these lines. Basically, with the use of a spinning-wheel, the spinner draws out the fibres of wool and twists them to form a single strong thread.

Line 18: *Night in*: when the night had drawn in.

Line 25: *whorl*: curled form, referring to the outside of the ear. The word is usually used in connection with the delicate spiral shape of shells or plants. (The image here also suggests the words of the storyteller whirling or spiralling down into the ear.)



Line 27-30: the image is of bats.

### **Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole**

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to build up a picture of the scene in their own imaginations. From reading the first stanza, what has to be done before she can start her storytelling? What does the **imagery** of this stanza add to the atmosphere? Why is the narrator presented in this way? Has it anything to do with her being a woman?
- Why might people think the stories were "useless", a waste of time? What might men looking on think about all these women sitting around listening?
- Students should look at the way the art of the storyteller is described in the third verse. What does the image of the spinner say to them?
- The last line of the third stanza tells us that the audience know the ending of the stories she tells. What then is the fascination of them? How has Lochhead suggested the hold the storyteller has on her night-time audiences? Students should remember as ever, to look at *how* the words are arranged as well as *what* is said. They should listen to how the words sound.
- Students should consider how the women are described as they start the new day. How does the poet make this vivid? Can they imagine them shaking sleep off – how have the words Lochhead used evoked this image? As they get back to the reality of their lives, what happens to the stories heard the previous night?
- Students should then look at the way the stories are absorbed by the children. The poet uses the image of bats which hang upside down during the day and come out at night. Is this an effective **metaphor**? What are the associations of bats for the students? What does the image imply about the stories that are told?
- Storytelling was an important feature of more primitive societies. Why might this have been so? Students should consider how far Lochhead's poem helps them *imaginatively* to appreciate the importance of storytelling. Are there any ways that this poem touches on the effect of stories (in whichever medium) now?

### **Thematic Links with set poems**

Women: *Muliebrity; Plenty; She dwelt among untrodden ways*

Characters in work: *Monologue; Farmhand*

Stories and the imagination: *Little Boy Crying; Before the Sun; The Listeners*

## Charles Lamb: 'The Old Familiar Faces'

### Background

Charles Lamb (1775-1834) was born in London, England, and became famous as an essayist and critic. This poem sounds as though it might have been written by an old man, who had outlived his contemporaries – it is often quoted as such. The actual truth is that Lamb was only 23 when he wrote it. Lamb was very attached to his sister, Mary, but a year or two before this poem was written, in a fit of insanity, she killed their mother with a kitchen knife. She was confined to a mental institution and later Charles, who always stood by her, had her transferred to a private house where he arranged for her to be looked after. Later, according to his letters to his friend the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, she recovered her sanity and became aware of the enormity of what she had done. The poem might be interpreted in the light of this. However, it is important at this level for students *not* to get too bogged down in biographical details. It is far more important for students to look at the universality of the emotion expressed in the poem, of regrets for the passing of shared pleasures and the carefreeness and innocence of childhood.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 4: *carousing*: merry making (usually involving drinking and lively talking).

Line 5: *bosom cronies*: close friends.

Line 11: *ingrate*: ungrateful person.

Line 14: *traverse*: cross.

Line 17: *wert*. were (archaic).

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- Get students to look at the effect of the repetition, by taking the first two stanzas and reading them out aloud. How do the repetitions affect the way they speak the lines? What light does this shed on the poet's state of mind?
- In stanza 3, how is the agony of his being parted from his "love" expressed? As always students should look at how the words are arranged as well as the content of those words.

- In stanzas 4 and 5, the last line of the verse is modified a little. In what ways do students feel that this modifies the meaning? Is he being critical of his own behaviour? If so, how?
- Students should read stanza 5 out aloud, and notice the way the first syllable in each line is **accented**. What is the effect of this?
- Students should spend some time pondering the full meanings of the following words and consider their impact: *ghost, paced, desert, bound, seeking*.
- The second person is used for the first time in the sixth stanza. Get students to imagine this being spoken to them. What is the effect of this direct appeal? What is the impact of the question in the second line?
- The last stanza in some respects recalls the style of the first verse with its repetitions and reversion to the same last line. What is the effect on the students of the way it is written?

### **Thematic links with set poems**

Mortality: *Rising Five; She dwelt among the untrodden ways*

Memories of childhood: *Plenty;*

## Seamus Heaney: 'Mid-Term Break'

### Introduction

Seamus Heaney was born in County Derry in Northern Ireland in 1939. He was brought up on his family's farm in the village of Mossbawn and when older was sent to boarding school. It was while he was here that the events recalled in this poem took place – his infant brother was killed in a motor accident and young Seamus was brought back from his school to attend the funeral.

### Teacher notes to assist a first reading

Line 2: *knelling*: the sound of a funeral bell.

Line 15: *stanchd*: bandaged to stop the flow of blood.

Line 20: *box*: colloquial word for a coffin.

### Student exercises to assist a closer reading of the poem as a whole

Suggestions for students to work on individually or in pairs or groups and then discuss together.

- We do not know until well on in the poem what has happened to the person who is to be buried, and not till later still how young he was. Get students to identify the places where we do learn these things and try to explain why the poet chose to tell it this way. What impact does this structure have on them?
- Bearing in mind their responses to these last questions, how does the title of the piece take more meaning (much ironic) after they have absorbed the full poem? Students should compare their thoughts about the meaning of the title with those of others in the class.
- How does the poet feel as he sits waiting to be picked up by the neighbours? What do students notice about the sounds of the second line? How do these features intensify the expression of his feelings? Students should notice that there are two references to the time in the poem (lines 3 and 14). What does this show about the passage of time?
- Students should study and make notes on the behaviour of the various people the 'I' of the poem finds in the family home when he arrives, taking each individual or group in turn. They should imagine the impact of each one's behaviour, and the *accumulated* impact. How do the words emphasise the awkwardness of it all? What would be different from the normal atmosphere in the farmhouse?

- Students should note down what they think about the way the baby's behaviour is described, and the way his mother's crying is described and what the effect is of the repeated use of the word, *hand*, at the end of the fourth and fifth stanzas. They should try to link their observations to their answers to the questions in the previous bulleted paragraph.
- Get students to look at the two pictures of the body: first in lines 14 and 15 when the ambulance brings it to the house, and then when the poet is alone with him when he is laid out in the room. Students should explore the differences in the way they are described, and discuss the effect of the contrast.
- What do students find particularly moving about the last 7 lines? They should select a few words and phrases which particularly affect them and try to explain why they are moving. They should spend some time especially on the last line of all. They should remember to explore the effect of it on them as a climax to the poem as a whole.
- Finally, students should review their notes and try to fix in their minds a picture of how Heaney has approached this poem – how he has shown the development of the young boy's grief.

### **Thematic Links with set poems**

Mortality:	<i>She dwelt among the untrodden ways; Before the Sun; Rising Five; The Old Familiar Faces</i>
Childhood Experience and Perceptions:	<i>Little Boy Crying; Rising Five; Before the Sun</i>
First Person Narration:	<i>Monologue; Little Boy Crying; Plenty</i>