

POETRY

AN INTRODUCTORY PACK FOR GCSE

Whether you're looking at this at home, or are back in school, this pack is a great way to get to grips with one of your key areas of study for GCSE English Literature – poetry. Put together by the experts at York Notes, it will really kickstart your studies!

So – what's in the pack?

1. Refresh your understanding of poetry and the features that distinguish it from other forms.
2. Explore ways to read poetry for pleasure and study.
3. Tackle the challenging area of interpretation through exploration of a classic poem.
4. Look at ways to compare parallel poems through theme, language, and form.
5. Find your own poetic voice with a series of exercises and ideas for creating your own verse.
6. Follow up with our suggested links and ideas: websites, videos, and so on.

We hope you enjoy your exploration of this fascinating form.



What IS a poem? A quick refresher

You have been reading and writing poetry since you first went to school, so this may seem like an obvious question, but it can be really useful to remind yourself of what makes poetry special and different from other forms of writing.

Prose versus poetry

Read these two versions of the same text called 'November Night' by the poet Adelaide Crapsey.

Listen. .
With faint dry sound,
Like steps of passing ghosts,
The leaves, frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
And fall.

Listen. With faint dry sound, like
steps of passing ghosts, the leaves,
frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
and fall.

You will know, instinctively, that the version on the left is the poem, whilst the one on the right looks like it could come from a story. So – what *makes* this a poem?

A) Form

The text on the left is written in **lines**. The poet has deliberately selected where each line begins and ends. In a prose story, the writer uses continuous **sentences**. It is true that the length of sentences has an effect, but their actual shape on the page doesn't usually matter.

B) Structure

The **order** of words and lines is central to many poems. You may know that the form of this poem is a **cinquain**: a poem of five lines with 2, 4, 6, 8 and 2 syllables. This is not accidental. It allows the poet to build up tension or create a rhythm – we hear the leaves breaking free one by one – and then there is a pause – and they fall.

C) Sound and rhythm

Poets pay attention to *every single word*. Often words are chosen as much because of *how* they **sound** as for *what* they mean. Here, nothing is out of place. Why did the poet choose the words '**Listen**' and '**frost-crisp'd**' to describe dry leaves? Say the words aloud – they have a brittle, hard quality.

D) Snapshots of life

Not all poems do this, but many allow the writer to create a **soundbite** or **snapshot** of a moment. This could be a memory of a few minutes, something heard or glimpsed through a window, or an observation of someone's face. 'November Night' would not make much of a story, but as a snapshot of a moment it is brilliantly evocative: *we can see and hear it as if we are there with the poet.*

E) Poetic techniques

Poetry, like other forms of writing, uses a whole range of techniques but the particular **combination** of sound, shape and content creates a unique experience. Here, the poet has used **onomatopoeia** (words, like '**crisp'd**', that sound like the thing they describe) but there are many more techniques too.

For example, note the distinct **imagery**, which helps create the snapshot. In this case, there is a perfect **simile**, '**like steps of passing ghosts**'. But why is this so good? Well, the leaves are dead but not quite dead, and like phantoms they make little noise as they move. They also *look* a bit like ghosts, these little frosty leaves.



Activity 1

Here is another of Adelaide Crapsey's cinquains. Can you reconstruct it using the 'rules' of the form (5 lines of 2, 4, 6, 8, and 2 syllables)?

Niagara (in prose)

How frail. Above the bulk of crashing
water hangs, autumnal, evanescent, wan,
the moon.

Niagara (as a poem)

How frail.

Above...

How to read a poem for pleasure - and for study

It can be difficult to remember that poets do not write for their words to be analysed, decoded and examined. So, to get the most out of reading poems, you need to:

- **Respond** to them **personally** and/or **emotionally**
- Accept that **they don't always have one meaning** or **solution**
- Try to **enjoy the sound** and **patterns** of the language
- See **poetry** as something *you can do too*

First reading: the 'easy' bit

Read the poem through once without stopping.

A London Thoroughfare, 2 a.m

They have watered the street,
It shines in the glare of lamps,
Cold, white lamps,
And lies
Like a slow-moving river,
Barred with silver and black.
Cabs go down it,
One,
And then another,
Between them I hear the shuffling of feet.
Tramps doze on the window-ledges,
Night-walkers pass along the sidewalks.
The city is **squalid** and sinister,
With the silver-barred street in the midst,
Slow-moving,
A river leading nowhere.

Opposite my window,
The moon cuts,
Clear and round,
Through the plum-coloured night.
She cannot light the city;
It is too bright.
It has white lamps,
And glitters coldly.

I stand in the window and watch the moon.
She is thin and **lustreless**,
But I love her.
I know the moon,
And this is an alien city.

Amy Lowell (1874–1925)

Glossary

Thoroughfare: street or road

squalid: dirty, unpleasant

lustreless: without shine or glow

Second reading: generate ideas

Now – read the poem again. Then:

- **highlight** or **note down** *anything* that **stands out** (it could be a striking image, or a strange turn of phrase, words or phrases that echo each other in some way, particular poetic techniques such as rhyme). At this stage, don't edit your own ideas – anything goes!
- **write down** or **label** the poem with **questions** or your own **ideas** (e.g. 'why does she **'love'** the moon?').

From your two readings or notes, is there anything at all you can say about the **mood** or **tone**, or what **story** seems to be being told? You could try to write down your thoughts:

It seems to me that the poem's mood is...

Third reading: get your brain into gear!

Read the poem a third time. This time, try to focus on the **voice/speaker** of the poem and what he/she **is telling the reader**. You could call this the story of the poem. This could be something really simple like: *A woman looks out from her window onto...*

Or, better still, try to plot out the poem **in stages**. Complete these stages in the right-hand column.

Verse 1	The speaker describes the wet city street and...
Verse 2	She now looks at...
Verse 3	She reveals her thoughts about...

Final reading: You made it!

So, read the poem one final time. You probably have a pretty good idea what is going on now. You know the basic 'story' of the poem. Now is the time to see if you can say *anything else* about it. You can begin to edit out any of the earlier ideas which don't seem to make sense now, and focus on those that do. Does the poem have a **theme** – for example, would you say it is about memory – or love – war or loneliness – or something else? Finish off by **writing a paragraph or two** about any themes or ideas you think the poet was interested in or wanted to explore.

Interpreting poems: your ideas

The two poems you have read so far have allowed you a glimpse into the past – a London street at night in the early 20th century and a snapshot of leaves falling from a frost-covered tree. Poets' ability to capture a picture or a feeling shows the reader a window into their world. But sometimes these worlds can be alien or very different from our own – we can struggle to make sense of them.

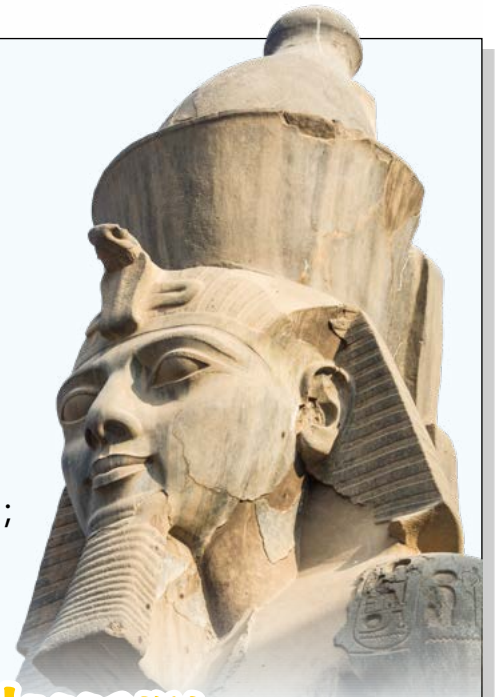
The following poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley is one you may be familiar with from your schoolwork, or from your GCSE Literature studies. In this exercise, you are going to focus on how you can explore the ideas and imagery in it, and consider your own viewpoint.

First, read the poem a couple of times, and if it is new to you, follow the sequence of readings (1–3) as you did for the last poem.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said — “Two vast and **trunkless** legs of stone
Stand in the desert Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered **visage** lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the **pedestal**, these words appear:
'My name is **Ozymandias**, King of Kings:
Look on my Works, **ye** Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822)



Glossary

trunkless: missing the main part of the body from the legs upwards

visage: face

pedestal: base of a statue

Ozymandias: an Egyptian Pharaoh also known as Rameses II

ye: you

Activity 1

Now, think about the **picture** the poet creates of the statue and the desert. List *anything* which you can visualise. Try to **draw** each of these things on a separate piece of paper.

Quotation 1: 'Two vast and trunkless legs of stone stand in the desert'

Quotation 2: 'Half-sunk...

Quotation 3:

Quotation 4:

Quotation 5:

You should end up with a series of spectacular pictures, like the introductory shots of a powerful film: a traveller alone in the desert staring at the ruined statue of a great king.

But, what is the point of all this? What if anything is the poet trying to say? Why does he bother describing this cruel face of a powerful king?

Activity 2

Here are some possible **interpretations**. For each one rate them from **1** (I don't agree) to **5** (I totally agree).

	1	2	3	4	5
The poet finds exotic places fascinating					
Life is fragile and doesn't last					
The lust for power makes people cruel					
Time soon forgets those who think they are special					
Nature destroys everything					
Deserts are harsh places where nothing can survive					
Belief in your own power or greatness comes before a fall					
A good sculptor can really capture a person's character					

Activity 3

Write **your own short interpretation** of the poem – what ideas you think the poet is trying to convey.

I think the key idea Shelley wanted to get across was...

Parallel poems

As part of your GCSE course, you are likely to have to **compare** or at least consider two poems which share similar themes or ideas. But beyond this, there can be enjoyment in reading two works in this way – rather like seeing two paintings next to each other in a gallery or hearing two songs paired together.

First read the following two poems. Your brain will probably start trying to find links, but for now it is more important to read each poem independently without worrying about the other. Then, follow the process of reading, exploration and generating ideas you have learned about.

The first poem is by Claude McKay. McKay was born in Jamaica but lived in the United States. The second is a contemporary poem about a problem we see every day around the UK.

The White House

Your door is shut against my tightened face,
And I am sharp as steel with discontent;
But I possess the courage and the grace
To bear my anger proudly and unbent.
The pavement slabs burn loose beneath my feet,
And passion rends my **vitals** as I pass,
A **chafing** savage, down the decent street;
Where boldly shines your shuttered door of glass.
Oh, I must search for wisdom every hour,
Deep in my wrathful bosom sore and raw,
And find in it the superhuman power
To hold me to the letter of your law!
Oh, I must keep my heart **inviolate**
Against the potent poison of your hate.

Claude McKay (1889–1948)



Glossary

vitals: the body's internal organs

chafing: made sore by rubbing

inviolate: protected

Invisibility Cloak

Once she dreamed
Of having an invisibility cloak,
Of magic stories and wizards and wands.

Once she dreamed
Of casting a spell
Of turning all the bad things to good.

Now, she dreams
Of one who will stop
By the shop where she sleeps
Who, in the cold and the rain,
Will see *her* under the cloak -
A person with a name.

That she is still a girl
Who is capable of laughter
And happy-ever-afters.

Mike Gould



Activity 1

Using a grid like the one below, jot down any **initial responses** you have to each poem. You don't have to use the headings but they might be useful.

	<i>The White House</i>	<i>Invisibility Cloak</i>
Who is the speaker?		
What 'person' is the poem told in?		
What is the form and structure of the poem (verses?)?		
What basic 'story' does the poem tell?		
What, if any, features of sound or patterns of language stand out?		
What images or details stand out?		

Activity 2

Write a **short response** to the poems. You can **compare and contrast** them – or just write about them **separately**. Try to comment on what **you** think the key themes are in each – and/or what feelings are expressed by the speakers.

Finding your own voice

Writing your own poetry is a brilliant way of improving your response to other people's poems. By *doing it yourself* you begin to understand the process and the craft.

This final activity is a chance for you to write about *anything* you want. It could be about isolation during lockdown, or happy memories from before it started. Or it could provide a snapshot into your life – the view from your bedroom window, or an observation of a family member and something special or humorous about them. It can be serious or funny – or both at the same time!

You could use this sequence to help you.

Stage 1: Generate ideas

Jot down any ideas that come to mind. You could start with an idea ('My dad's cooking' or 'The old woman in the flat opposite') or an image ('The tree at the end of our garden' or 'My rusty bike') or a theme ('Lockdown Blues' or 'Dreaming of freedom').



Stage 2: Word smother!

Write down images, words, phrases, lines – anything that you might be able to use in your first draft. Smother your page with words. You could even sketch things out or find pictures from magazines. Anything to stimulate the brain and your language use.



Stage 3: Order, order!

Arrange your words or lines. Begin to think about whether you need to split ideas into verses, or whether you could begin each line with a memorable phrase (*I miss.../He remembers.../In the window opposite I see.../Once she dreamed...*).





Stage 4: Write your first draft

Get something down on paper. Anything. It is important to commit to writing – to trying out your ideas. It doesn't have to be the finished piece. Have you got a title? If not, add one now.



Stage 5: Check and redraft

Now be ruthless. Make sure you have chosen the best words and the best form or shape. If a word is weak or doesn't add anything, take it out. Sometimes the best poems are ones where you cut things out and reduce the text to the essential bits. Other times, you might need to add more – a new image or rhyme, a sound pattern or a new verse.



Stage 6: Publish!

If you can share your poem – then do it. It might be the case that your teacher will read your work, or you could send it to a friend or share it with a family member. Or, it could just be for you. Copy out or type up your very best version and pin it on your wall. Be proud of it.

Well done for finishing this poetry mini-course! Hopefully, this has inspired you to read and write more poetry, but also that your GCSE poetry study is something to enjoy or look forward to.

Want to know more?

There are numerous poetry websites and places where you can access both classical poetry and poetry written by contemporary writers.

1. For more on Percy Bysshe Shelley, who wrote 'Ozymandias', check out the British Library which has an introduction to the poem with a very detailed explanation of the background to the poem and its context.

Go to: www.bl.uk, search for 'Introduction to Ozymandias' and click 'View online'.

A shorter article with similar information can be found on the **Guardian** website. Just search online for 'Guardian Romantic poets Ozymandias'.

2. For exploring poetry in general **Poetry Foundation**, **Poetry Archive** and **Children's Poetry Archive** have some great poetry and in some cases videos and readings by the poets in question.

3. If you want to experiment with writing your own poetry, **Poem Generator** is a great resource, as are the following sites:

Go to: www.futurelearn.com and search for 'How to Make a Poem'.

And

Go to: www.bbc.co.uk/teach, search for 'topical collections', click 'Educational Calendar' and find 'World Poetry Day – Teaching Resources'.



Finally, don't forget that York Notes has lots more resources to help you with your studies!

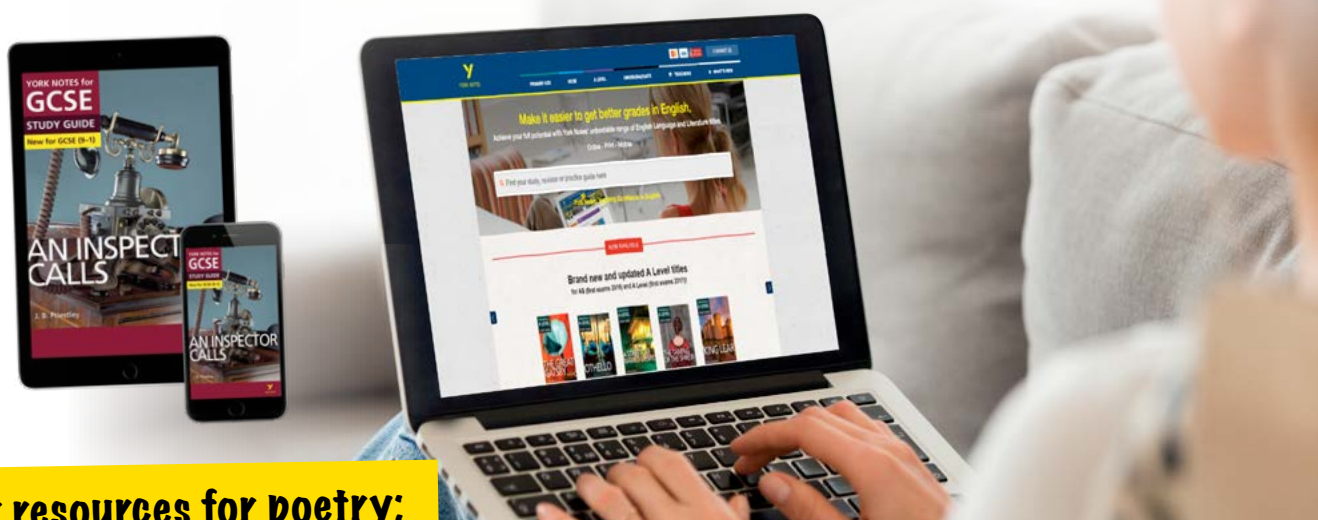
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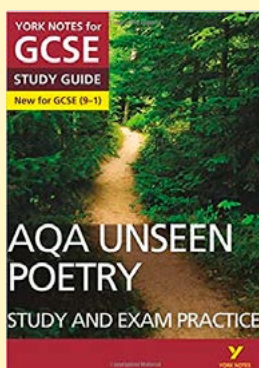
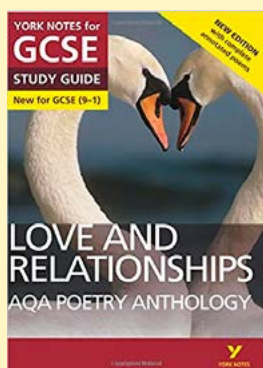
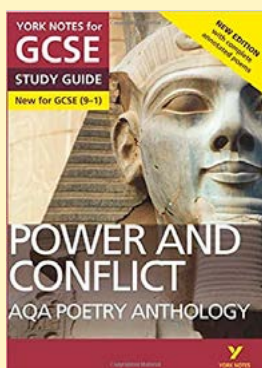
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Further resources for poetry:



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