

AQA GCSE English Language Specification A

Exam Practice: Paper 2

(SAMPLE PAGES)

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Section A: Answering Reading questions

1 An approach to poetry

Throughout your course, you have probably been looking at poems in pairs and groups, discussing their similarities and getting used to the idea of referring to one poem and then others by making cross-references. While you've been preparing for the exam and talking about poems in class you have probably discussed them in the following ways:

- **Content** – what the poem seems to be about on the surface
- **Theme** – what the poem is about under the surface
- **Mood** – the emotions and atmosphere the poem creates
- **Structure** – how the poem has been put together
- **Language** – why the poet has made a particular choice words

These are the areas from which all exam questions will be taken and in which you need to think about comparisons and cross-referencing. It's worth trying to remember them.



Activity 1: Remembering poetic features

Take the first letter from the areas above (**C,T,M,S and L**) and make a sentence that will enable you to remember them. For example:

Cats Think Mice Smell Lovely

It doesn't matter how silly the sentence is as long as it helps you to remember. And you really need to do this by yourself! What helps you is not necessarily what helps your friend.

Now let's look at those areas individually.

Content and theme

Poems are like icebergs. For every third you can see on the surface, there is another two-thirds under the surface. So, if you think of the content as being the surface of the iceberg, the theme is the part of the iceberg under the water. And, as anyone who was on the *Titanic* will tell you, that's the part that really matters. Once you've discovered the theme of the poem, by looking at what's under the surface, you will be well on the way to doing what the examiners want you to do, which, just to remind you in simple language is to:

- Show that you've understood what you've read by writing about the poems in a way that shows that you've understood. You can do that by referring to the poems (quoting bits) and then commenting appropriately on the bits that you've quoted.
- Show that you understand the way language is used in poems and how writers use different language for different purposes.
- Choose the right bits to comment on from more than one poem and then show what the connection between them is



Activity 2: Writing about themes

You have been asked to write about the theme of change in two poems, 'What were they like?' and 'Nothing's changed'. Make essay notes and produce a paragraph plan with quotes.

Mood

Mood is the atmosphere and emotion that the poem creates. Although you will find some similarity of themes in the Anthology, you will find that the mood of the poems varies widely.

Take for example the two poems 'Love after Love' (page 14) and 'Half-Caste' (page 13). You may think that the theme of these poems is similar – broadly speaking, they are both to do with the finding and the loss of identity – but their moods are very different.

Often you will be able to find the mood of the poem by a close look at vocabulary or the use of repetition. There are many words in 'Love after Love' to do with joy, hospitality and positive emotions – 'elation', 'greet' 'smile', 'love' 'feast' which gives the poem an optimistic feeling whereas in 'Half-Caste', the repetition of the phrase 'Explain yuself' (and its position at two key points in the poem) makes the poem seem challenging and although there is an element of humour, there is also bitterness.

Niyi Osundare has been a brave outspoken critic of the military regimes of his country, Nigeria, and in the poem 'Not my Business' (page 15) the words of violence that abound in the poem – 'beat', 'stuffed', 'booted' – contrast with the frightening ending of the poem which is full of silence, incomprehension and menace:

The jeep was waiting on my bewildered lawn
Waiting, waiting in its usual silence.

Tatamkhulu Afrika has also been active in fighting apartheid in his native South Africa and in his poem 'Nothing's Changed' (page 6), there is vocabulary of anger and violence. However, the overwhelming mood is one of desolation ('seeding grasses' 'weeds') and the feeling that nothing has, or will, change.

The mood of this poem underlines the theme. You will often find that this is true of other poems.



Activity 3: Theme and mood

For each poem in the Anthology, try to find another poem which has a similar theme. Then see if you can identify the mood of those two poems.

Structure

The **structure** is how the poem has been put together and you can tell a lot about the poem merely by looking at how it's laid out on the page. If you look for example at 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan' (page 16) and 'Limbo' (page 5), you can see that they look very different. 'Unrelated Incidents' (page 12) looks different again. Some poems, like 'Vultures' (page 10) are written all in one verse or stanza whereas 'Blessing' (page 7) is written in four stanzas, some shorter than others. There is always a reason why a poet has chosen to write in a particular form and that reason will be crucial to your understanding of the poem.

Repetition is a part of structure too and you need to think about why poets repeat certain words or phrases, sometimes, as in 'Not my

Business' (page 15), using them as a kind of chorus at the end of every verse.

Punctuation is another area you need to consider when looking at structure. The poem 'Island Man' (page 17) has no punctuation at all and 'Half-Caste' (page 13) has only a few slashes: ///. Looking closely at the punctuation may help you to understand the poem better.

Rhythm and rhyme are other elements of structure that you need to consider when thinking about poems. You will notice that most of the poems in the Anthology do not rhyme, and few seem to have a fixed rhythm. But, as with the case of the dog who didn't bark, you need to think about why!



Activity 4: Repetition

In pairs, choose two poems which use repetition as a device and discuss with your partner why the poets have used repetition in the way that they have.