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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 (SECTION 5)***

FOR EXAMINATION IN JUNE AND NOVEMBER 2011, 2012 AND 2013

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Introduction

These notes on the selection of poems are not offered as definitive readings of the poems, but as prompts and some initial stimulus to the poetry, some of which may be unfamiliar. They offer some ideas about the author, the content, concerns, language or structure of the poems, with some suggestions for individual consideration or classroom discussion.

Comparisons with other poems in Section 5 are suggested. This is, though, neither a prescribed nor an exhaustive list of links. The purpose of the anthology is to encourage students and teachers to explore the poems and make connections of their own, as well as gaining an understanding and insight into the individual poems.

Some relevant website urls have been included, which give further information about the authors and their work, with critical and background material which may assist students and teachers in further research.

Frances Cornford
Childhood

Frances Cornford, granddaughter of Charles Darwin, was born in Cambridge, England, in 1886, where she also died, in 1960. She was awarded the Queen's Medal for Poetry in 1959.

'Childhood' explores a dual perspective on the ageing process. On the one hand, it is a child who watches 'through the banisters' and is 'helplessly young', but the whole poem is a memory – 'I used to think'. Between the lines, the reader understands that the crafting narrator is moving towards old age. Both young and old are 'helpless' in the progression of time.

These wider considerations are based on precise, particular memories and observations. The first section vividly describes the physical features of old age, while the second centres around the moment of realisation about 'My great-aunt Etty's friend' and her rolling beads from a broken necklace.

Though written in one stanza, consider the effects of Cornford's use of short lines. The first serves to complete the childish observation before the epiphany in the poem's second section, while the final short line provides the ambivalent conclusion. Note the way too that the couplets, established in the early part of the poem, break up in the last four lines.

Compare with

My Parents
For Heidi With Blue Hair
Praise Song for My Mother
Follower
Country School
A Quoi Bon Dire

Stephen Spender
Fleur Adcock
Grace Nichols
Seamus Heaney
Allen Curnow
Charlotte Mew

Emily Dickinson

Because I Could Not Stop for Death

Born in Amherst, Massachusetts, USA, in 1830, Emily Dickinson was a prolific poet, though few poems were published during her lifetime. Her family was very prominent – her grandfather founded Amherst College, where her father, also a US Congressman, was Treasurer. However, Emily challenged many of the conventions of the society around her, particularly religion. While she read the works of other 19th century poets in England and America, she developed her own idiosyncratic style, using dashes and capitalisation. In later life she became very reclusive and died in 1886.

This poem is a good example of her style, with punctuation dominated by dashes and words intermittently given initial capital letters. The poem is slightly disconcerting, presenting the arrival of death as a friend, or even a bridegroom, to escort the narrator in a leisurely manner towards her tomb.

The personified Death's actions are 'kindly', he shows 'Civility' and the journey has 'no haste'. The central stanza poignantly contrasts children at play with death and the children are the first of three references to the passing of time towards the end of life. They are followed by the ripening grain, ready for harvest, and the setting sun, a frequent metaphor for the end of life.

Describing the tomb as a 'House' suggests comfort and the final stanza confirms this, compressing the 'Centuries' since the journey into less 'than the Day'.

Consider whether the capitalisations are random, or serve to highlight key words. There are a number of repetitions, internal rhymes and examples of alliteration in the poem. Consider what these sound features add to a reading and understanding of the poem.

Compare with

<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
<i>A Quoi Bon Dire</i>	Charlotte Mew
<i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading

<http://www.online-literature.com/dickinson/>

Elizabeth Bishop

One Art

Born in 1911, Elizabeth Bishop had a turbulent childhood, her father dying in her first year of life, while her mother suffered from mental illness and was committed to an institution when Elizabeth was five. She was never to see her mother again, and lived first with her maternal grandparents in Nova Scotia, then her paternal grandparents in Massachusetts. After graduating from Vassar College, she travelled widely and influences from her travels can often be found in her poetry. Although her output of poetry was relatively small, she was a perfectionist who spent a long time revising and perfecting her poems. The qualities of her work were recognised by the award of the Pulitzer Prize and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. She died in 1979.

The form of 'One Art' is a version of the villanelle, which depends on limited rhymes – just two throughout the poem – and repeating final lines in the stanzas. Bishop stretches the strictures of the form by using half rhymes and changing the words of the repeated 'disaster' line. It could be argued that her difficulty in maintaining the form is mimetic of her difficulty in maintaining her stance that 'loss is no disaster.' This interpretation could be confirmed by the final line, where the form and control of the poem is broken by the italicised parenthesis '*Write it!*'

The ending is quite different from the poem's early stages, where the tone is almost flippant, but as it moves from the loss of small things, like 'door keys', to more significant items like 'my mother's watch', the tone becomes less certain. In the personal last stanza, addressed to the lost loved one and introduced by a hesitant hyphen, the voice of the poem has lost its conviction.

Compare with

<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
<i>A Quoi Bon Dire</i>	Charlotte Mew
<i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poet.html?id=590>

Alfred, Lord Tennyson
Song: Tears, Idle Tears

Though sensitive to criticism, which restrained him from publishing his work for a long time, Tennyson (1809-1892) became the pre-eminent poet of Victorian England. His work was enormously popular and he was highly regarded by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The loss of his close friend Arthur Hallam, aged only 22, affected Tennyson greatly and he often wrote poignantly of grief and loss, most notably in the long poem *In Memoriam*.

'Song' was written as part of a longer poem called 'The Princess'. Although the narrator at the opening says 'I know not what they [the tears] mean', the poem is full of imagery of the past and of death – 'the days that are no more' is the recurring refrain.

The first stanza is framed by the paradoxes of 'divine despair' and 'the happy Autumn-fields', which suggest a bittersweet quality to the narrator's grief. The two central stanzas are patterned around the adjectives 'fresh', 'sad' and 'strange', these pairings echoing the ambiguity of the first stanza. Significantly, 'sad' is the repeated adjective and references to death become more explicit, undercutting the optimism of 'summer dawns'.

The final stanza resolves these ideas in imagery of lost love, which is both 'deep' and 'wild'. The continuing memories of the past create a 'Death in Life' – sweet memories made bitter by the knowledge that they are gone.

Compare with

<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>The Tree Are Down</i>	Charlotte Mew
<i>Friend</i>	Hone Tuwhare
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Time's Fool</i>	Ruth Pitter
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
<i>The Triumph of Time</i>	A. C. Swinburne
<i>Because I Liked You Better</i>	A. E. Housman

Further reading

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/tennyson/index.html>

Stephen Spender
My Parents

Stephen Spender (1909-1995) mixed with a number of left wing poets while at Oxford, including W. H. Auden, and joined the fight against Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Always interested in human and social concerns, he questioned how poetry could address such issues.

The poem 'My Parents' touches on a social divide between the comfortable middle class narrator and local working class children. It is a divide of which both sides are keenly aware. On the one side, the narrator's 'parents kept me from children who were rough', while on the other, the children 'threw mud' 'at my world'.

At the end of the poem, the narrator and the other children remain apart: 'I longed to forgive them but they never smiled.' As the poem develops through its three stanzas, the boy seems to long for more than to offer forgiveness. Spender's language consistently expresses admiration, even envy, of the other children. Though they are poor, with 'torn clothes', they have a vitality that he self-consciously lacks with his 'lisp'. Note that the verbs applied to them are full of action – 'threw', 'ran', 'climbed', 'tripped', 'sprang' – while the narrator's verbs are passive and weak – 'feared', 'looked', 'pretending', 'longed'. The vigour of the children's actions is emphasised by their rhythmic placing in the lines.

The local children have freedom, roaming 'the street', 'cliffs' and 'country streams' and they have physical presence, with 'thighs', 'muscles like iron' and they are described as 'lithe'. The reminiscence of childhood shows a community divided by class and education, but also contains a yearning for something missed.

The title is interesting. The parents are not mentioned after the first words of the poem, so what effect and significance does the choice of title have?

Compare with

<i>Childhood</i>	Frances Cornford
<i>For Heidi With Blue Hair</i>	Fleur Adcock
<i>Praise Song for My Mother</i>	Grace Nichols
<i>Follower</i>	Seamus Heaney
<i>Country School</i>	Allen Curnow

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7522>

Fleur Adcock
For Heidi With Blue Hair

Fleur Adcock was born in New Zealand in 1934, but spent part of her childhood in England and returned to live in London in 1963. She received a Cholmondeley Award in 1976 and a New Zealand National Book Award in 1984. In 1996, she was awarded an OBE.

The poem is a memory of childhood addressed directly to the child, Heidi, at the centre of the anecdote. It remembers and recreates Heidi's act of teenage rebellion with sympathy, sharing her victory in the 'battle'.

The poem is loosely formed in five-line stanzas of free verse, perhaps undermining poetic structural convention in a similar way to Heidi's hair challenging the school's conventions. The care with which the details of her hairstyle are described in the first stanza suggests the narrator's admiration, while the headmistress' objection that she had 'not done it in the school colours' is made to sound ridiculous. This can be linked to the dismissive metaphoric verb 'twittered' used to denote the teachers' consultations.

The vulnerability of the apparent rebel is made clear through her 'Tears', her concern about the cost and, finally, reference to her 'mother's death'. She has support from the narrator and her 'freedom-loving father', but the final stanza focuses on the gesture of support from her friend who has her hair styled in 'the school colours precisely'.

Readers may question against whom the 'battle' was fought – school, society's expectations, conformity in general, grief – or was it a 'battle' to establish an identity, a sense of self?

Compare with

<i>Childhood</i>	Frances Cornford
<i>My Parents</i>	Stephen Spender
<i>Praise Song for My Mother</i>	Grace Nichols
<i>Follower</i>	Seamus Heaney
<i>Country School</i>	Allen Curnow

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=75>

Grace Nichols

Praise Song for My Mother

Grace Nichols was born in 1950 in Georgetown, Guyana, and grew up in a small coastal village before moving to the city when she was eight. This experience was central to her first novel, *Whole of a Morning Sky* (1986), set in 1960s Guyana in the middle of the country's struggle for independence. She has worked as a teacher and journalist and has a strong interest in Guyanese folk tales, Amerindian myths and the South American Aztec and Inca civilisations. She has lived in the UK since 1977 and her poems often express a Caribbean philosophy, sometimes directly contrasting with the spirit of the UK.

The tradition of the praise song comes from West Africa and from there to the Caribbean, so the term in the title of this poem sets a cultural background. The patterning of the short stanzas on the page, through shape and repetition, also establishes the poem's identity as a song.

It is also significant that the metaphors which Nichols uses to describe the importance of her mother are all drawn from the physical world – the things that surrounded her in her childhood: 'water', 'moon', 'sunrise', 'fishes', 'flame tree', 'crab' and 'plantain'. These references also represent the cycle of the days, shade and sustenance, all of which are contained within the poem's conception of motherhood. Note the continuity suggested by the present participle form of the verbs at the end of each stanza, particularly the repeated 'replenishing'.

The memories of the surroundings of childhood are an important contrast with the move to 'wide futures' at the end of the poem. Consider the effect of this last line forming a stanza on its own.

Compare with

<i>Childhood</i>	Frances Cornford
<i>My Parents</i>	Stephen Spender
<i>For Heidi With Blue Hair</i>	Fleur Adcock
<i>Follower</i>	Seamus Heaney
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>Country School</i>	Allen Curnow
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham

Further reading

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth79>

Seamus Heaney

Follower

Seamus Heaney was born in 1939 to a farming family in County Derry, Northern Ireland, and much of his poetry is rooted in Ireland. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995.

Heaney's farming background is evident in this poem, as the first five stanzas celebrate the father's expertise in old-fashioned ploughing with horses. The language constantly points to his skill in controlling the horses and ploughing perfect furrows in the soil, which 'rolled over without breaking.' It is as much an evocation of tradition and direct contact between man and the earth, as it is of the father.

It is the reminiscing narrator who defines his father's ploughing skills; as a youth he was eager, but 'stumbled'. As the father gives the child a ride on his back while ploughing, the reader senses the patience of the elder man with the 'nuisance', but also evident is the child's aspiration 'to grow up and plough'.

The final stanza reverses the positions and can be interpreted in alternative ways. It could be the elderly, infirm father who now 'keeps stumbling', or it could be the memory of the now deceased father which consistently shambles through the narrator's mind. If the poem is read autobiographically, the ending has extra poignancy, as Seamus Heaney never grew up to 'plough'.

Compare with

<i>Childhood</i>	Frances Cornford
<i>My Parents</i>	Stephen Spender
<i>For Heidi With Blue Hair</i>	Fleur Adcock
<i>Praise Song for My Mother</i>	Grace Nichols
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>Country School</i>	Allen Curnow
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=1392>

James K. Baxter***Elegy for My Father's Father***

Born in 1926, James K. Baxter became one of New Zealand's finest poets and most controversial figures. His judgments of society were often harsh, and were not always well received, but he was deeply concerned with the poor and those marginalised by society.

This single stanza poem presents a developing set of responses to the death of the narrator's grandfather, though the term 'Father's Father' in the title makes the line of progression through family lines more explicit than the noun 'grandfather'.

Though the term 'Elegy' means lament, the tone of the poem is mixed, with celebration, sorrow and regret. One of the key regrets is for a life lived without expression of feelings; twice the poem refers to the fact that 'his heart had never spoken'. The reader gains the impression of a somewhat grim and taciturn man. Even his family seem to find it difficult to mourn his passing: 'They stood by the graveside/ .../ And mourned him in their fashion.'

However, the poem also pays tribute to his strength and endurance. These images are directly followed by the description of him 'old and blind', sitting 'All day'. The suddenness of the contrast emphasises the gulf between his prime and his old age. The poem also suggests, that despite his failure to express feelings, he was sensitive to his experiences of the natural world around him. The narrator finally conjectures that his grandfather's keen awareness of the cycle of life enabled him to be 'unafraid' of death.

Compare with*My Parents**Praise Song for My Mother**Follower**A Dream*

Stephen Spender

Grace Nichols

Seamus Heaney

William Allingham

Further reading<http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/baxterjk.html>

Charlotte Mew
The Trees Are Down

Charlotte Mew (1869-1927) was highly regarded by writers such as Thomas Hardy. She vowed never to marry because she feared she might carry a hereditary mental illness, as a brother and sister had been committed to institutions. This fear, and grief for the death of her sister Anne, led to her suicide in 1927.

There is a clear sense of desolation and loss in this poem, a lament for the felling of 'the great plane-trees'. The trees have survived the variations of nature – 'sun', 'rains', 'wind', 'breeze' and 'gales' but are brought down by men whose 'Whoops', 'Whoas' and 'loud common talk' seem to show their lack of care, creating a strong contrast with the narrative voice. The men are also separate from the connectedness of the natural world, with the narrator showing links between the 'rat', the trees, the weather conditions, 'the sparrows' and 'the small creeping creatures'. The narrator is also connected sympathetically and suggests a spiritual dimension with the 'angel' of the penultimate line and the initial quotation from *Revelation*, one of the books of the Bible.

The poem contains a number of onomatopoeic and rhyme effects while it uses form quite freely, with short lines and very long lines (several are so long they have to be split for printing, to which Mew objected). It is worth considering how these techniques maintain the connections between ideas in the poem.

Compare with

My Parents
The Trees
A Quoi Bon Dire

Stephen Spender
Philip Larkin
Charlotte Mew

Further reading

http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?owner_id=486

Philip Larkin
The Trees

Philip Larkin (1922-1985) is a poet whose work is very popular, despite his reputation for being a pessimistic, death-obsessed and darkly humorous observer of humanity.

In this poem, Larkin takes a familiar natural image of optimism and new life, the fresh leaves of spring, but characteristically undermines that optimism. Though the poem ends with apparent optimism, as life begins 'afresh, afresh, afresh', its three short, regular stanzas have already established that the cycle of the seasons always ends with death. The leaves 'looking new' is only a 'trick', as 'they die too', which undercuts even the 'greenness' of the spring leaves, making it 'a kind of grief.'

Note the way Larkin combines the regular conventionality of the poem's form with a straightforward, almost chatty diction. The only exception to this is the metaphor of the 'unresting castles' at the start of stanza three – what is the effect of this?

Compare with

<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>Song: Tears, Idle Tears</i>	Alfred, Lord Tennyson
<i>The Trees Are Down</i>	Charlotte Mew

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7076>

Allen Curnow
Country School

Allen Curnow (1911-2001) had a long and productive career as poet and critic, traversing many subjects and styles. He received the New Zealand Book Award for Poetry on six occasions, the Commonwealth Poetry Prize in 1988, a Cholmondeley Award in 1992, and in 1989 was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He was made a CBE in 1986 and received the Order of New Zealand in 1990.

This poem looks back on the school, and on childhood, from an adult perspective. The poem considers the school as it is now and uses the pine tree as a point of comparison with humankind. The tree, a sapling when the narrator attended school, now is as tall as the school's roof; it 'stands mature/ In less than the life of a man'. The school too is old, with 'paint all peeled', and it is these signs of the progression of time which push the narrator towards the reflection and reassessment of the poem's final stanza. The signs of childhood moments still exist – 'the stone' and 'the dunny', but the adjective 'terrible' is now ironic, as the doors are seen to be 'small'.

Note the conversational tone of the poem, as if the reader is the narrator's companion visiting the school, apparent in the first line and in the imperative 'Look' at the beginning of the final stanza. The reader is characterised as a person who attended the school, as it is the stone 'That skinned your [the reader's] knees.' This use of the second person involves the reader directly with the poem and its subject matter.

Compare with

<i>Childhood</i>	Frances Cornford
<i>My Parents</i>	Stephen Spender
<i>For Heidi With Blue Hair</i>	Fleur Adcock
<i>Praise Song for My Mother</i>	Grace Nichols
<i>Follower</i>	Seamus Heaney

Further reading

<http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/writers/curnowa.html>

James Fenton

Cambodia

James Fenton was born in 1949 and made his first mark as a poet while at Oxford University. A master of technical form, he has strong interests in other cultures and the effects of the West's interaction with them. After visiting Vietnam and Cambodia in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, he became political correspondent for the *New Statesman* and later became Professor of Poetry at Oxford.

Fenton was in Cambodia when the American Army was withdrawing from Vietnam and saw the collapse of the Lol Nol regime, which was succeeded by civil war and the rise of the notorious Pol Pot. The poem, written later, is stark and simple and develops like a child's counting rhyme, a form which contrasts sharply with, and highlights, its bleak assessment of the destruction of warfare. It begins with a 'smile' and ends with continuing death. Note the force of the present tense and the repeated 'still' in the final line. There are other sardonic touches too: three men 'pay the price' of one man's 'best advice', while the one man who 'shall live' will nevertheless 'live to regret.'

Compare with

<i>Attack</i>	Siegfried Sassoon
<i>Reservist</i>	Boey Kim Cheng
<i>You Cannot Do This</i>	Gwendolyn MacEwen
<i>Anthem For Doomed Youth</i>	Wilfred Owen
<i>My Dreams Are of a Field Afar</i>	A. E. Housman

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=5576>

<http://www.danagioia.net/essays/efenton.htm>

Siegfried Sassoon

Attack

Although there is other writing, Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967) is best known for his poetry of the First World War, which communicates the horror and futility of warfare and is often fiercely critical of those in charge of it. He was nearly court-martialled in 1916 when his polemic *A Soldier's Declaration* which was printed in *The Times*. Instead he was sent as a patient to Craiglockhart Hospital in Scotland, which treated shell-shocked soldiers. There he met Wilfred Owen, who, as the younger poet, asked for his advice, leading to a brief but mutually influential friendship.

The title of the poem implies aggressive intent, a heroic military action. The description in the poem, though, undermines this view, as 'Tanks creep' and clumsy men 'jostle' with 'grey muttering faces' to climb out of their trenches. With strong visual and aural description, Sassoon presents a view of warfare based on his own observations, which is far removed from heroic militarism, and ends with a direct and desperate prayer for the end of the war.

There are a number of important components of this description. The adjectives applied to the environment make it part of the threat, while the verbs chosen for the personified tanks and the soldiers all suggest the difficulty of movement. Note the way the list of the soldiers' 'battle-gear' emphasises the cumbersomeness of their burdens. Time, at the end of the poem, continues relentlessly but is meaningless, while 'hope' is bleakly personified.

The glamour of fighting for one's country was often presented to Britain's population during the First World War, by the media and in literature. Consider ways in which a poem like this challenges those views.

Compare with

<i>Cambodia</i>	James Fenton
<i>Reservist</i>	Boey Kim Cheng
<i>You Cannot Do This</i>	Gwendolyn MacEwen
<i>Anthem For Doomed Youth</i>	Wilfred Owen
<i>My Dreams Are of a Field Afar</i>	A. E. Housman

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=1561>
<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/>

Boey Kim Cheng
Reservist

Born in Singapore in 1965, Boey Kim Cheng now lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

Cheng assumes the voice and persona of a part-time soldier called up periodically from civilian life and this narrator includes the reader amongst his colleagues. The tone throughout is self-deprecating and amused – at himself, his actions, the army, the routines – but the poem ends with some optimism that something worthwhile will eventually be achieved, though even that could be interpreted at his final joke at his own expense.

The opening stanza mixes martial language – ‘fanfare’, ‘call to arms’, court-martial’ – with the physical reality of the irregular soldiers, with their ‘creaking bones’, ‘grunts’ and ‘pot bellies’. They provide a comic contrast with their ‘sleek weapons’ and the ironies are pointed out with ‘the annual joust’, the tilting ‘at the old windmills’ and ‘battle-weary knights’.

The second stanza is less light in mood and more critical, suggesting that the reservists have no control and are ‘like children placed/ on carousels’, the fairground simile expanded with military exercises described as an ‘expensive fantasyland’. The narrator’s impatience is clear with the reference to ‘tedious rituals’, while those in command are ‘monsters’.

The reader is left to judge whether the narrator’s emergence as one of the medalled ‘unlikely heroes’, and discovering ‘open sea’ and ‘daybreak’ is plausible in the final stanza. Consider the effect of Cheng’s connection with ancient Greek myth.

Compare with

Cambodia

Attack

You Cannot Do This

Anthem For Doomed Youth

My Dreams Are of a Field Afar

James Fenton

Siegfried Sassoon

Gwendolyn MacEwen

Wilfred Owen

A.E. Housman

Gwendolyn MacEwen
You Cannot Do This

Gwendolyn MacEwen was born in Toronto in 1941 and before her death in 1987 had published 26 books, including poetry and novels. She once said that in her writing, myth, metaphor and symbol were 'as much part of my language as the alphabet I use.'

The poem begins with a sudden challenge, made as if direct to the reader with the use of the second person, and the suddenness emphasised by the lack of an opening capital letter, suggesting that we enter the poem in the middle of an argument. The opening is also disconcerting because we do not know who is actually being addressed, nor what they are guilty of doing to the narrator's people. To 'hack away a horizon' is unlikely to be taken literally and a number of metaphoric interpretations are possible. The third stanza, with its repetition of 'something to do with', extends the refusal to be explicit, encompassing small tangibles, such as 'signet rings' to large intangibles, such as 'power'. In between, most aspects of human hope, aspiration and culture are included, which suggests that humanity itself is under threat. The central stanza seeks to assure that events will be recorded; the poem itself 'is not art' but a 'record' of the threat, or atrocity, and its effects.

Consider the effect of the poem's challenging tone combined with its lack of specificity. What is the effect of MacEwen's avoidance of capital letters at the beginning of sentences?

Compare with

<i>Cambodia</i>	James Fenton
<i>Attack</i>	Siegfried Sassoon
<i>Anthem For Doomed Youth</i>	Wilfred Owen
<i>My Dreams Are of a Field Afar</i>	A. E. Housman

Further reading

http://www.arcpoetry.ca/howpoemswork/features/2004_11_myers.php

Wilfred Owen

Anthem For Doomed Youth

Born in 1893, Wilfred Owen is one of the best known poets of the First World War, determined to give poetic voice to the atrocities of war. He was encouraged by Siegfried Sassoon, who he met when they were both patients at the Craiglockhart Hospital in Scotland during the war. Tragically, Owen was killed in action on 4 November 1918, just a week before the armistice.

Unlike Sassoon's poem in this selection, Owen's title is direct and opens the poem's pessimistic tone. The opening lines of both the octave and the sestet of this sonnet ask questions which those sections go on to answer. Both questions are about appropriate funeral arrangements and both answers show that the 'doomed youth' of the war will have no formal, dignified funeral, but grim death on the battlefield while loved ones will mourn far away at home.

The tone is set by the first line's image of slaughter, before the onomatopoeic descriptions of the sounds of warfare are shown to be the substitutes for 'passing-bells' and 'prayers'. In the sestet, the flickering light in dying eyes will serve instead of 'candles' and other funerary trappings are substituted by the absent grievers.

Consider how Owen uses the sonnet form and emphasises the patterning in the poem with its layout on the page. The underlying rhythm of the sonnet form is iambic pentameter – notice where Owen varies this, and to what effect.

Compare with

Cambodia

Attack

You Cannot Do This

My Dreams Are of a Field Afar

James Fenton

Siegfried Sassoon

Gwendolyn MacEwen

A. E. Housman

Further reading

<http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/home/>

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/>

A. E. Housman

My Dreams Are of a Field Afar

Alfred Edward Housman (1859-1936) was an eminent Classical scholar, appointed Kennedy Professor of Latin at Cambridge University in 1911. His long poem *A Shropshire Lad* was published in 1896 and his *Last Poems* in 1922, the only books of verse he produced, though his brother published another volume after his death.

In the two simple stanzas of this poem, Housman expresses regret for those who have fallen in war, but also the guilt often felt by survivors. The first stanza presents starkly the difference between the narrator and his 'comrades' – they are 'in their graves' while 'I am not.' Note how the rhythm of the final shorter line places the emphases in 'my', 'I' and 'not', suggesting the weight of the poem's burden by metre. The second stanza expands it, placing the narrator's and his comrades' actions antithetically – 'forgot and ran' contrasted by 'Remembered and remain.' The 'ran' suggests cowardice, while the 'remain' reminds the reader of the permanence of their stay in battlefield graves.

As well as the final line of stanza one, note how the alternating iambic tetrameter and trimeter lines consistently place the stress on the important words. Line 2 is a particularly good example.

Compare with

Cambodia

Attack

You Cannot Do This

Anthem for Doomed Youth

James Fenton

Siegfried Sassoon

Gwendolyn MacEwen

Wilfred Owen

Hone Tuwhare

Friend

Hone Tuwhare (1922-2008) was New Zealand's most distinguished Maori poet writing in English. He started writing while a trades union activist working on the railways and was always committed to the causes of working people and the Maori.

Something of this sense of communality and the importance of shared experience is apparent in this poem addressed to the eponymous friend. The reader takes that friend's place, becoming the 'you' of the poem, addressed conversationally by the narrative voice. The memories of 'shared days' are important because they are past – the fort is 'dead wood' and the tree 'is no more' – but remain precious. They offer some comfort in the 'drear/dreamless time', which perhaps suggest that maturity and adulthood lacks excitement and idealism. The final stanza suggests hope for renewal, though undercut by the hesitant 'Perhaps' and the unlikelihood of the metaphor.

The tree is an important symbol in the poem, providing shelter and food and the hesitant hope for renewal at the end. It also provides a contrast – the 'lone tree' compared with the sustaining friendship upon which the poem is based. Consider how the references to the tree connect the stanzas of the poem, and the effect of the italicisation of stanza three.

Compare with

Country School
from *The Triumph of Time*
Meeting at Night
Because I Liked You Better

Allen Curnow
A. C. Swinburne
Robert Browning
A. E. Housman

Further reading

<http://www.bookcouncil.org.nz/Writers/Profiles/Tuwhare,%20Hone>

Stevie Smith
A Man I Am

Stevie Smith (1902-1971) led a quiet life working as a secretary for a magazine publisher, but she became well known for her quirky, individual verse, often accompanied by characterful line drawings. Apparently jaunty and comic in tone, her poems often explore serious subject matter.

The persona Smith assumes in this poem seems to be humanity itself and through its jaunty rhythms, repetitions and limited rhymes portrays the ascent of man from 'hate' and savagery to 'remorse' and 'joy', from 'wolf' to 'man'.

The tone of the poem is, though, ambiguous. The horror of tearing 'the throat' of a 'little new born child' is undercut by the bouncing rhythm and the almost comically casual diction ('I could not wait for long at anyrate'). In the second stanza, the appeal to God to 'Take the burden of my sin' is tempered by 'remorse' being described as 'that primordial curse'. Even in the final stanza, 'joy' is found while swimming 'Upon the silt of death'. It is this final image which is 'just like a man.'

The poem needs careful reading and consideration. How do you respond to the ambiguities of its imagery, language and tone?

Compare with

<i>Here</i>	R. S. Thomas
from <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7088>

R. S. Thomas
Here

R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) rarely left North Wales, but achieved international recognition with his poetry. An Anglican minister, he was a man of devout but questioning faith and believed that the technological progress of the 20th century separated humankind from spirituality.

This sparse poem revolves around the questions in the fourth and fifth stanzas. They are questions of guilt, uncertainty and religious doubt, none of which receives an answer. The earlier stanzas suggest the narrator's development from his past, while the questions are puzzled by his present state. The final stanzas consider his possible future destination, or, more accurately, the lack of a destination. The poem expresses a pessimistic view of being 'a man', where there is 'nowhere to go' except to 'stay here with my hurt.'

Consider how the title and the developing stanzas lead the reader through past, present and future and the use they make of their single rhymes. Do you consider this to be a personal poem, or does the 'man' represent an everyman?

Compare with

<i>A Man I Am</i>	Stevie Smith
from <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7175>

William Allingham

A Dream

The Irish poet William Allingham (1824-1889) numbered Dante Gabriel Rossetti among his friends; Rossetti provided illustrations for one of this books.

Dreams have frequently been used in literature to explore the subconscious or present visions, and this poem could be said to do both. While a moonlit march of the dead might seem to be a macabre gothic sight, Allingham does not present it like that. Though the figures pass through 'moonlight' and 'shadow', they are defined as ordinary people – 'Townsfellows', 'Schoolmates', 'Straight and handsome folk; bent and weak too'. There is nothing sinister about the 'crowd'. Throughout, though, the narrator recognises that the people are dead – he finds the 'drowned' are 'the strangest sight', recognises that others are dead 'but a day' and others he 'had not known were dead.' The tone of the description suggests an interested observer rather than registering any shock or horror at the sight.

It is only the sight of the dreamer's mother which causes an emotional response. The sixth stanza demonstrates the feeling of loss which death has caused and the longing for maternal comfort now denied the narrator. The penultimate stanza withdraws from that emotion and close focus and sees the whole group again, while the final stanza, elongated by a line, shows the dreamer striving to 'recall' the night-time vision, rather than dismiss it.

Compare with

<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>Song: Tears, Idle Tears</i>	Alfred, Lord Tennyson
<i>Friend</i>	Hone Tuwhare
<i>Time's Fool</i>	Ruth Pitter
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
<i>A Quoi Bon Dire</i>	Charlotte Mew
from <i>The Triumph of Time</i>	A. C. Swinburne
<i>Because I Liked You Better</i>	A. E. Housman

Ruth Pitter
Time's Fool

Ruth Pitter (1897-1992) lived quietly, working on her poems. The natural world around her was a key influence and inspiration, more important than social contact. She maintained contact with the literary world by letter and had broadcasting commitments with the BBC. In 1955 she was the first woman to receive the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

This gently elegiac poem recreates a time past, a time of simplicity. Just as the rhymes work from the outer lines to the centre, the description of this past time comes in the central stanza, the heart of the poem. Consider the unattractiveness of much of the description – the 'hard cankered apple', the 'damp bed' and 'dim bit of mirror'. Nevertheless, these were 'Dear enough'. Does this suggest that 'youth' and 'fancy' are resilient, blind or self-deceiving?

The first stanza considers the present and its imagery of neglect establishes the tone of the poem, with emphasis on 'lost', 'Thrown away' and 'no more'. The final stanza contrasts the narrator with animals and plants, each of which have their place and are 'safe', 'snug', 'in splendour'. The final line connects them with the narrator's existence described in the second stanza, 'happy and poor.' The reader might consider how convincing this comparison is, and to whom the poem is addressed. Who is time's fool? Does the poem lament the loss of youth, a simpler former time, or a person with whom that time was shared?

Compare with

<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
<i>A Quoi Bon Dire</i>	Charlotte Mew

Further reading

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poetryarchive/singlePoet.do?poetId=7081>

Emily Brontë

Cold in the Earth

One of the famous three Brontë sisters, with Charlotte and Anne, Emily was born in 1818. She is perhaps best known as the author of the novel *Wuthering Heights*, but the quality of her poetry was recognised by her sister Charlotte, who felt 'a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, not at all like the poetry women generally write.' She died of tuberculosis in 1848.

Brontë's speaker in this poem attempts to reconcile deep grief at the loss of 'my Only Love' with necessity of continuing to live in 'the empty world'. The last stanza's oxymorons make clear the almost sensual attraction of indulging in grief's 'rapturous pain' and 'divinest anguish', but the centre of the poem deals with survival and the admission that other thoughts and considerations occasionally cause the departed lover to be forgotten and obscured as the speaker is borne along on 'the World's tide'.

The early part of the poem is dominated by language and imagery associated with the 'Cold' of the title – consider all the implications of cold in this context. One of the implications is the permanence of death and this is contrasted with the changes which are an inevitable part of life. The surviving lover's 'years' are marked by 'suffering' but also 'change'. Note how the poem stretches these two potentially contradictory impulses, between living and changing ('those brown hills have melted into spring') and constant fidelity ('No other Sun has lighted up my heaven').

Consider how the alternate rhymes in the four-line stanzas give emphasis to some of the poem's key ideas. Stanzas 3 and 7 end with exclamations, while the opening stanzas and the final one end with questions. What do you think are the effects of these choices?

Compare with

<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Time's Fool</i>	Ruth Pitter
<i>A Quoi Bon Dire</i>	Charlotte Mew
from <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/ebronte/index.html>

Charlotte Mew
A Quoi Bon Dire

In this gentle poem of loss and ageing, Mew compares the idealistic optimism of youth with the realities of age and mortality. There is, though, no bitterness in the poem's vision – the final images are carefree, although separated from the 'fine morning in a sunny lane' inhabited by the young lovers.

Consider the effects of the way the first two stanzas isolate the speaker and the lost loved one before they are brought together in the longer third stanza. Note that the speaker addresses the loved one throughout the poem, implying that although separated 'Seventeen years ago', the relationship still exists.

What do you think is the significance of the poem's French title?

Compare with

<i>The Trees Are Down</i>	Charlotte Mew
<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Time's Fool</i>	Ruth Pitter
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
from <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading:

http://www.carcenet.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?owner_id=486

A. C. Swinburne **from *The Triumph of Time***

Algernon Charles Swinburne was born in London in 1837 and was a member of the British aristocracy. During his education at Oxford University, he met the Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris and Edward Burne Jones. Rossetti remained a close friend, with whom Swinburne lived for many years. He lived a dissolute life of excess until 1879, when he began to withdraw from society. He died in 1909.

These are the opening six stanzas of a much longer poem. Over its 49 stanzas, the poem voices the internal monologue of someone separated from the one they love, and the ensuing desolation is seen metaphorically as a shipwreck. The stately form of the stanzas is Swinburne's adaptation of the *ottava rima* – his variation is moving the couplet from the end of each stanza to lines 5 and 6. Since the couplet is often used as a closure, consider the effects of this disruption of the traditional form.

These stanzas use metaphor extensively to explore the relationship and the result of its loss. Note that much of the imagery is drawn from the natural world: 'the sea', 'husk' and 'flower', 'shower', 'corn', 'sunbeams', 'rain', 'seasons', 'blossom' and 'fruit' in the first three stanzas alone. Each image is associated with change and the ephemeral nature of life. Note the way, though, that Swinburne denies the speaker the comfort of the cycle of life which these images might also suggest. The 'husk' is 'fruitless' and the 'corn' 'will not grow again; it is ruined at root'.

The fourth stanza uses Christian imagery of the 'wine and bread' to introduce an aggrandised image of the speaker and the lover as 'gods'. This might be seen to put the relationship on a spiritual plane, but it also separates them from time and mortality – however, note the effect of the conditional 'Had you eaten... / We had grown as gods'. Consider how this conditional mood confirms the poem's pessimistic tone in the sixth stanza.

Compare with

<i>One Art</i>	Elizabeth Bishop
<i>Because I Could Not Stop for Death</i>	Emily Dickinson
<i>Elegy for My Father's Father</i>	James K. Baxter
<i>Friend</i>	Hone Tuwhare
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>Time's Fool</i>	Ruth Pitter
<i>Cold in the Earth</i>	Emily Brontë
from <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading:

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/swinburne/index.html>

Robert Browning

Meeting at Night

Robert Browning was born in London in 1812. Educated largely at home by his father, he was a precociously bright child. Although he attended London University when it opened, he left in order to pursue his studies and reading in his own way. He married fellow poet Elizabeth Barrett in 1846 and the pair left for Italy, where Browning remained until the death of his wife in 1861. He found most fame as a poet of dramatic monologues, where a character's single voice addresses the reader or a silent listener. He died in 1889 and is buried in the Poet's Corner of Westminster Abbey in London.

The title of the poem suggests a clandestine meeting and its two stanzas describe a lengthy journey to reach the loved one, with the climax of the 'two hearts beating' together in the last line. The quest is illuminated by imagery of light – first the 'yellow half-moon', then the waves' 'fiery ringlets' before the 'blue spurt of a lighted match' which marks the arrival. Each image is more active than the last, and note how the poem alternates pace with slow progress to build towards the climax of the meeting.

Consider, in various places, the effects of alliteration and other aural effects in a poem set at night.

Compare with

Because I Liked You Better
Friend
from *The Triumph of Time*

Emily Dickinson
Hone Tuwhare
A. C. Swinburne

Further reading

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/index.html>

A. E. Housman

Because I Liked You Better

Alfred Edward Housman was born in Worcestershire, England, in 1859. A poet and Classicist, he became in 1892 Chair of Latin at University College, London, followed by his appointment as Kennedy Professor of Latin in Cambridge, and a fellow of Trinity College, in 1911. Much of his poetry remains very popular, long after his death in 1936.

The tight controlled trimeters of this poem, with their alternating feminine and masculine endings, could be said to mirror the 'stiff and dry' emotional restraint which they describe. Even the use of the verb 'liked' rather than 'loved' is telling. This guarded language of emotion is possibly a reflection of Housman's shame of his own homosexuality. The promise to abandon thoughts of a relationship is intensified by its gesture of dismissal ('throw[n]... away') and the space created between the two ('the world between us'). The poem looks both to past and future, remembering the unrequited love which led to parting in the first two stanzas and projecting forward to the speaker's death and his grave in the final two. The last two lines return to the promise and emphasise the irony that the poem's own expression demonstrates that the promise has not, in fact been kept, though the thoughts have been kept private and otherwise unexpressed.

Compare with

<i>Friend</i>	Hone Tuwhare
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
from <i>The Triumph of Time</i>	A. C. Swinburne
<i>Meeting at Night</i>	Robert Browning
from <i>The Ballad of Reading Gaol</i>	Oscar Wilde

Further reading

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/housman/index.html>

Oscar Wilde
from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) first rose to prominence at Oxford University, where he founded the Aesthetic Movement which promoted 'art for art's sake' and was notorious for his colourful style of dress. His major successes were on the London stage, with a number of highly accomplished, witty plays which undermined social conventions, culminating in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. His life ended bitterly. He was convicted for homosexual practices and sentenced to imprisonment. After his release, he lived his last years in Paris under a pseudonym. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was written at this time.

These ten stanzas form the opening of Wilde's much longer poem which explores a prisoner's thoughts about a fellow prisoner who has been condemned to death. The poem opens by visualising the violence of the man's crime, murdering the 'woman whom he loved' with 'blood and wine... on his hands'. The speaker is shocked by the discovery of the nature of the crime – 'the very prison walls/ Suddenly seemed to reel' – but finds fellow feeling and a shared humanity with the murderer.

The poem goes on to explore the common humanity shared between men in harrowing circumstances. The effects of imprisonment and the yearning for freedom is expressed in the image of 'that little tent of blue/ Which prisoners call the sky', and the speaker argues that, in different ways 'each man kills the thing he loves', though not every one will 'have a noose about his neck'. Consider ways in which the last four stanzas of this extract explore that idea, and compare them with the depiction of imprisonment, the murderer and his crime in the first six stanzas.

Compare with

<i>A Man I Am</i>	Stevie Smith
<i>Here</i>	R. S. Thomas
<i>A Dream</i>	William Allingham
<i>A Quoi Bon Dire</i>	Charlotte Mew
from <i>The Triumph of Time</i>	A. C. Swinburne

Further reading

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/index.html>