

FACTFILE: GCE ENGLISH LITERATURE

STARTING POINTS – SECTION A: POETRY PRE 1900



Section A: The Study of Poetry Pre 1900

In this Unit there are 4 Assessment Objectives involved – A01, A02, A03 and A04.

A01: Textual Knowledge and understanding, and communication

In this examination, the candidate should be able to articulate informed and relevant responses that communicate effectively knowledge and understanding of poetry.

This AO involves the student's knowledge and understanding of the poems, and ability to express relevant ideas accurately and coherently in a form appropriate to literary studies. Specialist vocabulary should be used where necessary and appropriate. Quality of written communication is taken into consideration in all units.

A02: Poetic methods

In this examination the candidate should analyse the poet's use of such poetic methods as form, structure, language and tone. This AO is the driver of Unit A2 2 Section A and is of primary importance.

The student should analyse relevantly the ways in which meanings are shaped in poems. This means identifying poetic methods and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods – advice to teachers and students:

The poetic method should be:

identified – using appropriate terminology;

illustrated – quotation will be expected and this should be relevant and sufficient to illustrate the feature in full. It should observe the layout of the original text, and should follow the conventions with regard to smooth and syntactically appropriate combining of the quotation with the student's own words;

analysed – so as to show that the student understands its operation and effect; and

related – to the key term of the question



Section A: The Study of Poetry Pre 1900

Use of the terms “image” and “imagery”:

For our purposes in this unit “images” and “imagery” are to be sought and found in the language of the poems and not in the mind of the reader. The student should be discouraged from such formulations as “In this poem the reader has the image of nature as a destroying force” where “image” is really being used to mean impression. For the purpose of A02 analysis in this section, what we mean by “image” is figures of speech, where the “figure” (simile, metaphor, personification etc.) has a significance more than literal. Where there is no such significance, the student might be advised to use a term such as detailing.

Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet’s words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject matter and/or reader. It may be considered both in the light of a poetic method and as an effect of other methods e.g. diction, syntax. Tone, if it is to be handled productively, requires careful treatment. As with all methods, the tone must be:

identified – here no specialist vocabulary is needed, merely a precisely chosen adjective or adjective phrase (e.g. acerbic, admiring, mocking);

illustrated – a full and apt quotation should be selected and presented correctly;

analysed – the use of language in the quotation should be analysed to demonstrate that the student understands how the tone is achieved; and

related – to the key term of the question.

The importance of shifts of tone as a structural device (in e.g. contrast, characterisation or development) should be understood by students. Tone should be treated in the same rigorous way as any other poetic methods.

A03: Contexts

In this examination the candidate should demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which poetry is written and received.

Contextual information offered should be relevant to the question. Contextual information which is made relevant to the key terms of the question will be rewarded. Students should be aware that little credit can be given for contextual information that is introduced merely for its own sake. They should remember that the text has primacy over the context. A good response will use contextual information sparingly and judiciously.

A04: Connections

In this examination, the candidate should explore connections between poems. (Or, in Question 1 within *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale*.) The connections made will be in relation to the key terms of the question.

The following information is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a starting point for teachers and students. It reflects some of the stylistic and contextual issues which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers’ and students’ own independent research.



Chaucer: The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore the work of their selected poet. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that a particular poem is like to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

Themes:

- Marriage roles and power within relationships;
- Sexual desire; and
- Attitudes to women and femininity

A02: Poetic methods

A few general features:

- The use of colloquial speech and realistic, bawdy language to create persona of the Wife;
- Emphasis on the oral nature of the tale with frequent devices such as direct address, digressions and interruptions;
- Devices of classical rhetoric e.g. hyperbole to justify arguments about women, men and biblical teachings about relationships;
- Sensual and sexual imagery;
- Symbolism e.g. the Knight to represent men; and
- Use of contrast as a structural device e.g. between Prologue and Tale

A03: Contexts

This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

- Biographical information;
- Historical Context: Medieval attitudes to women and marriage such as those enjoined by the Church; cultural misogyny and women's rights; attitudes to class and poverty e.g. Wife's discussion of "gentillesse" in her Tale; and
- Literary Context: links to other tales; genre of courtly romance or fairy tale, links to Arthurian legend

A04: Connections

See general information



John Donne

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore the work of their selected poet. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that a particular poem is like to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

Themes:

- Death;
- Salvation;
- Attitudes to sexual love;
- Partings;
- A sense of sinfulness; and
- Repentance

A02: Poetic methods

A few general features:

- Fondness for colloquial cadences and turns of phrase often used to convey an emotional energy, such as expostulations, imperatives and profanities
- Fondness for dramatic monologue form, with its opportunities for self-dramatization and role-play;
- Clearly perceptible logical or argumentative structure;
- Use of 'conceits';
- Frequent use of paradox, contrast and oppositions e.g. between body/sensual imagery and religious imagery or the busyness of the public world vs private world of the lovers in 'The Sun Rising';
- Frequent allusions to medieval mythology, science and philosophy; and
- Wide range of stanza forms; sonnet form used by Donne to convey arguments and intensity of feelings

A03: Contexts

This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

- Biographical information such as Donne's religious beliefs and conversion to Anglicanism;
- Attitudes towards relationships e.g. Platonic views about relationships and the impact of science and learning e.g. Ptolemaic theory and Renaissance cosmology;
- The nature of Metaphysical poetry; and
- Conventional Elizabethan love poetry

A04: Connections

See general information



William Blake

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore the work of their selected poet. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that a particular poem is like to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

Themes:

- Innocence vs experience;
- Sexual desire and its repression;
- Absence of Christian charity in the Church;
- The decline of man's relationship with nature leading to a loss of virtue and happiness; and
- Injustice and cruelty in a materialistic world

A02: Poetic methods

A few general features:

- Use of a range of voices and speakers e.g. the childlike narrator in Blake's poems which contrasts with the adult perspective in other poems;
- Word play, puns and semantic inventiveness;
- Diverse poetic range: using a style sometimes terse and aphoristic, sometimes lyrical;
- Complex and often ambiguous biblical and literary allusion and imagery e.g. to the fall of man and Milton's *'Paradise Lost'* and the conflict between heaven and hell; biblical and religious language;
- Extensive and elaborate use of symbolism and abstract concepts;
- Oppositions and juxtaposition e.g. innocence vs experience; and
- Deceptively simple and conventional style of poetic lines; the hymn-like quality, simple meter and rhythms which belie the cryptic complexity of his work

A03: Contexts

This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

- Biographical information such as Blake's involvement in the social controversies of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the critical dismissal of his work at the time;
- Blake's contribution to the development of Romanticism;
- Impact of science and learning and modern innovation e.g. the growth of the British Empire, the Industrial Revolution and changes to society; and
- Political, social and philosophical views such as Blake's radical political stance against the rationalism of the Enlightenment and his attitudes to class and poverty

A04: Connections

See general information



John Keats

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore the work of their selected poet. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that a particular poem is like to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

Themes:

- Mortality and the inevitability of death;
- Aesthetic beauty of art and its power to ease human suffering;
- The ideal vs the real;
- The beauty of truth; and
- Human joy and despair

A02: Poetic methods

A few general features:

- Removal and absence of the speaker/narrator in contrast to the Romantic tendency to focus on the individual;
- Use of the apostrophe technique;
- Frequent allusion and use of classical mythology;
- Complexity of symbolism e.g. recurring symbols of artistry;
- The sensuous imagery of Keats' poems;
- Personification to explore abstract concepts; and
- The structural variety of Keats' stanzaic forms, combining his own distinctive style with traditional forms

A03: Contexts

This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response:

- Biographical information such as Keats' financial instability, ill-health and premature death;
- Keats as an influential figure of the Romantic movement and the ways in which his poetry addressed many of the concerns of the Romantic period; and
- The nature of Romantic poetry

A04: Connections

See general information



Emily Dickinson

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore the work of their selected poet. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that a particular poem is like to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

Themes:

- Death and immortality;
- The relationship between the human and natural world;
- States of suffering; and
- Individual consciousness and emotion

A02: Poetic methods

A few general features:

- Inward, reflective tone;
- Frequent use of sensory language and synaesthesia;
- Importance of structure, particularly the abrupt endings and use of bathos;
- Experimental nature of rhythm, meter and rhymes: the regularity of the poetic line is often broken by use of dashes, enjambment and 'slant' rhymes or no rhyme;
- Compressed and compact use of language: the aphoristic and epigrammatic nature of her poetry;
- Use of form linked to hymns and psalms;
- Tendency to use concrete imagery to explain feelings and abstract concepts; and
- Complex use of metaphor which leads to ambiguity

A03: Contexts

This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

- Biographical information such as the poet's religious beliefs, Christian upbringing, and self-imposed seclusion; and
- Dickinson can be seen in the context of Victorian and American poetry, but also as a unique writer, whose poetry transcended these conventions

A04: Connections

See general information



Elizabeth Barrett Browning

A01: Textual knowledge and understanding, and communication

The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore the work of their selected poet. Students should be encouraged to be flexible in their thinking, realising for example that a particular poem is like to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

Themes:

- Love and marriage;
- Religion and faith;
- War and death;
- Political oppression and human rights; and
- Women and social attitudes

A02: Poetic methods

A few general features:

- Experimental, innovative and challenging in terms of style and subject matter;
- Bold stance and use of rhetoric e.g. questions, repetitions, direct address to present arguments;
- Disruption to the poetic line with the experimental use of punctuation: dashes, ellipses and capitalisation;
- Variety and innovative use of poetic form such as novel-poems, experimentation with ballad and sonnet forms, rhymed couplets and accentual verse;
- Radical use of rhymes in her use of assonance, sight rhymes and double rhymes;
- Frequent use of biblical and religious imagery;
- Complex and inventive use of vocabulary, particularly the use of idiomatic expression and neologisms

A03: Contexts

This list is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students. It reflects some of the contextual areas which might be found useful. Remember the remarks above about balancing text and context in a response.

- Biographical context: Barrett Browning's political, social and philosophical views e.g. her criticisms of child labour, and her rejection of political and social oppression;
- Literary context: Barrett Browning can be considered within the Romantic and early Victorian literary context but the innovative and experimental nature of her poetry sets her apart; and
- Barrett Browning's association with other writers and political thinkers

A04: Connections

See general information

