



Unit AS 1: Section A

The Study of Poetry 1900-Present

Elizabeth Jennings and Philip Larkin

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, using appropriate terminology and concepts. 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 AS 1: 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 such as form, structure and particular uses of language, and showing how these methods relate to the key terms of the question.

Discussing poetic methods - advice to students:

1. The poetic method should be:

identified, using appropriate terminology if possible. (It should not be necessary for the student to learn or research recondite terms; the more well-known terms should be sufficient at this stage, provided they are used accurately);

illustrated, - as this is an “open book” section, 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.

2. Use of the terms “image” and “imagery”

For our purposes in this section “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 a figure 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.

3. Use of the term “tone”

Tone is usually understood as the poet's words in combination with his or her attitude towards subject 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. This feature, 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;

analysed – the quotation should be analysed so as 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, characterization or development) should be understood by students.



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. In this section, the stipulated context will be biographical, and the student should demonstrate how this has influenced the poet's work by drawing on relevant information from outside the poem. Contextual information which is made relevant to the key term 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 two named poems.

The student should explore connections between two named poems, discussing similarities and differences in the handling of themes and poetic techniques, and in contexts. Significant, pointed connections which are made relevant to the key term of the question will be rewarded.

Introduction

Teachers and students should be cautioned that this chapter does not contain everything you need to know about the poets and their poems. Instead what is offered is a summary of some of the key elements of the poems, such as context, language and imagery, structure and form, tone and themes. These are intended as a **starting point** which may be explored and developed further both in the classroom and through teachers' and students' own independent research.

No claim is made that the discussion for any one poem is comprehensive. It is hoped that the comparative and contextual material offered here will re-assure teachers and students about the nature and amount of what is expected.

It should also be clear that the list of **themes** which concludes this section might be added to. The following is therefore neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as they begin to explore their pair of poets. You are encouraged to be flexible in your thinking, realizing for example that a particular poem is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem. Enjoy your study of these poems.

Biographical information

Below is some biographical information relating to the poets Elizabeth Jennings and Philip Larkin. Use this as a starting point for your own research. Also included are links to a range of websites and books which can be used to deepen your knowledge of the poets, their lives, poetic style and themes, as well as critical reception.



Elizabeth Jennings

Elizabeth Jennings is a highly respected British poet who wrote critically acclaimed poetry on a range of subjects such as religion, mental illness, and childhood. She was a member of 'The Movement', a group of poets and writers who achieved fame in the post-war period. They were known for their rejection of pretentiousness and their call for simplicity in writing.

Jennings was born in 1926 in Lincolnshire, England. She attended a private Catholic school and, as a teenager, she discovered a passion for poetry and began to compose her own verse. Her early work favoured simple language, an interest in form, and the use of rhyme and metre.

She graduated from St. Anne's College, Oxford, in 1949 with an M.A. in English. At university, Jennings published her poetry and met many writers such as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn. These writers and Jennings went on to become part of 'The Movement'. Jennings was the only woman and the only Catholic in the Movement. Despite this, Jennings felt a close connection with the other members. After graduating, she worked for a short time in advertising. She believed this experience helped her to 'tighten' her writing. She was a librarian at the Oxford City Library during the 1950s. In 1953, her first volume of poems was published, to critical approval. Jennings went on to publish numerous collections of poetry and essays on poetics, as well as edit volumes of verse.

Inspiration for her poetry came from her own experiences of travelling in Italy, her deeply held religious beliefs as well as her battle with mental illness, for which she was hospitalized several times in the 1960s. Jennings often writes about personal subjects, although she has claimed she is not an autobiographical poet. Like other members of "The Movement," Jennings writes simply and directly. In her early writing she employed set forms, regular meter, rhyme, and preferred iambic pattern. However, as her career progressed she experimented with free verse and unrhymed poetry. Most of her poems are written in a few short stanzas. She often uses startling line breaks, sometimes beginning a line with a strong verb.

Activity

- Research the life and times of Elizabeth Jennings. Use your research to produce a presentation for the rest of the class.

Further Research

<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/oct/31/guardianobituaries.books>

<http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=638>

<http://www.poetryarchive.org/poet/elizabeth-jennings>

<http://www.bc.edu/libraries/newsletter/2012fall/02Jennings.html>

<http://elizabethjennings.dmu.ac.uk/home2.html>



The Movement

The Movement is the name given to describe a group of like-minded English poets, which included Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, Kingsley Amis and Thom Gunn. Their intention was to move poetry beyond the “modernist” approaches favoured by writers in the 1920’s and 1930’s, such as T.S Eliot and Ezra Pound whose poetry had been accused of being obscure and elitist. The members of the Movement looked back to the past for inspiration; they favoured a more traditional approach, using traditional forms and subject matter.

Philip Larkin was one of the most distinguished poets within this movement, although he said he had ‘no sense at all’ of belonging to a literary movement. Elizabeth Jennings was the only female member of the group. In many ways her work was unrepresentative. She was a devout Catholic, whilst many of the other members of the group were sceptical and dealt with religion in a satirical fashion.

Further Research

<https://neoenglish.wordpress.com/2010/12/02/what-is-meant-by-the-poetry-of-the-movement-and-what-is-larkin%E2%80%99s-position-vis-a-vis-this-poetry/>

<http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/philip-larkin-and-movement.html>



Philip Larkin

Philip Larkin was born in Coventry in 1922. He read English at St. John's College, Oxford. Larkin was declared unfit for military service in the Second World War, and so was allowed to continue his studies uninterrupted. After graduation he, like Elizabeth Jennings, worked as a librarian. In 1945 his first book of poems, 'The North Ship' was published. He also wrote two novels in this decade. In 1950 he moved to Belfast to take up the post of librarian at Queen's University Belfast. This was a difficult time for Larkin; a collection of poems was turned down by publishers, and Larkin printed at his own expense his volume of 'XX Poems' in 1951.

In 1955, Larkin returned to England as Librarian at the University of Hull, where he remained for the rest of his life. In the same year, 'The Less Deceived' was published, which finally brought Larkin the critical acclaim he craved. In 1966, 'The Whitsun Weddings' was published and this confirmed him as one of the most respected and widely-read poets of his time.

Larkin employed the traditional tools of poetry such as rhyme and metre to explore the often uncomfortable or terrifying experiences of the modern world. Like Jennings, he was regarded as a member of 'The Movement'.

His final book of poems, 'High Windows', sold 6,000 copies in its first three weeks when it was published in 1974. By this point in his life Larkin was a well-known and respected poet, receiving the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He died of cancer on 2 December 1985, aged sixty-three.

Since his death Larkin has been somewhat of a controversial figure. When alive he had been regarded by many as a solitary curmudgeon who shunned publicity. However, in the years following his death a biography by Andrew Motion and the publication of his letters revealed Larkin to be tormented and unhappy. Larkin's critics used the books to claim that he was a bigoted, misogynistic and narrow-minded man. Despite this many people still regard him as a great British writer and in 2003 almost two decades after his death, a Poetry Book Society survey cited him as Britain's best-loved poet of the previous 50 years.

Activity

- Research the life and times of Philip Larkin. Use your research to produce a presentation for the rest of the class.

Further Research

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqa6L22m0rY>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdeEFerYVtk>

http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/culture/books/non_fiction/article1445846.ece?shareToken=72867b6de3f05230bfe4549fcb78b619

<http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3153/the-art-of-poetry-no-30-philip-larkin>



Activity

- In groups think of some of the points of **connection**, similarities and differences between the lives of Jennings and Larkin.
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Now that you know some **contextual** information on Jennings and Larkin, it is time to turn our attention to the study of their poems. First remind yourself of what the examiner will be looking for in your analysis of the poems.



Elizabeth Jennings: The Poems

Below are some pointers to help you in your analysis of the poems. The notes below do not contain everything you need to know about the poems. Instead, what is offered is a summary of some of the key elements of the poems, such as imagery, form and structure, tone and themes. These are intended as a starting point in your discussion and exploration.

Identity

In this rather complex poem Jennings considers the theme of personal identity: what makes us who we are? The argument appears to be that we construct our own identities based on how others perceive us; likewise we judge them based on our own assumptions of what they must be like, rather than what they are actually like. This poem has been called, 'an intellectual love poem', in which the beloved, 'you', is a collection of images assembled by the lover; therefore love becomes an exercise both of the will and the imagination. This poem appears to imply that identity is not a fixed construct but one that is dynamic and constantly evolving.

Language and Imagery

- Repetition of the personal pronoun conveys the idea that the 'self' is a construct.
- Direct address to the loved one ('you').
- 'Assemble' implies something pieced together, made up.
- Imagery of light.
- 'Image and passion', emphasise the importance of imagination and desire in constructing our opinions of other people.

Structure and Form

- Last stanza shifts focus to how other people have constructed the speaker's identity, 8 lines rather than 6 as in the previous two.

Themes and Ideas

- Identity.
- Love.



Song at the Beginning of Autumn

In this poem the speaker reflects on the changing of the seasons, from summer to autumn. The poem explores the idea of how memories can be invoked through certain sensory experiences, such as smell. The speaker considers how we give meaning to these sensory experiences through the process of naming. In other words we use language to make sense of and shape the world. The speaker draws on her own personal recollections of autumn – bonfires, marble, smoke. These memories prompt her to exclaim the word ‘autumn’. When that word is unleashed into the world it gives life to the existence of the season: ‘When I said autumn, autumn broke’.

Did you know?

In the poem the reference, ‘Proust who collected time within/A child’s cake’, is to the famous French author Marcel Proust (1871-1922). Proust’s most famous novel is ‘In Search of Lost Time’, which is also known as ‘Remembrance of Things Past’. In this novel Proust explores the theme of involuntary memory. This is a memory that occurs when cues, such as smells, tastes, sounds and so on encountered in everyday life evoke recollections of the past without conscious effort.

At one point in the novel Proust uses a madeleine, a type of cake, to contrast involuntary memory, memories which we have due to smell or taste, with voluntary memories i.e. memories that we consciously seek to retrieve.

Language and Imagery

- Direct address is used to command the reader’s attention.
- Use of alliteration is used to suggest the lush richness of summer.
- Sensory imagery, not surprising in a poem that explores how sensory experiences can invoke memories.
- Literary allusion to Proust.
- Personification of summer and autumn.
- The importance of naming the seasons; the naming gives concrete form to abstract moods.
- Enigmatic reference to how memory carries one back ‘against my will’.
- The verb ‘broke’ at the end suggests a violent eruption, memory made real through the naming of the season.

Structure

- Four stanzas , regular rhyme scheme – could represent the regularity of the seasons.
- Regular rhythm and use of iambic tetrameter, suggest control, which is interesting as involuntary memories can be unexpected.
- Movement from summer to autumn and from the general to the personal.

Tone

- Reflective.
- Admiring.



Themes and Ideas

- Memory and the past.
- Nature



Absence

In this poem the speaker reflects on her experiences of visiting the place where she and a loved one last met. The speaker observes that nothing seems to have changed. Nature, in fact appears oblivious to their loss. This seeming indifference makes their loss seem all the more unbearable. However, when the speaker thinks of the name of the loved one, the whole world seems to move and is changed.

Language and Imagery

- Use of personal pronoun makes the experience more immediate and personal.
- Repetition of negatives, 'nothing', 'no', to emphasise there had been no change.
- Symbolism of the fountain and gardens, nature tamed and restrained.
- Abundance of visual imagery of the gardens, perhaps an allusion to the Garden of Eden.
- Birds are referred to as 'thoughtless', their ecstatic singing contrasts to the speaker's emotions.
- The use of the word 'savage' demonstrates the extreme emotions of the speaker.

Structure and Form

- Three regular stanzas, quintets, written in iambic pentameter, giving a controlled and steady quality to this poem.
- Regular alternating rhyme scheme reflects the well-tended garden and the steady stream from the fountain.

Tone

- Measured, calm tone in the first stanza.
- Melancholic, mournful, 'Were shaken by my thinking of your name.'
- Monosyllabic words add to the sense of finality and to the serious sombre tone.

Themes and Ideas

- Loss.
- Death.
- Grief.



Fountain

Here the speaker is concerned with the various aspects of the fountain she is observing. What is noteworthy is its energy and its perfect form, which is reliant on a tension between energy and control. The fountain appears calm and gives rise to wonderment for the observer. The fountain acts as a metaphor for creative power. The poet believes the fountain is the perfect embodiment of energy and control, each depending on the other for meaning.

Language and Imagery

- Imagery of water, the pool and sea.
- 'Elemental' - water is one of the elements; however, it could also symbolise anything else essential or necessary to survive, such as the creative impulse or God.
- Power of nature, even statues come to life!
- Direct address, commanding the reader, 'Observe it there'.
- Language of power and force, 'fast', 'wild'
- The importance of containment and control, 'Taming', 'keeping fast'.
- Imagery of the 'perpetual stream'.
- Alliteration connects the water with wonder, 'Drawing the water down to the deepest wonder'.

Tone

- Reverential.

Themes and Ideas

- Creativity.
- Contrasts; Nature and humans, order and disorder.

Did you know?

'*In Retrospect and Hope*', a poem in the 1970 collection, singles out '*Fountain*' as the poet's favourite. Why do you think this might have been one of Jennings' favourite poems?



Letter from Assisi

Assisi is a town in Italy. It was the birthplace of St. Francis who founded the Franciscan religious order. He is one of the most venerated religious figures in history. Assisi is also renowned for its churches and medieval castles, as well as for being a place of pilgrimage for many Catholics.

In her lifetime Jennings travelled to Italy where she fell in love with the country and its culture. She used the prize money from an award she won to fund her travel for three months. Her 1958 collection, *'A Sense of the World: Poems'* include many that were written during her time there. *'Letter from Assisi'* is from this collection. In the poem the speaker writes from Assisi about the quietness of this holy place that contains the spiritual inheritance of St Francis. The speaker discusses how the place was not as she expected, however; it filled her with an unusual sense of 'nostalgia' for home.

Language and Imagery

- Reference to peacefulness, which Assisi is renowned for .
- Paradox, 'silence is so wide you hear it'.
- Contrast between what they say and what she observes about the town, 'severe', 'no softness', 'no sensual joy'.
- Symbolism of the flowers.
- Imagery: 'hand that draws a shutter back', and 'eye which warms as it observes a child' suggesting something pleasurable and uplifting being revealed.
- Imagery of death: 'Peace pales and withers'.
- Symbolism of the doves.
- Symbolism, 'salt' and 'tears'.
- Spiritual inheritance of St.Francis, 'local silence or a sense of prayer'.

Tone

- Peaceful.
- Calm.
- Reflective.



The Annunciation

Did you know?

In the Christian religion the **Annunciation** is the celebration of the announcement by the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary that she would conceive and become the mother of Jesus the Son of God.

The Annunciation has been a key topic in Christian art in general, particularly during the Middle Ages .

The speaker describes how the Virgin Mary might have felt at the Annunciation, and how after this experience everything changes. The poem views Mary's experiences from a sympathetic viewpoint.

Language

- Contrast between pain and ecstasy.
- 'Have its way' – euphemism.
- Shadow is suggestive of fear.
- Alliteration of 'lightly lifted' juxtaposed with 'terrified'.
- Mary's thoughts conveyed directly.

Themes and Ideas

- Experience is a metaphor for the coming of God.
- The power of God.

http://www.oxfordpoetry.co.uk/interviews.php?int=vi3_elizabethjennings



My Grandmother

This is a poem about family relationships and grief. In it the speaker remembers her grandmother and the antique shop she kept. The speaker informs us that when she was little she once refused to go out with her grandmother which upset both of them. As her grandmother grew old, the shop closed and she kept all her antiques in one room. As she was old she could not keep them as well and as highly polished as she once had. At the end of the poem we are told that when her grandmother died the speaker did not feel sad, only guilty that she once had refused to go out with her.

Language and Imagery

- Use of lists reveals the range of items in the shop, which are described more vividly than the Grandmother.
- Straightforward simple language, conveys an impression of the speaker as young.
- Symbolism of the polished surfaces.
- Sensory imagery.
- Imagery of dust is associated with death.

Form and Structure

- Unusual elegy, as the speaker seems to feel no grief.
- Each stanza further develops the relationship between the speaker and her grandmother.

Themes and Ideas

- Regret.
- Love.
- Grief.



The Young Ones

In this poem the speaker is positioned as the 'outsider' observing the youth of the day. She comments on the difference between the young people she sees and how she behaved when she was their age. She notes how they appear much more confident than she ever was. The speaker tries to find consolation in the fact that she is older, that she has now the choice of how she can behave - 'unsure or bold'.

Language and Imagery

- Use of the plural pronoun, 'They', positions her as the outsider.
- Focus on appearance, 'hair piled up high./New styles each month.'
- Contrast, 'I look/ not wanting to be seen', presents the speaker as observer.
- Language that suggests lack of confidence, 'huddled', 'lop-sided'.
- 'Unfinished face', emphasises the youthfulness of those she observes.
- Contrast, 'unsure or bold' implies uncertainty about how they should move forward.

Structure and Form

- Regular structure, four quatrains.
- Use of exact rhyme.
- Iambic pentameter.
- Overall there is a very traditional structure, which could perhaps reflect the speaker's conventional attitude, further highlighting the age gap.

Tone

- Tonal shift, from resigned to pragmatic, 'Yet at least I have the chance...'

Themes and Ideas

- Youth and experience.



Night Sister

In 1962, Elizabeth Jennings suffered a nervous breakdown after which she spent some time in a psychiatric institute. During her time there Jennings was given a room to work in by one of the sisters on the ward. Although she has declared that she is not a confessional poet, we can only assume that poems like this one and *A Depression* must surely have been influenced by her experiences during this period.

In this poem the speaker writes of her admiration and gratitude to a ward sister whom she has observed. In an interesting twist we see it is not only the nurse who cares and looks after the patient but that the patient can also be concerned about the nurse's welfare.

Language and Imagery

- Use of questions, speaker is seeking answers.
- Direct address to the Night Sister.
- Metaphor, 'shell' suggestive of protection
- 'Scarred'- imagery of a wound and what it leaves behind.
- 'Locked doors', 'sudden shouts and tears' are a reminder she is in a psychiatric ward.
- Horror imagery, 'ghost-haunting of the owl appears'.
- Use of the word 'pure' has religious connotations.

Tone

- Appreciative.
- Complimentary.

Structure and Form

- Use of pentameter creates a calm measured effect.
- Enclosed rhyme scheme could reflect her confinement.

Themes and Ideas

- Compassion for others.
- Mental Illness.



A Depression

In this poem the speaker describes a woman who appears to be in a depressed state. As the poem progresses the woman appears to get over her depression. However, the speaker wonders, 'will it last?' The conclusion to this poem offers an even more horrific proposition, that 'The Cure, as much as the disease, appals'. This poem, like *Night Sister* comes from her 1966 collection, *The Mind has Mountains*. The title is taken from a poem by G.M. Hopkins, who himself also experienced bouts of depression.

Language and Imagery

- Symbolism of the undusted room and the unhung picture, reflects the woman's indifference.
- Use of the dash emphasises 'absences'.
- Metaphor of the 'furious window'.
- Use of brackets seems to align the speaker with the woman.
- Use of question to suggest uncertainty, '...will they soon disappear?'
- Impact of the placement of the last word, 'appals', suggesting horror and fear.

Tone

- Tonal shift in third stanza, a hint of optimism and promise creeps in. 'And then one day quite suddenly she came/ Back to the world.'
- Shifts again in the last stanza to tone of resignation, 'I do not know how a depression falls' and then fear.

Themes and Ideas

- Depression.



Love Poem

In this poem Jennings discusses the experience of loving someone. The poem begins with the rather ironic declaration that we are often shy around those we love the most. The speaker observes that sometimes the people closest to us are the ones we find it most difficult to 'bring to mind'. The speaker goes on to assert that 'pain' is an important part of love. The poem concludes by asserting that loving someone should be a private experience, not public and ostentatious.

Language and Imagery

- Simple, confident declaration, 'There is a shyness'.
- Use of the indefinite pronoun, 'something'.
- Repetition, 'O Love is Kind'.
- Biblical reference, Corinthians 13:4-8, 'Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.'
- Sensory imagery of thirst and sweetness.
- Contrast between sweetness and pain.

Tone

- Calm, assertive, 'There is a shyness'
- Meditative, 'For love is quiet, and love is kind'.

Themes and Ideas

- Original ways of looking at love.
- God and Love.

Activity

This is a poem that is often read aloud at weddings. How does it fit in with modern ideas about love? Do you agree with the speaker's view on love?



One Flesh

In this poem the speaker reflects on her parents' relationship. What was once a passionate relationship has now been transformed over time. The poet emphasises their physical separation in the first stanza through the symbol of the twin beds. As the poem continues it becomes clear that even though the couple are bound together by marriage, they are physically, emotionally and mentally apart. Their daughter, the speaker, reflects on how at one point they must have been passionate but that time has altered the nature of their relationship. Ironically it is now their separateness that unites them.

Language and Imagery

- Biblical allusion in the title, 'Adam recognized that Eve was part of him—they were in fact one flesh'.
- Symbol of the two single beds emphasises the physical separation of her parents.
- Use of caesura and of line break emphasises the distance between them.
- Imagery of shipwreck emphasises the breakdown of the relationship.
- Imagery of the thread implies the vulnerability of their relationship.

Structure and Form

- The heroic couplets ending the first two stanzas reflect the couple bound together.
- Change of rhyme scheme in the last stanza could reflect the loss of intimacy in their later years.

Tone

- The tone of the speaker is accepting, resigned, regretful.
- Wistful, 'All men elsewhere'.
- Resigned, 'Whose fire from which I came, has now grown cold?'

Themes and Ideas

- Relationships.
- Inevitable fading of physical desire and intimacy.



Philip Larkin: The Poems

Below are some pointers to help you in your analysis of the poems. The notes below do not contain everything you need to know about them. Instead, what is offered is a summary of some of their key elements, such as imagery, form and structure, tone and themes. These are intended as a starting point in your discussion and exploration.

Church Going

This is one of Larkin's most famous and in some ways most complex poems. In it a man, who could represent the 'common man', is out cycling when he stops at a church. At first he is unimpressed and begins to wonder what will happen when there are no more believers in the world. However, as the poem continues he loses his detachment and becomes impressed by what the church stands for: tradition, and an attempt to answer important questions, such as 'why are we here?' 'where do we go when we die?' The church and religion therefore seem to represent for the speaker a fixed point in an ever-changing world.

Language and Imagery

- The title is ambiguous, it could suggest the habit of going to church or it could imply that this tradition is on the decline ('going').
- Onomatopoeia, 'thud', suggests a dull lifelessness.
- Use of questions reflects the speaker's quest for understanding or knowledge.
- Language of church ceremony: 'here endeth'.
- Mixture of complex versification and everyday, colloquial language constructs a 'double voice'.

Structure and Form

- The typical line is iambic pentameter, suggesting continuity and tradition.
- Regular rhyme scheme; however, there are also some half-rhymes, these are rhymes where the consonants match but the vowels are not identical.

Tone

- Detached and cynical at the start.
- Humour, 'God knows how long.'
- Curious, repetition of 'wondering.'
- Becomes more serious towards the end as the speaker recognises the appeal of the church.

Themes and Ideas

- The importance of faith and the loss of faith in a modern world.



Love Songs in Age

Love Songs in Age is about a woman, who some critics believe might be Larkin's mother. One day she comes across sheet music that she has had since her youth. Looking over these songs, she finds that they trigger memories of her youth. The poem seems to suggest that what was promised by these songs, '...to solve, and satisfy/ And set unchangeably in order' was nothing more than an illusion then, just as it is now.

Language and Imagery

- Use of lists, each one presents a memory and reflects the passage of time.
- 'Glare' has connotations of being blinded.
- Imagery of spring signifies youthful optimism.

Structure and Form

- Regularly rhymed stanzas, with second and sixth lines shortened; run-on lines at end of stanzas. Frequent use of caesura in combination with enjambment. Effect: to produce a reflection which moves irregularly but thoughtfully to the cheerless concluding couplet.

Tone

- Pessimistic: 'It had not done so then, and could not now.'

Themes and Ideas

- The transience of love.
- The past and memory.
- Ageing.



Faith Healing

The poem is about a visiting American faith-healer who is addressing a large crowd but who has little time to speak on a one-to-one basis with them. The poem explores the way in which the crowd react to him. Some leave but some are unable to do so, such is the power of the faith-healer – or the power of their own need.

The poem describes the regimentation of the meeting and the ways in which members of the crowd, genuinely moved, react to the faith-healer's stage-managed 'kindness'. They believe he has a personal message for them, a call of loving kindness for them alone. The speaker reflects on how many people suffer because of a lack of love in their life and how this emptiness is sometimes filled with the types of experience offered by the faith healer. The poem ends on a pessimistic note as the speaker seems to be implying that if these people are unable to find love in their lives, then a faith-healer will not be able to help them.

Language and Imagery

- Imagery of 'warm, spring rain of loving care' portrays the healer in a positive light, suggesting he has powers to thaw the hearts of his audience.
- Imagery used to describe people implies they are simple-minded: 'sheepishly stray', 'dumb and idiot child'.
- Use of neologism 'blort' for the same purpose.
- Detailing of description of crowd hints at reasons for the lovelessness which 'nothing cures'.

Tone

- The speaker's attitude is complicated, at first he appears sympathetic.
- Then he becomes sceptical and scornful: 'Moustached in flowered frocks they shake'.
- Finally, in the end he is reflective, wondering.

Themes and Ideas

- Faith.
- Human weakness.
- Love.



For Sidney Bechet

Philip Larkin was a fan of jazz music. *For Sidney Bechet* is a poem dedicated to the famous jazz musician, Sidney Bechet. In this poem the sound of the music enables the listeners to conjure up visual imaginings associated with New Orleans, Bechet's birthplace. Music moved Larkin and in this poem the passionate speaker is touched by the music, indeed so much so that he appears to attribute a moral value to it: 'the natural noise of good'.

Language and Imagery

- New Orleans is romanticised, 'Everyone making love and going shares'.
- Contrast with what the city means to the speaker.
- Simile, 'like circus tiger' suggests excitement, spectacle and danger.
- Biblical allusion to rubies, Proverbs 31.10: 'Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies'.
- Use of exclamation mark to emphasise spontaneity and enthusiasm.
- Use of personal pronoun, 'me' and 'my', emphasises the speaker's personal response.
- 'Scattering' can have two interpretations, getting rid of grief or making the music widespread.
- Speech-related words animate the last lines: 'voice', 'say', 'the enormous yes', 'speech', and 'greeted' could imply that music is a form of communication.
- 'Long-haired', metaphor is a veiled attack on over-intellectualizing music fans.
- 'Scored pity' could be a pun on a music score, and refer to emotion we feel when listening to the music.

Structure and Form

- Apostrophe: direct address to a person or thing (often absent): 'That note you hold'.
- Caesura, 'Like an enormous yes./My Crescent City...' emphasises the speaker's positive response.

Tone

- Enthusiastic, affirmative: 'Like an enormous yes.'

Themes and Ideas

- The power of music/ art.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEOeeOtXOKU>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpop/features/7894725/Philip-Larkin-jazz-critic.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdeEFerYVtk>



The Whitsun Weddings

Did you know?

Whitsun is the name given for the festival of Pentecost, the seventh Sunday after Easter. Whit was used for a range of celebrations in the Church; it originally commemorated the Descent of the Holy Spirit on Christ's disciples at Pentecost. It became a holiday, a celebration, and associated with weddings and baptisms.

This is one of the best known of Larkin's poems. The speaker is on a train on a hot Saturday afternoon and is wakened by the sounds of celebration. He realises that this is Whitsun, a traditional time for weddings. The speaker sees, in almost every station, families seeing brides and bridegrooms off on their honeymoon. Most people might regard the couples as representing new beginnings, the speaker marvels to himself at their lack of thought.

Throughout the poem the speaker appears smug and cynical; however, in the last stanza he reconsiders. There is a recognition that these weddings are an act of trust and he himself acknowledges we cannot truly know the outcome.

Larkin or the persona?

The poem is written in the past tense and the first person. It is based on a personal experience, which Larkin had in 1955. In this poem the speaker makes disparaging remarks about the families and the couples he observes which are condescending and mean-spirited.

In reading poetry we must be careful not to confuse the speaker with the poet. Larkin claimed there was nothing of himself in 'The Whitsun Weddings', but his biographer, Andrew Motion, claimed there is 'everything of the poet in the poem, the longing for love as well as the standing aloof and detached, attracted to the young girls, but not prepared for the commitment of marriage.'

Activity:

Do you think the speaker in the poem is representative of Larkin's own feelings and opinions? Does it matter to our understanding and interpretation of the poem?

Imagery and Language

- Sensory imagery, the feel of the 'hot cushions', the sight of cars' 'blinding windscreens' reflecting the sun, the smell of the fish-dock, of grass and of the train's upholstery are used to create a warm, oppressive atmosphere.
- Use of negative language and imagery to present the working classes and women especially, 'seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat.'
- Use of everyday words, 'perm', 'nylon', 'Odeon' suggestive of the 1950s.
- Women 'share the secret like a happy funeral': juxtaposition is used to suggest the conflicting emotions marriage inspires.
- Towards the end there is a greater use of metaphor and imagery. London seems like a golden field, its postal districts 'packed like squares of wheat', the train and its passengers are compared to 'an arrow-shower' shooting forward - a positive image of shared experience suggesting potentiality and growth.



Structure and Form

- The poem has eight rhymed stanzas, of ten lines each. The rhyme scheme is ABABCDECDE.
- The lines in each stanza have five stresses except the second line, which has only two; it introduces a visual contrast and may suggest the alternating but regular rhythm of a train.

Themes and ideas

- Journeys.
- Relationships.



Talking in Bed

In this rather pessimistic poem Larkin explores the idea of human intimacy. Larkin takes a situation, talking in bed, a place where lovers should be able to communicate easily; however, he presents the couple as isolated from each other, lying in silence. The reason for the breakdown in the relationship is never clearly identified. The poem seems to imply that in human relationships as time goes by the intimacy fades, silence creeps in and communication becomes more difficult.

Language and Imagery

- Title is ironic as there is little communication.
- Ambiguous use of the word, 'lying'
- Use of contrast– 'Yet more and more time passes silently' conveys a sense of human stagnation in contrast with nature, where "Outside, the wind's incomplete unrest / Builds and disperses clouds about the sky".
- Imagery of man-made aspects of the environment, which do not meet our human needs.
- Use of the double negative, "Or not untrue and not unkind" creates a sense of fumbling to find a reduced satisfaction.
- Apparent contradiction, 'At this unique distance from isolation", suggesting that someone can be physically close but ironically distant at the same time.

Structure and form

- The sense of broken communication and isolation is well displayed through the structure and form of the poem.
- Rhyme scheme portrays the absence of continuity and the broken-up nature of the couple's discourse.

Tone

- Pessimistic.

Themes and Ideas

- Break-down of communication.
- Loss of intimacy over time.
- Love.



Dockery and Son

This is another of Larkin's best-known poems. In it the speaker looks back over his life and his achievements. The life of his old college companion, Dockery, is considered and presented as a contrast to the life the speaker has chosen.

The poem begins with the speaker returning to his old college, where he discusses Dockery with the Dean. He is told that Dockery's son is now a student at the college. On his way home he tries to remember Dockery but is unable to do so. However, it strikes him that Dockery must have been a young man when he had his son. The speaker falls asleep, then awakes to change trains at Sheffield. At the station he notices how the railway lines come together then diverge, and he reflects on how this is in many ways a symbol of how our lives come together and then we part and move on.

This then leads the speaker to reflect upon his life. He considers how his life differs from that of others. He believes the main reason for those differences are 'habits', patterns we fall into. In the final four lines the speaker once again contemplates his own isolation and loneliness, and comes to the conclusion that no matter how differently we lead our lives we are all destined to a similar end - 'the only end of age'.

Language and Imagery

- Title relates to one of the central themes in the poem - family.
- Incorporates the ordinary rhythms of speech within the poetic form.
- Symbolism of the room being 'locked' implies there is no going back – given emphasis by the positioning of the word.
- Pastoral imagery contrasts with that of the grim industrial city.
- 'Awful pie' symbolic of an unsatisfactory life.
- Metaphor of the railway lines 'joining and parting' like human lives.
- Imagery of the 'unhindered moon' reflects his isolation.
- Use of ellipsis suggests confusion or uncertainty, 'Of...No, that's not the difference.'
- Aphorism: 'Life is first boredom, then fear'.

Structure and Form

- Monologue, but with quoted speech from the College Dean.
- Repeated use of 'and' towards the end reflects the protagonist's complicated and meandering thoughts.
- Jaunty rhythm in first verse could suggest his youthful carelessness.

Tone

- Melancholic, 'Life is first boredom, then fear./ Whether or not we use it, it goes,'.

Themes and ideas

- Mortality.
- Inheritance.

Activity



Larkin never married, nor did he have any children. He agreed with Cyril Connolly's famous dictum: "There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall."

What does this poem, or others you have studied, reveal about Larkin's thoughts on family?



Aubade

Did you know?

Traditionally, an aubade celebrates the arrival of dawn—the light of day pushing away the darkness of night. It can also be a kind of morning love poem. The typical situation usually has something to do with lovers parting at sunrise. There might be a little sadness in the departure, but at least their love endures.

In this poem the speaker rises early, not to go on a romantic morning walk, as suggested by the title, but to watch the dawn break alone. The speaker then goes on to reflect at length on the tediousness of everyday life, fear, isolation, mortality and the futility of our existence. In the end the dawn arrives and the mundane realities of life begin again.

Language and Imagery

- Irony of the title, in an aubade the dawn is usually celebrated.
- Darkness of the room is symbolic.
- Abstract emotions are given concrete form, ‘rages out / In furnace-fear’.
- Personification of ‘unresting’ death.
- Ironically the sunrise, traditionally a symbol of hope and rebirth, only represents a day closer to death for the protagonist.
- Use of imagery to describe organised religion, ‘musical brocade’, ‘moth-eaten’.
- Simile, ‘It stands plain as a wardrobe’, suggests the mundane immobility of death.
- Imagery of darkness, the archetypal symbol of death.
- Image of the telephone, a symbol of work, like a vicious animal.
- Colour of the sky is bland and uninspiring, ‘The sky is white as clay, with no sun’.

Structure and Form

- Line nine of each stanza has fewer syllables – to encourage the reader to focus on subject matter.
- Five stanzas: four reminders of death and a mention of what we use to distract ourselves from it.
- Regular rhyme scheme – could represent the inevitability of death.
- Rhythmically varied pentameter to express both the monotony of life and our emotionally urgent reactions to it.

Tone

- Apprehensive.
- Despairing.

Ideas and Themes

- Fear of Death.
- Despair.
-

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDr_SRhJs80



Activity

A.N. Wilson has claimed that this is an almost perfect poem. Read the article he has written about this poem.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/anwilson/3554550/Philip-Larkins-almost-perfect-poem.html>

To what extent do you agree with him?



High Windows

Did you Know?

Britain experienced a cultural shift in the 1960s. “Swinging London” was a term coined by *Time* magazine in their April 1966 issue, in order to define the culture and fashion scene in 1960s London. Religion began to be a less important feature in the lives of many young people and sex was talked about more openly. The invention of the contraceptive pill meant young women experienced new sexual freedoms. Drugs such as LSD and marijuana became easier for young people to access; indeed this was an era characterised by a whole series of new freedoms.

The poem was written in 1967, when Larkin was 45 years old and working in a university library. He was therefore surrounded by large numbers of students in their late teens and early twenties, at the height of the “swinging sixties” when young people had learned to express themselves fearlessly and not to be embarrassed by their sexual feelings for each other.

In this poem the middle-aged speaker appears to be envious of the younger generation. He believes they now have freedoms which he longed for but was denied when he was a youth. In particular he focuses on two young people and reflects that they are probably having sex, something which would have been unthinkable in his youth. Therefore the poem explores the idea of a Britain that is changing, and people who now have more personal freedoms. The speaker seems to believe that everyone who is young must be happy. He then wonders if the older generation thought of his own in a similar way. This brings him to the central image of the poem, the High Windows, which could suggest that freedoms are best experienced with some constraints, or that a contemplation of what life is renders the freedoms and constraints alluded to meaningless.

Language and Imagery

- Symbolism of the title ‘High Windows’.
- ‘Kids’, emphasises the youth of the young people.
- ‘Fucking’, explicit, crude language.
- ‘Everyone’ is a generalisation, the speaker could be projecting his own ideas onto everyone else.
- Simile, ‘Like an outdated combine harvester’, emphasises the distance between the generations.
- Metaphor, ‘the long slide’, has connotations of youthfulness but also loss of innocence.
- Use of italics to report the imagined thoughts of an observer considering the speaker when the later was young.

Structure and Form

- Five quatrains built on a roughly observed interlocking rhyme scheme.
- The rhyme is relaxed through the use of slant rhyme ‘if/life, back/dark’.
- Enjambment captures the sense of thought passing on to thought.



Tone

- Colloquial: 'like free bloody birds'.
- Cynicism, 'He/ And his lot will all go down the long slide/ Like free bloody birds'.
- Pessimism that we are not really free: 'And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows/ Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless'.

Themes and Ideas

- Personal freedoms and their limitations.
- Ageing.
- Changing world.



The Old Fools

This poem deals with the theme of old age and what happens to us as we get older. In society the expectation is that we treat our elders with respect; however, in this poem the speaker appears to portray the elderly with a brutal callousness and a lack of sympathy. The 'old fools' in the poem are described in an exaggerated fashion as acting like children, having limited intelligence and very poor memory. However, in the last line, the poet provides a chilling reminder that old age comes to us all.

Language and Imagery

- Title 'The Old Fools', is cynical and critical.
- Use of questions, conveys a sense of the speaker's uncertainty, encouraging readers to question their own beliefs.
- Brutal detailing of senility, 'when your mouth hangs open and drools,/ And you keep on pissing yourself', highlights the loss of human dignity.
- Use of second-person 'your' universalizes the observation.
- Coarse, colloquial language, 'pissing yourself', reveals the speaker's disgust.
- Focus on body parts is dehumanising, also 'ash' and 'prune' are end results of a process.
- Metaphor of the mind as having rooms which can be closed or shut off.
- Imagery of players on stage could be an allusion to Shakespeare's seven ages of man speech from *As You Like It* ('sans everything').
- Metaphor of the flower represents movement towards completeness and then to decay.

Structure and Form

- Series of questions in the first two stanzas; brief ominous concluding statement.
- Intricate rhyme scheme.
- Heavy indentation of last line of final stanza (and other stanzas) for a poignant dramatic effect.

Tone

- Mocking, 'Do they somehow suppose/ It's more grown-up when your mouth hangs open and drools'. Mockery undercut by adoption of universalizing second person.
- Speculative, as shown through the use of questions.
- Reflective: 'Perhaps being old is having lighted rooms/ Inside your head...'

Themes and Ideas

- Growing old.
- Inevitability of death.

Activity:

Philip Larkin is said to have told *The Observer* in 1979, 'I think writing about unhappiness is probably the source of my popularity, if I have any. . . .'

To what extent have you found this to be the case in your study of Larkin's poetry?



Solar

In this poem Larkin reflects on the power and importance of the sun and what it gives to us. The sun is seen as beautiful and eternal. There are religious undertones in the poem - some critics have claimed it is a parody of Christian devotional poetry. The sun exists and it gives us all we need. Unthinkingly, however, we project onto the sun characteristics of kindness or affection, which it of course cannot feel.

Language and Imagery

- Personification of the sun.
- Imagery of the lion.
- Plant imagery.
- Sibilance.
- Biblical allusion, Jacob's ladder.
- Direct address.
- Imagery of the flower.

Tone

- Awed.

Ideas and Themes

- Nature.
- Power.
- Beliefs.



The Explosion

Philip Larkin was asked to write this poem for the memorial service of miners who died in a mine disaster in 1969. In this poem Larkin deviates from his usually cynical outlook on death and the afterlife and instead through the poem offers comfort to the widows and hope for the future.

Language and Imagery

- Metaphor of the men as 'shadows' hints at what is to come.
- Detached, matter-of-fact description of events.
- Personification of the sleeping slagheap is menacing .
- Symbolism of the eggs.
- 'Tremor' - the explosion is understated.
- Use of language suggestive of a prayer for the dead, 'The dead go on before us.../ Are sitting in God's house in comfort'.
- Surprise of the last line, 'the eggs unbroken'.

Structure and Form

- Elegy.
- Concludes with a single line set apart to emphasise the optimism for the future.
- Increasing frequency of use of enjambment towards end of poem to suggest urgency of speaker's emotion.
- First five stanzas deal with what has happened, the last ten lines deal with what is currently happening.

Tone

- Ominous: imagery of 'the tall gates standing open.'
- Optimistic: imagery of light, 'coin' and 'sun'.

Themes

- Death.
- Love.



Some connections

Below are some of the key themes explored in the work of Larkin and Jennings. The following is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive, but is intended as a helpful guide to teachers and students as you begin to explore the pair of poets. You are encouraged to be flexible in your thinking, realizing for example that a particular poem is likely to embody more than one theme, or that a theme may not receive explicit statement in a poem.

- Death and mortality.
- Age and Youth.
- Family.
- God and religion.
- Fate.
- Memory.
- Art.

Activity:

- Think of poems by Jennings and Larkin that relate to the themes listed above.
- What other themes have you come across in your study which you think should be added to this list?

How to Connect the Poems?

Below is a suggestion of how you could connect two of the poems. Be aware that this is not a “model answer”.

No claim is made that the discussion for these poems is comprehensive. It is hoped that the comparative and contextual material offered here will re-assure teachers and students about the nature and amount of what is expected,



Specimen question

This question is about **failing human relationships**.

Read again 'One Flesh' by Jennings and 'Talking In Bed' by Larkin.

By analysis of the **poetic methods** used, and drawing upon relevant biographical information, compare and contrast how these poets write about failing human relationships.

N.B. Equal marks are available for your treatment of each poem.

In planning an orderly and relevant response to this question, there will need to be an awareness of how each poet deals with the theme of failing human relationships in his/her poem and how the treatments of the theme differ. There will also need to be an awareness of biographical contextual information.

The poems 'Talking in Bed' and 'One Flesh' effectively explore the theme of failing human relationships. Both poems feature couples whose relationships seem to have changed over time and who are now physically, emotionally and mentally distant from each other.

The themes of failing human relationships, isolation and estrangement are common in the work of the poets of 'The Movement', a literary movement formed in the 1950s, of which both Philip Larkin and Elizabeth Jennings were members. Philip Larkin never married and much of his work is characterised by a cynical attitude to marriage, love and family. Elizabeth Jennings also never married; however, the failing human relationship of the couple featured in her poem, 'One Flesh' is presented in a more gentle and sympathetic way than that of the couple in Larkin's 'Talking in Bed'. One possible reason for this rather more compassionate approach could be that the couple featured in Jennings' poem are her parents.

In Jennings' poem the title, 'One Flesh' has Biblical connotations. Religious imagery often features in Jennings' work, perhaps not surprisingly, as she was a devout Catholic. The phrase comes from the Genesis account of creation, in which Adam and Eve are presented as 'one flesh'. This term is used in Christian marriage vows; the title is therefore a reminder of the couple's marriage and their symbolic union. The word 'flesh' has connotations of sensuality and intimacy; however, in the poem it becomes clear that this couple no longer have a close or intimate relationship and so the title is used ironically.

Similarly, the title of Larkin's poem, 'Talking in Bed' is also used ironically. The couple in this poem appear to have a similar lack of intimacy as the couple in 'One Flesh' and rather than 'talking in bed', instead they appear isolated and unable to communicate. Quite clearly both couples have relationships that could be considered failing.

Larkin's poem begins with the wry assertion that 'Talking in bed ought to be easiest'. Indeed, the reader might assume that sharing a bed with someone implies a degree of intimacy and closeness that would make communication easy. The couple in Jennings' poem do not share a bed: 'Lying apart now, each in a separate bed'. The symbolism of the separate beds suggests that physical intimacy is no longer an important part of this couple's relationship. The use of caesura in the middle of this line further reinforces the impression of division.



However, sharing a bed is not necessarily a sign of intimacy, as the couple in Larkin's poem who do share a bed are just as isolated as the couple in 'One Flesh'. The couple in Larkin's poem seem to have difficulty communicating, despite the fact they seem to have been together for so long: 'Lying together there goes back so far'. The word 'lying' is ambiguous and can be interpreted literally as lying in bed or as the couple not being honest, 'lying' to each other. This might well provide some explanation for the distance between the two. In this case the next line then becomes a paradox as lying cannot be an 'emblem' of honesty.

In Jennings' poem the couple's isolation is further emphasised when we learn that he lies, 'with a book', this could suggest his desire to avoid intimate communication. However, later we learn that the book is 'unread', perhaps a sign that all imagination and enjoyment has gone from this man's life. A melancholy tone permeates this stanza, especially when we are told that his wife appears equally keen to escape her present situation. She is presented as dreaming of childhood. A wistful tone is created through the use of the simile, 'Like a girl', which implies that she longs for a return to 'childhood' and an escape from this failing relationship she finds herself in.

In both of the poems the couples seem to be living dull, uneventful lives. In 'Talking in Bed' the use of repetition emphasises how slowly time seems to pass: 'Yet more and more time passes silently'. That the couple remain 'silent' as time passes suggests the difficulties they have communicating in their failing relationship.

The idea of time moving slowly is also explored in 'One Flesh'. Jennings uses enjambment, 'As if they wait/ Some new event...'; the word, 'wait', reinforces the idea of a long period of time spent waiting. What they are waiting for is revealed in the next line, 'Some new event'. The couple seem to be desperate for something new. The word, 'something' implies it is undetermined and unspecified. It doesn't really matter what it is as long as it offers a break from the monotony of their lives. This impression of a life that is uneventful is further compounded by the use of imagery, which conveys the idea of life being static and fixed. The book is 'unread', she stares at a 'fixed point' - in this world nothing is moving, life has become stagnant.

Larkin uses the external world to explore the failing relationship of the couple in his poem. Outside is presented as 'Incomplete unrest', a contrast to the silence of the bedroom. The outside world could in some way mirror the unhappiness of the couple: the use of the imagery of the 'wind' in turmoil and the 'clouds in the sky' which 'build and disperse' could be a metaphor for tensions or arguments between the couple. These images combined with that of the 'dark towns' create a dark and menacing atmosphere, implying there is turbulence and unhappiness in this relationship. Jennings also uses imagery from the natural world to effectively illustrate the failing relationship presented in 'One Flesh'. In the second stanza the couple are described as, 'Tossed up like flotsam'. This simile implies a lack of control and the word 'flotsam' suggests something shipwrecked, broken and adrift, just like their failing relationship.

The reference to 'their former passion' implies that the passion is now gone. This adds pathos as we realise that this couple once were in love and passionate about each other. We are told that, 'now, they hardly ever touch/ Or if they do, it is like a confession'. The use of words with religious connotations, 'confession' and 'chastity' is a reminder of the religious vows of the marriage service which they now keep, even though the physical aspect of their relationship seems to have diminished.

As both poems draw to a close there seems to be little hope for either of the couples.



In Jennings' poem, the couple are presented as 'Strangely apart, yet strangely close together'. The repetition of 'strangely' implies there is something unusual or unnatural about this relationship; the contrast between together and apart, reminds us that physical proximity is not indicative of intimacy. In the last stanza Jennings reveals, 'These two who are my father and my mother'. Jennings does not call them her 'parents' as this as this would imply unity, instead she calls them 'father' and 'mother', further emphasising their separation in this failing relationship.

Jennings uses the imagery of a thread and feather to suggest the relationship is delicate and fragile. A simile is used to describe silence, 'like a thread to hold/And not wind in', and this conveys the lack of communication between the couple, which ironically is the thing that binds them together. The metaphor of time as a feather 'Touching them gently' is again a poignant reminder of the passing of time. The poem ends on a tone of resignation but also one of regret, Jennings once again reminds the reader of the 'fire' this couple used to have, but rather sadly reminds us that over time it 'has grown cold'. The final word 'cold' is a sad reminder that in human relationships intimacy diminishes over time.

Larkin's Poem concludes in similarly bleak fashion, offering little hope that things will improve for this couple in the future. The speaker reflects on the cosmic indifference to the couple's plight, 'None of this cares for us', but one senses that the lack of 'care' can also be found within. A sense of the couple's isolation is suggested, but the phrase 'this unique distance from isolation' again, as in Jennings' poem suggests that there is a realisation that being physically close is not necessarily the same as being emotionally close. There seems to be some confusion as to why this relationship has failed, why at "this unique distance" they feel so isolated from each other. The cause of that, 'unique distance' is hinted at in the final stanza, in the difficulty of saying 'words at once true and kind/ Or not untrue and not unkind'. The use of the double negative reminds us that as time passes it is difficult for the couple to be truthful or kind to each other. Therefore, rather than say anything unkind or untrue they chose to say nothing. Larkin presents this couple's failing relationship with honesty and without sentimentality. The speaker does not blame the couple. He merely describes their situation, acknowledging that is a hopeless one, which they are unable to change.

Both Larkin and Jennings have effectively presented couples in failing human relationships in the poems 'One Flesh' and 'Talking in Bed'. Larkin presents the couple in his poem with honesty and without sentimentality; however, Jennings' presentation is a more sensitive one, with a gentle despairing tone, and this could well be explained by the fact that this poem is based on her own parents' relationship. Despite these differences, both Larkin and Jennings raise similar questions about the nature of human relationships. In the poems discussed they present couples for whom intimacy has diminished with the passing of time and who are left feeling isolated, unfulfilled and disappointed.

Activity:

Go through this essay and annotate where it has met the assessment objectives. If you were to give this student advice on how to improve the essay, what would you suggest?



Glossary of Poetic Terms

An important part of your response in the exam will be your appropriate and relevant use of literary terminology. Below is a list of terms you are likely to come across in your study of poetry.

- **alliteration:** the repetition of sounds at the beginning of two or more words in close proximity. The term is usually applied to the repetition of consonants.
- **assonance:** two or more words, which are in close proximity, repeating the same vowel sounds.
- **bathos:** a juxtaposition of the important with the insignificant or trivial – often to comment ironically on the actual insignificance of what is deemed important. This figure of speech can also be used purely humorously.
- **cadence:** inflection or emphasis, sometimes used for poetry based on a “musical phrase” of language rather than a strict metre.
- **caesura:** a significant pause within a line of poetry, generally created by the use of punctuation.
- **diction:** the language used in a work of literature particularly as regards vocabulary choices.
- **epigram:** a short, pithy saying, conveying a profound thought in an economical and arresting way.
- **hyperbole:** language that uses exaggeration for effect.
- **image:** For the purpose of AO2 analysis in this unit, what we mean by “image” is a figure 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”.
- **imagery:** this word generally applies in a visual sense to figurative language that stimulates a picture in the imagination. Tactile imagery appeals to the sense of touch. Auditory imagery appeals to the imagination by echoing or creating sound effects.
- **irony:** this is language and tone that implies that the intended meaning is different from the expressed meaning.
- **metaphor:** where one thing is described directly as another, to enhance meaning or effect. When this is used for a more protracted purpose it is called an extended metaphor.
- **metre:** metre is the measurement of rhythm, expressed as the number and kind of metrical feet in a line of poetry. This measurement considers the number of syllables and where the stresses fall in each foot.
- **motif:** a dominant or recurring idea or figure of speech within a work of art or within the work of an artist, musician or writer.



- **neologism:** a new word, sometimes a compound of two or more existing words, or an existing word with an unusual prefix or suffix added.
- **onomatopoeia:** when a sound is conveyed in word form; or when the sound of a word enhances its meaning.
- **oxymoron:** a figure of speech where two juxtaposed words or phrases appear to be contradictory.
- **paradox:** where two ideas, expressed in close proximity, are apparently contradictory, but on closer examination prove to be meaningfully related.
- **personification:** to attribute human characteristics to a non-human subject.
- **satire:** the use of humour – often through mimicry and exaggeration – to expose as absurd a society, a belief or ethic, or a person or class of people and thereby to ridicule it.
- **simile:** where something is explicitly compared to something else, e.g. by using “like” or “as”.
- **synaesthesia:** the expression of a deliberate confusing of the senses (e.g. describing music as a colour, or light as a liquid).
- **tone:** the emotion or attitude intended by the writer, effected through use of language, rhythm and punctuation.