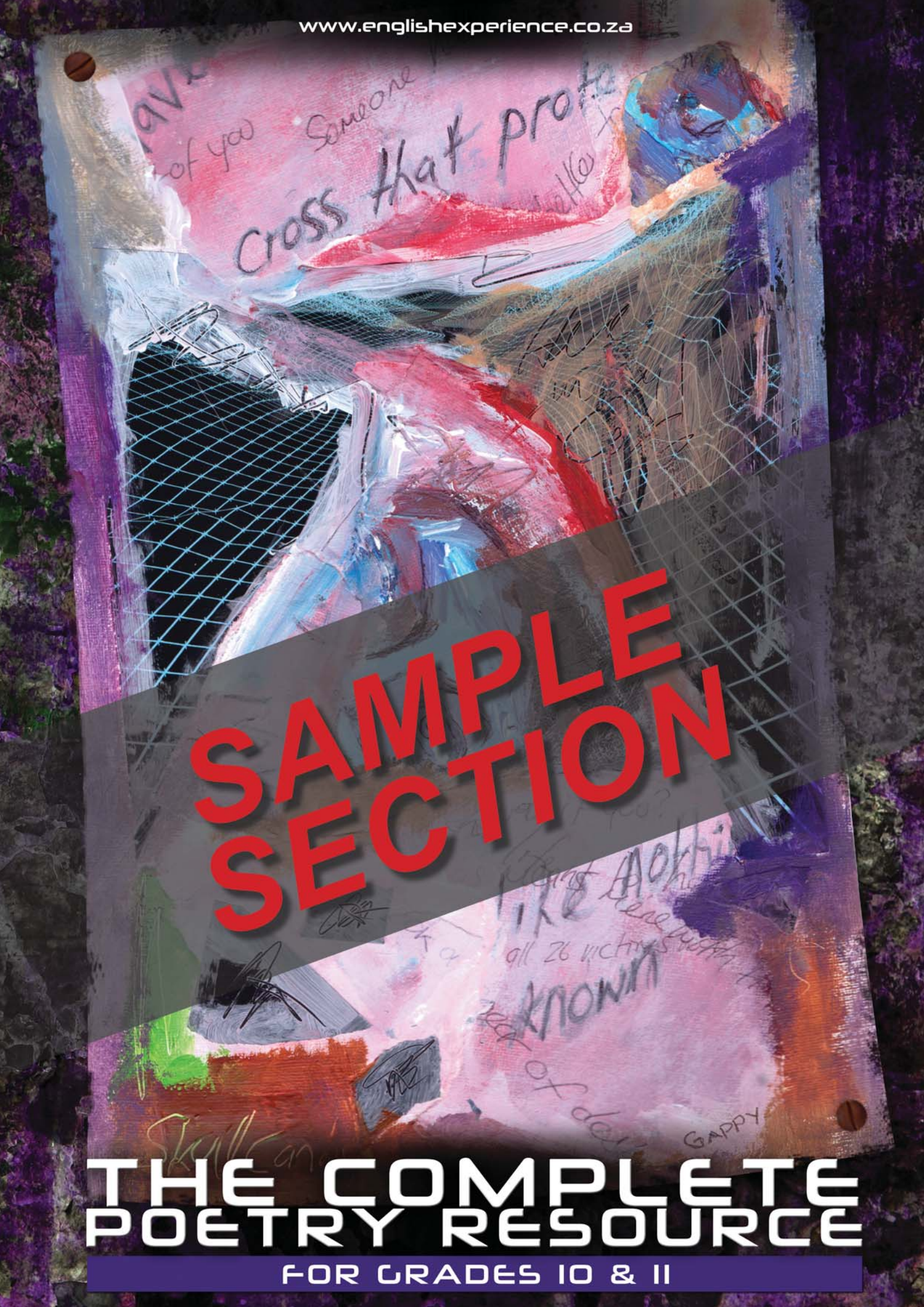
www.englishexperience.co.za



THE COMPLETE POETRY RESOURCE

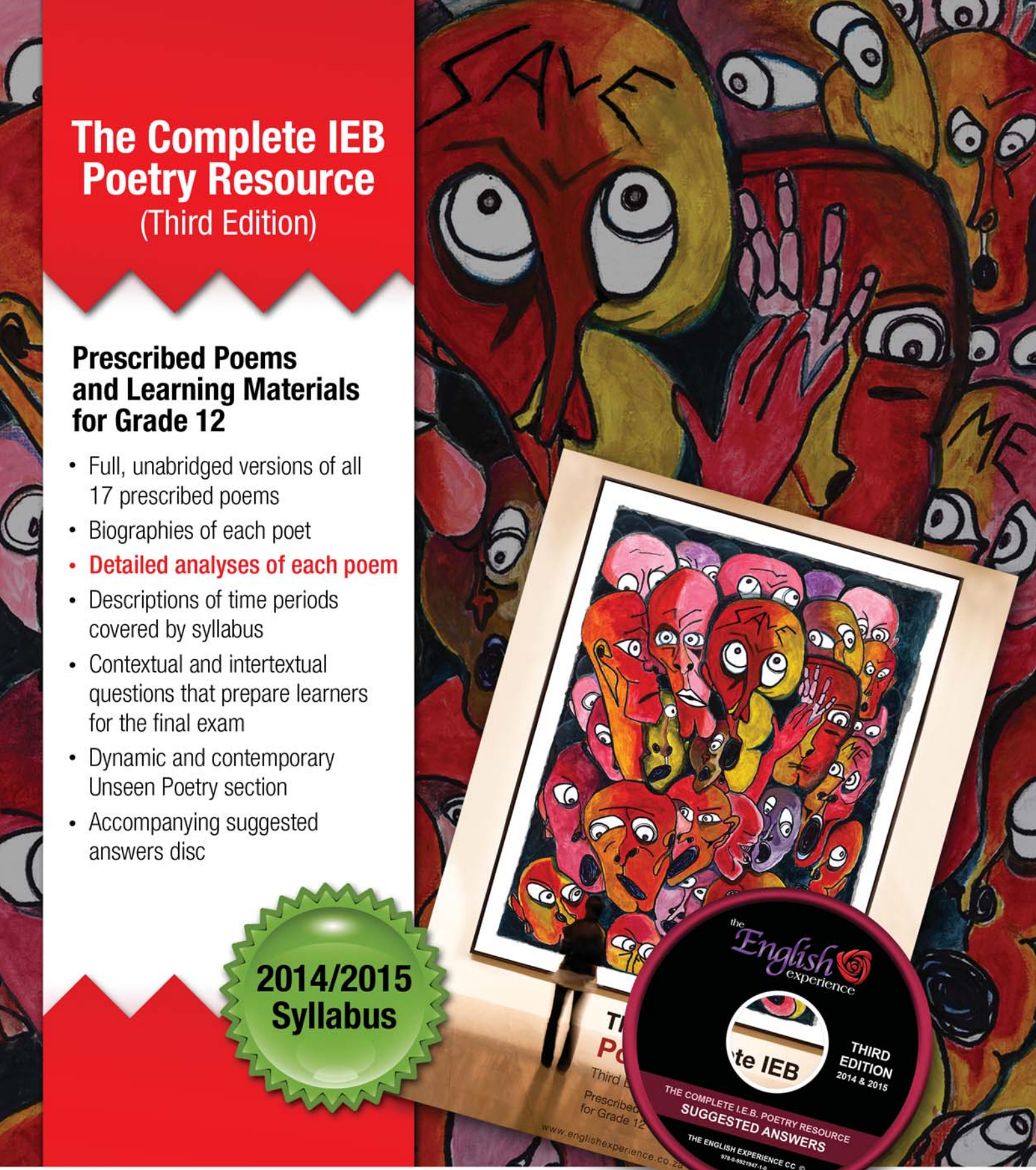
FOR GRADES 10 & 11

The Complete IEB Poetry Resource
(Third Edition)

Prescribed Poems and Learning Materials for Grade 12

- Full, unabridged versions of all 17 prescribed poems
- Biographies of each poet
- **Detailed analyses of each poem**
- Descriptions of time periods covered by syllabus
- Contextual and intertextual questions that prepare learners for the final exam
- Dynamic and contemporary Unseen Poetry section
- Accompanying suggested answers disc

2014/2015 Syllabus



www.englishexperience.co.za
info@englishexperience.co.za
Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702
Fax: +27 (0)86 612 4437

the English experience

Publishers of innovative educational material

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

ABOUT THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE

The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality IEB English educational resources for educators and learners. The team of passionate, talented experts behind The English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate — enriching and challenging both educators and learners — without losing sight of the important goal of examination readiness and success.

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource The English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features — including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials — designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields, such as historical fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proofreaders and obsessive fact checkers — together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help to ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While examination readiness and success is a non-negotiable, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.

Visit **www.englishexperience.co.za** to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code to launch the site on your phone automatically. Please note, you will need to have the free 'Tag reader' app installed, which you can download from http://gettag.mobi

OUR APPROACH

Perhaps the toughest challenge in teaching poetry to modern learners is convincing them that the effort often required to grasp the meaning of a poem is worth it. Decoding the language and deciphering the message of a poem can be taxing for learners so it's perhaps not surprising that many of them see poems as works through which they have to slog in order to pass an examination.

This resource has been written with this reality in mind and particular attention has been paid to providing the kind of context and insight necessary to help them engage fully with each poem and to discover for themselves why it has captivated others.

We believe that studying poetry rewards us with a broader, deeper understanding of ourselves and of the world around us. That is why this resource does more than provide learners with a detailed and, hopefully, insightful analysis of each poem. It also encourages them to engage with each work on a personal level and to uncover their own responses through the extensive contextual and intertextual questions.

Throughout this resource, learners are challenged to agree or disagree with the analysis provided. By formulating and expressing their own responses to the opinions, ideas and themes explored in the pages of this resource, learners are encouraged to reflect and grow as individuals as well as students.

In the end, we have approached the poetry syllabus the same way we approach every text: with two, interrelated goals in mind. Our first, non-negotiable objective is to ensure examination readiness and success. Our second ambition is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the works being studied.

USING THIS RESOURCE

This comprehensive resource is ideal for teaching poetry to students in Grades 10 and 11. Much more than an anthology, it prepares learners for Grade 12 poetry by analysing poems from the last 500 years and presenting each one in the context of its time period, using a combination of perennial favourites from the masters and inspiring, edgy contemporary verse.

Focused on making poetry exciting and relevant, this resource combines attention-grabbing verse with detailed analysis and challenging, varied questions. The Grade 12 poetry syllabus will be manageable and straightforward for learners who have developed their skills and critical appreciation of verse using this stimulating resource.

POETRY IN CONTEXT

The poems are arranged into sections that illustrate the progression of English language poetry through the five centuries covered by the syllabus, from the Elizabethan Era of the 1600s to the Modernism movement of the 1900s and contemporary South African verse. The 20th century section, for example, includes the poetry of Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Adrienne Rich and Sylvia Plath.

Each section begins with an **introduction** to the period that draws attention to the major events and influences of the time, and some of the themes that are highlighted in the analyses that follow. After this introduction, a concise **biography** of each poet is presented, followed by his or her **poem**, an **analysis** of the poem and then a set of contextual and intertextual **questions**.

The purpose of this structure is to help learners appreciate how English language poetry has developed over the last 500 years and to provide them with a social, political and personal context that, it is hoped, will help them to understand and to value the work of each poet. With this in mind, we recommend working through this resource in chronological order.

KEY TO USING THE BOXES IN THIS RESOURCE:

Definition or Glossary
Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text

Information
Provides additional details or facts about a topic

Alert
Something to which you need to pay attention

Quirky Fact
Fun, interesting, extraneous information

Checklist
A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily

UNSEEN SECTION

The popular Unseen poetry section, which prepares learners for tackling poetry they have not come across before (and, thus, the third poem they will be presented with in Question 3, Paper I of the Matric examination), features different and inspiring verse from contemporary sources and guidelines on how to answer contextual poetry questions.

We hope you enjoy using this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any comments, queries or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us.

INTRODUCTION TO POETRY

READING AND UNDERSTANDING POETRY

Reading and analysing poetry effectively is just as much about attitude as it is about mastering the necessary techniques. You will benefit from developing useful methods and honing your skills, but, ultimately, understanding poetry is about being open to new ideas and new ways of seeing the world around you.

Many readers complain that they develop a kind of 'block' when it comes to poetry, which prevents them from understanding the 'hidden message' in the poem; however, poets aren't trying to trick or confuse readers. Their message isn't actually 'hidden', but expressed in a way that is unique, complex and often very striking.

Poets don't wish to frustrate you, but they *are* trying to challenge or provoke you: not to work out an obscure meaning hidden behind fancy poetic techniques, but to think about their subject in a new, enlightening way. If a poem makes you think about an issue or look at something in a different light, then the poet has succeeded (and so have you!).

HOW TO ANALYSE A POEM

Before tackling a set of contextual questions about a poem, take the time to read through the verse carefully and to conduct a 'mini-analysis' (by following the guidelines below). That way, when you tackle the questions, you will already have all the answers at your fingertips.

Even if you're unable to use all of your observations in your answers, conducting a mini-analysis will enrich your understanding of the poem as a whole and ensure that your answers are as comprehensive and well-informed as possible.

STEP 1: READ THE POEM

It's rare to understand a poem fully the first time you read it; most poems take several readings to be truly appreciated. Don't try to analyse the poem as soon as you start reading it. If you decide what the poem is about or what message it is trying to convey too early on, you will run the risk of missing an important point later and may try to 'force' a particular meaning on the poem. Be curious, be open-minded, ask questions and *enjoy* the poem before you start trying to deconstruct and analyse it.

Simply reading the poem through several times without over-thinking it will help you to process the poet's meaning and technique(s) in a natural way. If you can, read the poem aloud. This will not only help you to detect patterns of rhyme and rhythm, it will often make the meaning of the poem clearer.

An **enjambed** line occurs when a sentence or phrase (a unit of syntactic meaning) runs on from one line of verse to the next, requiring you to read the two (or more) lines *together* to grasp their meaning fully.

An **end-stopped** line occurs when the sentence or phrase is completed at the end of the line of verse and is usually indicated by a full stop.

Consider the following extract taken from the opening lines of Mbuyiseni Oswald Mtshali's poem "An Abandoned Bundle":

The morning mist
and chimney smoke
of White City Jabavu
flowed thick yellow
as pus oozing
from a gigantic sore.

These lines don't make much sense if you stop or pause at the end of the first, second, third, fourth or fifth line. Read together, on the other hand, the six lines make up one thought. Notice the full stop at the end of the sixth line. This indicates that we should read these lines as one thought or unit of meaning.

Be sure that you are reading the poem correctly by paying special attention to the use of punctuation or lack thereof. The 'sentences' or pauses within the poem, for instance, will help you to decipher its meaning. Make sure that you differentiate between **enjambed** and **end-stopped** lines.

Once you've read through the poem a few times, pick up a pencil and read through it again, this time, making notes or marks on the poem. ***React*** to the poem — write in the margins, circle words or phrases that stick out or confuse you, underline repeated words or striking images, and draw lines to indicate related ideas or metaphors.

STEP 2: WHAT'S THE STORY?

Once you've read the poem through several times (not just once, but twice or even three times), you are ready to start deciphering its meaning. Before anything else, ask yourself: *what is the poem about? What kind of message is the speaker trying to convey?*

If the poem is particularly long, it may help you to re-read each stanza and jot down a few words or phrases that summarise that stanza. Once you have done this, work out one or two sentences that accurately sum up the **subject** and **theme** of the poem.

When determining the subject and theme of a poem, it is important to know something about its **context**. Obviously, knowing a few facts about the poet — such as when he or she lived — will help with your understanding and appreciation of the poem.

If you were to publish a poem now, your poem would be better understood by future generations if they knew a little about you as a person: for example, when and where you lived, your beliefs, what the social climate was, what society expected or frowned upon and what your personal philosophies included.

The same is true for any poem you will encounter and, therefore, it's important that you familiarise yourself with the different literary periods and the common concerns or styles of these eras, as well as any major historical events that may have influenced the poets of a particular era.

Many people believe that any work of art — poetry included — should be seen as an independent entity, but you should be aware that no artist exists in a vacuum, free from outside influences. This is often particularly true of poets, who regularly feel compelled to offer commentary on their society, and to engage with the social or political concerns of the day.

Even if a poem has a 'universal' or timeless theme, it still helps to know what may have compelled the poet to put pen to paper. The date of birth of the poet will usually give you a good indication of the period or movement to which he or she belonged, particularly if you aren't given any additional information. Remember, however, that you should **avoid making sweeping statements or generalisations** about a particular time period or literary movement.

You should also determine who is speaking in the poem. Remember that the **speaker** is not necessarily the poet and the views expressed by the speaker are not necessarily an indication of the poet's own views. A 'persona' might have been adopted in order to tell a particular story or present a certain viewpoint. Just as authors create characters in novels, poets often create characters through which to tell the story of their poems.

STEP 3: CLOSE READING

Conducting a close reading of a poem is a skill that you can learn and apply to any verse. Once you have mastered the technique of recognising particular poetic devices and the effects created by them, you will be able to adapt your approach to suit the text you have been asked to analyse.

First, consider **what caught your attention** (the phrases or words you underlined or circled when first reading the poem, perhaps). Why did these particular features strike you as effective or interesting? Is the poet using a particular

poetic device or Figure or Speech? Why is the poet trying to draw your attention to this particular aspect of the poem?

Once you have dealt with the aspects of the poem that proved most striking to you, return to the beginning of the poem and work carefully through each line, taking note of the more **subtle poetic devices** and **Figures of Speech** employed by the poet. Again, ask yourself each time: *why has the poet done this?*

Remember to consider the **connotations** of the words chosen by the poet, particularly any words that seem unusual or particularly arresting. Every word in a poem is carefully chosen by the poet, and should be considered in context in order to appreciate its impact or effect on your understanding of the poem as a whole. The word 'red', for example, could simply be a colour or it could be representative of anger, passion, hatred or danger.

Tone Vocabulary:

Words that describe tone can include: admiring, ambivalent, amused, anxious, angry, apologetic, bitter, celebratory, condescending, contemplative, critical, cynical, defensive, defiant, desperate, depressed, determined, disdainful, disgusted, disheartened, dramatic, earnest, enthusiastic, excited, fearful, formal, frank, friendly, frustrated, gloomy, happy, honest, hopeful, humorous, indifferent, indignant, informal, intimate, ironic, irreverent, judgmental, lighthearted, lofty, malevolent, malicious, melancholy, mischievous, mocking, negative, nostalgic, objective, optimistic, patient, patronising, pensive, perplexed, persuasive, pessimistic, reflective, regretful, remorseful, reverent, sarcastic, satirical, scathing, self-pitying, sensationalistic, sentimental, serious, sincere, sceptical, solemn, stiff, straightforward, sympathetic, thankful, threatening, tragic, urgent, vindictive, witty.

Punctuation or **typography** may give you further clues about the particular emphasis being given to a word by the poet. A word on its own line, for example, is always significant and the poet is drawing attention to it. Again, always ask: *why has the poet made these particular decisions?*

Be aware of the speaker's **tone**, as this will influence the way in which a poem should be read. Remember that 'tone' and 'attitude' are synonymous when analysing poetry and will, usually, be indicated by the use of particular **diction** (word choice), punctuation or typography. Try to learn and memorise as many words describing tone as possible so that you have a 'tone vocabulary' at your fingertips, allowing your answers to be more specific.

An important thing to remember is that every choice a poet makes is deliberately implemented to emphasise or **enhance the meaning** of the poem. Whenever you recognise a specific feature of a poem, your main concern should be determining ***why*** the poet has chosen to express him- or herself in that way; for example, consider some of the possible effects of the following popular **poetic techniques**:

Alliteration:

- to echo or repeat the sound of something (e.g. 'whispering winds' mimics the sound of a whistling wind)
- to draw attention to particular words
- to create mood or atmosphere

Assonance:

- to create mood
- to link words and ideas by repeating the sounds of these words

Simile:

- to emphasise certain characteristics
- the similarities between the two things compared are really striking

Metaphor:

- clarifies an idea with an unusual comparison
- certain associations or connotations may be evoked that emphasise or repeat the poet's meaning or theme

Glossary of poetic terms and Figures of Speech:

alliteration: the repetition of consonant sounds, especially at the beginning of words (e.g. 'some sweet sounds')

allusion: a reference to a familiar literary or historical person or event, used to make an idea more easily understood.

apostrophe: a statement or question addressed to an inanimate object, a concept or a nonexistent/absent person

assonance: the repetition of similar vowel sounds in a line of poetry (e.g. 'fleet feet sweep by sleeping geese')

ballad: a short poem with a repeated refrain, that tells a simple story and which was originally intended to be sung

blank verse: a line of poetry or prose in unrhymed iambic pentameter. Often used by Shakespeare and Milton.

caesura: an extended or dramatic pause within a line of verse

connotations: the range of associations that a word or phrase suggests, in addition to the straightforward dictionary meaning; for example, the word 'discipline' means order and control, but also has connotations of suffering and pain

convention: a customary or typical feature of a specific type of literary work (e.g. all sonnets contain 14 lines)

couplet: a pair of rhymed lines, often appearing at the end of a poem or stanza

diction: the selection and arrangement of words in a poem

elegy: a lyric poem written to grieve and celebrate the life of a person who has died

epigraph: a short phrase or quotation at the beginning of a literary work that serves to introduce the theme or subject of that work

foot: a unit used to measure the meter of a poem; one foot is made up of two syllables

free verse: poetry without a regular pattern of meter or rhyme

hyperbole: a Figure of Speech in which something is deliberately exaggerated

iamb: a foot containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable

image / imagery: the verbal representation of a sense impression, a feeling, or idea

internal rhyme: a rhyme that occurs within a single line of verse

irony: when the intended meaning of a statement or comparison is the exact opposite of what is said

juxtaposition: the placement of two things (often abstract concepts) near each other to create a contrast

lyric: a poem expressing the subjective feelings or emotions of the poet

metaphor: a comparison between essentially unlike objects or ideas without an explicitly comparative word such as 'like' or 'as'

meter: the repetition of sound patterns that creates a rhythm

metonymy: occurs where the name of one thing is replaced by the name of something closely associated with it; 'Hollywood', for instance, refers to the American film industry

octave: a stanza or section of a poem that is eight lines in length, often used in the sonnet form

ode: an extended lyric poem that is characterised by exalted emotion and a dignified style, usually concerned with a single, serious theme

onomatopoeia: occurs when a word imitates the sound it describes (e.g. 'buzz', 'meow')

oxymoron: a descriptive phrase that combines two contradictory terms (e.g. 'Oh loving hate!' from *Romeo & Juliet*)

paradox: a statement that appears illogical or contradictory at first, but may actually point to an underlying truth

parody: a humorous, mocking imitation of another literary work, usually intended to be playful and respectful of the original work, but can sometimes be sarcastic or critical

pastoral: derived from the word 'pasture' or 'pastor', which means shepherd; a pastoral poem is concerned with a rural or nature-based theme

personification: occurs when inanimate objects or concepts are given the qualities of a living thing

pun: a play on words that have similar sounds, but different meanings

quatrain: a four-line stanza

rhythm (meter): the recurrent pattern of accents or natural stresses in lines of verse

satire: a work that criticises or ridicules human vices, misconduct or follies

sestet: a stanza or section of a poem that is six lines in length, often used in the sonnet form

simile: a comparison between two unlike things using comparative words, such as 'like', 'as' or 'as though'

sonnet: a fourteen-line poem, usually written in iambic pentameter

subject: what the poem is about; the person, event or theme that forms the focus of the poem

symbol: an object that means more than itself, that represents something beyond itself

synecdoche: the use of a part to symbolise its corresponding whole (e.g. the word 'wheels' may be used to refer to a car)

theme: the main idea or message of a literary work

Close reading checklist

The basics:

Make sure that you are clear on the following:

☑ the subject (what the poem is about)
☑ the context (poet's background and/or literary period)
☑ the speaker
☑ the tone/attitude
☑ the theme or message

Style and technique:

Determine whether the poet has employed any of the following techniques:

☑ a particular form or structure (such as a sonnet or ode)
☑ unusual diction (word choice) or punctuation
☑ striking or unusual typography (layout of the poem)
☑ a specific rhyme scheme
☑ a regulated rhythm or meter
☑ repetition or other form of emphasis
☑ metaphors or similes
☑ Figures of Speech

REMEMBER: As well as identifying the particular styles or techniques used by the poet, explain what effect they have and how these features enhance or impact on the meaning of the poem as a whole.

FINALLY…

Understanding poetry has everything to do with being open to new ideas and taking your time when assessing each work. Taking into account pronouncements made by teachers, critics and fellow students is commendable, but every examiner will reward handsomely learners who show that they have read the poem carefully and are not afraid to make unique observations in considered, well-constructed answers that reveal a clear understanding and are supported by evidence from the text.

Three final points to remember:

- No statement will be given credit without evidence from the text
- There are no short cuts: revise your work and take the time to interpret the questions properly
- Poetry is meant to be enjoyed; approach a poem with the right attitude and your insights and understanding are likely to arise more easily than expected

ANSWERING CONTEXTUAL POETRY QUESTIONS

Keep the following useful tips in mind when answering contextual questions on a poem:

1. Markers want to see that you know what the poem is about; however, many questions are based on how the poem *works*. How it has been constructed, for instance, and what effect the poet has managed to achieve by using certain linguistic techniques. Ensure that you read the questions carefully and that you know exactly what is being asked before attempting to answer a question.

   A **contextual** poetry question is one which asks you to interpret and explain a particular aspect of a poem in relation to the meaning or themes of the poem as a whole.

2. Avoid re-telling the 'story' of the poem unless you have been asked to paraphrase or summarise it.
3. Always answer in coherent, well-structured sentences and avoid awkward constructions; for example, begin answers as follows:

   'That the man is …' ☒ '**It is evident that the man is …**' ☑

   'Because the man is …' ☒ '**The man is … therefore …**' ☑

   You are expected to write coherent sentences that address the question. It is also important to note that you are not expected to rewrite the question before you answer it. If the question asks: 'Quote an adjective that means

"outspoken"', for example, do not answer: *An adjective that means outspoken is: 'frank'*. It is acceptable simply to write the answer: 'frank'.

4. Take note of the mark allocation. This is a clear indication of the length and depth of answer that is required. A one-word answer will not suffice for a question worth three marks.

5. Be aware of 'double-barrelled' or multi-layered questions. Many students do not answer the different aspects or sections of a given question; for example:

   'What emotion do the words in line 1 convey, and how does this emotion change by the end of the poem? Provide a reason for your answer.'

   The example above requires the student to do three things in response:
   1. State the emotion
   2. Explain how it changes by the end of the poem
   3. Provide a possible reason for the difference

6. Identifying a Figure of Speech will be awarded a mark, but you are also expected to discuss how it adds to the meaning of the poem. Ask yourself the following questions:
   - What does the Figure of Speech contribute to the poem?
   - Does it clarify a point?
   - Is it unusual and, therefore, striking?
   - Does it emphasise a point or add humour?

7. Be sincere in your response to the poem. Do not state that a poem is brilliant or deeply moving when, clearly, you do not agree with this sentiment. You should engage with the text and avoid adopting the views you have gathered from a rushed reading of a study guide or a website on the internet.

8. Do not begin sentences with personal pronouns: *'I really think that…'* or *'In my opinion, this line means…'* is not acceptable. Always write in the third person and in the present tense: *'Line 1 means…'* or *'It is obvious that the child is upset because…'*

9. Avoid sweeping, generalised statements. You must validate your answers with evidence from the text. It is of little use to write: *'This is a really effective line'* or *'This simile is the best I have ever read'*. You must prove the statements and observations that you have made.

10. Be prepared to offer your honest opinion about the issues the poem addresses. You should be familiar with the range of themes expressed in the poem and your answers should be well thought out, candid, insightful and well-supported with evidence from the poem.

THE 19TH CENTURY

RESTRAINT, REALISM AND RAPID URBANISATION

Like the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, the Victorian era is named after its reigning monarch. Victoria became the queen of Great Britain in 1837 and reigned until her death in 1901. Victoria's reign is often associated with strict social conventions, sexual restraint and prudishness. The legs of tables had to be completely covered, for example, to prevent any indecent association with the same part of the human anatomy. The literature of the period was governed by similarly strict conventions. In contrast to the Romantics, who emphasised the imagination and fantasy, Victorian writers and audiences favoured realism.

It was a period characterised by peace, economic prosperity, positive political reforms and a strong sense of British nationalism. Education was made more widely available (particularly for girls) and rapid progress was made in science, medicine, commerce and manufacturing. Britain also expanded its territorial acquisitions overseas considerably. Despite all these positive developments, however, the Victorian era was also fraught with severe social problems.

The urban population of Britain grew rapidly during this period. The Industrial Revolution triggered massive ways of migration from the countryside to the cities as people sought work in the newly-built factories. At the height of the Industrial Revolution, between 1800 and 1851, an estimated 40 per cent of Britain's population moved from the countryside to urban areas. The infrastructure of the cities could not cope with such rapid expansion and a large portion of the urban population found themselves living in overcrowded, unhygienic slums.

Piccadilly Street in central London at the end of the 19th century (The Premier Photographic View Album of London. (1907), Valentine & Sons, London)

Hunger and malnutrition were rife as increased populations put a strain on urban food supplies. The lack of sanitation facilities in the densely-populated shantytowns — where it was common for up to 10 people to share a single room — meant that disease spread rapidly and children, in particular, were susceptible to deadly diseases like typhoid, cholera and tuberculosis. High levels of unemployment and rampant crime were also common problems, particularly in London.

The abundance of unskilled labourers compounded the situation by keeping wages meagre. Prostitution was rife and children as young as four years old were routinely made to work to help raise money, performing odd jobs, such as sweeping chimneys, and even employed under very dangerous conditions in the factories and mines.

Many children worked during Victorian times to help supplement family incomes, taking in washing or chopping wood to sell as kindling. (Warner H. (1912) *Spitalfields Nippers*)

RISE OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL

The Victorian Era witnessed the rise of the English novel and of the great English novelists. Victorian novels frequently engaged with the social problems of the day. The novels of Charles Dickens, for instance, featured the middle and lower classes and tackled poverty and child labour, with the grimy streets of London as a backdrop. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) also used her novels to comment on societal issues, for example, the position of women in Victorian society.

What's in a name?

It was not considered 'proper' for women to write and publish novels and poetry during the Victorian era. As a result, many female authors concealed their identities and published their works under male pseudonyms. George Eliot, for example, was the penname used by Mary Ann Evans, while the three Brontë sisters wrote under the names of Ellis, Currer and Acton Bell.

A reaction to the practice of child labour, the Victorian era is also credited with 'inventing' childhood as this was when efforts to implement compulsory education for children gained significant momentum. A positive side effect of these efforts was that the children's publishing industry flourished for the first time in history.

GOOD VERSUS EVIL AND THE BACKLASH OF GOTHICISM

The central theme of many Victorian works is good and evil. When comparing the literature of the era with more modern works, this theme often seems quite didactic. In other words, Victorian works of literature and art often acted as **morality tales**, promoting a stern code of 'correct' behaviour by ensuring that bad characters were always suitably punished and good ones rewarded.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian poet-priest, commented that the age in which he lived 'lacked a spiritual centre' because the scientific rationalism and materialism that was flourishing undermined Christian principles.

A reaction against this strict morality found expression in an artistic genre called the **Gothic**. Gothic works are often described as scary ghost stories, but there is more to them than that. While the realistic works of Dickens and Eliot draw a firm boundary between right and wrong, Gothic works often cross or question this boundary. One example of this is Heathcliff, the anti-hero of Emily Brontë's ***Wuthering Heights***, who resorts to all sorts of trickery to torment the love of his life after she spurns him.

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

Although they express it differently, the realistic and the Gothic genres of Victorian literature have one thing in common: **nostalgia**. Both look back to the past with longing, to the Elizabethan age, in particular. Shakespeare's plays were regularly performed and contemporary poets often wrote odes and sonnets in the Elizabethan style during the 19th century. There was also a revival of interest in classical and mediaeval literature, epitomised by Tennyson's famous "Idylls of the King". It is often argued that this longing was the result of the many changes — some very negative — brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation.

Queen Victoria, the monarch after whom the era is named. (Government Art Collection, London)

The Victorian Era is considered '**the age of the English novel**' and produced some of the most famous authors in literary history:

- Charles Dickens (*Oliver Twist*; *Bleak House*)
- Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë (*Wuthering Heights*; *Jane Eyre*)
- William Thackeray (*Vanity Fair*)
- George Eliot (*Middlemarch*)
- Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the d'Ubervilles*)
- Elizabeth Gaskell (*North and South*)
- Oscar Wilde (*The Importance of Being Earnest*)
- H.G. Wells (*The War of the Worlds*)
- Arthur Conan Doyle (*Sherlock Holmes*)
- Lewis Carroll (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*)

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI (1830 – 1894)

Portrait of Christina Rossetti by her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti

Christina Rossetti was one of the most important woman poets of the 19th century, proving hugely influential and talented in the areas of children's poetry, devotional verse and fantasy. Though her popularity waned in the early 20th century with the advent of Modernism, interest in her work was revived in the 1970s, particularly amongst feminist scholars, who considered her an icon of suppressed female genius. Freudian scholars have explored themes of religious and sexual repression in her works, while others have recognised her technical mastery. Rossetti's quiet spirituality and humility concealed a passionate and intense nature, and the success of her poetry lies in her ability to reconcile these seemingly contradictory aspects of her personality through her verse.

Rossetti was born in London in 1830, the youngest child of a highly artistic Italian family. Her father, Gabriele Rossetti, was a successful poet; her brother Dante was a highly influential Pre-Raphaelite painter; and her two other siblings, Maria and William, were both writers. Rossetti was a precocious and talented child, and by the age of 12 was already composing her own poetry, which her grandfather printed for her on his private press. A few years later, she contributed seven poems for publication in the Pre-Raphaelite journal *The Germ*, under the pseudonym of Ellen Alleyne.

> Rossetti's brother Dante was a founding member of the **Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood**, an influential group of mid-19th century *avante garde* artists. Members of the Brotherhood rejected the 'mechanist', academic approach of contemporary artists and favoured instead the Classical poses and compositions of High Renaissance artists, such as Raphael and Michelangelo. Several poets, including Rossetti, were associated with this artistic movement, and their work shares some of the characteristics of the Brotherhood's art.

The Rossetti family faced financial crisis when her father's physical and mental health failed; Rossetti herself experienced depression and illness during this period, and suffered a nervous breakdown at the age of 14. The family's difficulties only served to strengthen her religious faith, however; along with her mother and sister, Rossetti was a deeply devoted Anglican. In 1850, she broke off her engagement to fellow Pre-Raphaelite artist James Collinson when he converted to Roman Catholicism, and later rejected a proposal from Charles Bagot Cayley in 1864 for similar religious reasons.

Rossetti spent most of her life as a companion to her mother, and was devoted to her religion and the writing of poetry. In 1871, she was struck by Grave's disease, an autoimmune disorder that threatened her life and left her physically disfigured. Following her illness, she concentrated on religious and devotional poetry and prose, and continued to write and publish until her death from breast cancer in 1894.

Over the course of her lifetime, Rossetti published an impressive collection of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, firmly establishing herself as one of the most influential poets of her era. While her early work often imitated that of the poets she most admired, she later began to experiment with various verse forms, and received widespread critical praise when her first collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*, was published in 1862. The poem from which this collection takes its title is perhaps her most famous work, and is a commentary on Victorian gender roles, sexual desire and redemption.

> Much of Rossetti's poetry is quite **melancholic** in nature. Common themes she often returned to were the transience of material objects, and the desperate passion of ill-fated love.

"MY SECRET"

I tell my secret? No indeed, not I:
Perhaps some day, who knows?
But not today; it froze, and blows and snows,
And you're too curious: fie!
You want to hear it? well:
Only my secret's mine, and I won't tell.

Or, after all, perhaps there's none:
Suppose there is no secret after all,
But only just my fun.
Today's a nipping day, a biting day;
In which one wants a shawl,
A veil, a cloak, and other wraps:
I cannot ope to every one who taps,
And let the draughts come whistling thro' my hall;
Come bounding and surrounding me,
Come buffeting, astounding me,
Nipping and clipping thro' my wraps and all.
I wear my mask for warmth: who ever shows
His nose to Russian snows
To be pecked at by every wind that blows?
You would not peck? I thank you for good will,
Believe, but leave that truth untested still.

Spring's an expansive time: yet I don't trust
March with its peck of dust,
Nor April with its rainbow-crowned brief showers
Nor even May, whose flowers
One frost may wither thro' the sunless hours.

Perhaps some languid summer day,
When drowsy birds sing less and less,
And golden fruit is ripening to excess,
If there's not too much sun nor too much cloud,
And the warm wind is neither still nor loud,
Perhaps my secret I may say,
Or you may guess.

Glossary

fie (line 4): exclamation used to express disgust or outrage
ope (line 13): open
thro' (line 14): through
buffeting (line 16): battering, striking
languid (line 28): lazy, leisurely

ANALYSIS

"My Secret" (also known by the title "Winter: My Secret") was published in Rossetti's first collection, *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. This collection was made up largely of non-devotional poetry, and stands in contrast to the more religious verses on which Rossetti would concentrate in later publications. What is typical about this poem, however, is Rossetti's innovative experimentation with form, imagery and metaphors, a trait for which she is well known.

"My Secret" has perplexed contemporary and modern critics and readers alike, as there is no apparent secret to which the poem can be linked, and Rossetti's verse resists revealing its subject. While there are numerous interpretations and speculations associated with this poem, there exists no definitive explanation of the secret the speaker is so closely guarding. Modern readers can only guess at what she is hiding!

STRUCTURE AND TONE

The **tone** of "My Secret" is undoubtedly coy and teasing in nature. The speaker playfully addresses an unknown listener, engaging him or her in dialogue as (s)he refuses to reveal a closely-guarded secret, despite the listener's obvious pleading. While the gender of the **speaker** is not entirely clear, most critics believe it to be a woman, citing as evidence the references to a 'shawl' (line 11) and a 'veil' (line 12), which are items of clothing usually associated with women.

The poem is not formally structured, consisting of four stanzas of varying length and irregular rhyming patterns. The **rhyme scheme** is largely made up of rhyming couplets or triplets, which increase the pace at which the poem is read and contributes to a sense of playfulness and passion. The fast pace also indicates the persistence with which the listener is pleading with her to divulge her secret. Rossetti also makes frequent use of internal rhyme throughout the poem. The use of iambic meter serves to emphasise the rhyming sounds within her verse, as the stressed iambic foot always falls on the rhyming syllables.

Internal rhyme occurs when two words within the same line of verse rhyme, rather than a rhyme occurring between words at the ends of two lines of verse.

Iambic meter is a particular type of rhythm in poetry, where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable to create a beat that can be described as: da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM.

IDENTITY, PRIVACY AND FICKLE HUMAN NATURE

The **first stanza** of the poem introduces its premise: the speaker engages in a form of dialogue with her listener and, although we only hear the speaker's side of this dialogue, we can surmise that the listener is begging the speaker, rather persistently, to divulge a particular secret. The speaker, however, refuses to do so: she claims that the day is too cold for her to reveal her secret, and rebuffs the listener playfully but a little impatiently. The poem opens with the line 'I tell my secret? No indeed, not I', indicating that she is responding to an undisclosed listener who has just asked her to reveal her secret. She is playful and coy, suggesting that she may 'some day' (line 2) be willing to tell all, but 'not today' (line 3), rather oddly citing the cold weather as the reason. She accuses the listener of being 'too curious' (line 4) to know what she is hiding, and demonstrates her growing impatience by uttering the oath 'fie!' (line 4) in response to the listener's pestering.

The speaker's tone in the **second stanza** is once again coy and mocking, as she suggests that she may not even have a secret 'after all' (line 7) and that she is only having 'fun' (line 9) by teasing the listener into thinking that there is one. The remainder of the stanza then focuses on the weather once again, describing the cold as 'nipping' and 'biting' (line 10), requiring her to wear layers of clothes for warmth. It is here that the speaker's metaphorical use of the cold becomes clearer: it is likened to the persistent curiosity of the listener, who in a sense assaults the speaker with questions and pleas. This on-going assault is also reflected in her use of the words 'bounding', 'surrounding', 'buffeting' and 'astounding' (lines 15 and 16), and give the reader a sense of the intensity of the verbal attack. Her clothing – her 'wraps' (line 12) – afford a kind of protection, not only from the cold, but from the prying eyes of onlookers who want to know her secret. The suggestion that she wears her 'mask for warmth' (line 18) suggests that it provides comfort to her, as she is able to hide behind it and avoid revealing herself. Her secret, then, forms part of her identity, which she prefers to keep hidden beneath the disguising 'cloak' (line 12) and 'mask' (line 18). She seems to feel that by revealing her secret, she would be revealing too much of herself.

The door and the hallway in this stanza also serve as a **metaphor**: the enquirers knocking at the door represent those who would gain access or insight to her inner self, which she is not willing to reveal. She asserts that she 'cannot ope to every one who taps' (line 13) or, in other words, that she cannot reveal her true self or her secrets to simply anyone. The cold draughts that 'come whistling thro' [her] hall' (line 14), 'surrounding' her (line 15), describe her discomfort with and **vulnerability** to the penetrating curiosity of the enquirers. She insists that her desire to protect her privacy is only natural: after all, she says, 'who ever shows / His nose to Russian snows' (lines 18-19), by which she means that it is foolish and potentially harmful to expose your inner self to the cold scrutiny of others, so that they may 'peck' (line 20) at you. Here, she once again responds to the listener, who, it seems, has assured her that (s)he 'would not peck' (line 21) at her if she revealed her secret. The speaker thanks the listener for his/her 'good will' (line 21) in this regard, but would rather not put this claim to the test.

Continuing with the seasonal imagery, the **third stanza** moves from a description of winter to spring, which the speaker describes as 'an expansive time' (line 23). She is referring here to the new life and the abundance of growth that characterise spring in the natural world – the blossoming flowers and the birth of animals. While spring is usually portrayed in a positive light in poetry, the speaker describes it as a season she cannot trust, as it is too changeable and unsettled. March or early spring, she says, is made unpleasant by the 'peck of dust' (line 24) raised by winds (notice here the speaker's use of the word 'peck', evoking the significance of this word in the previous stanza). April, meanwhile, is characterised by thunderstorms, while the flowers which bloom in May are easily killed by late frost and 'sunless hours' (line 27).

Read in conjunction with the last two lines of the previous stanza, this third stanza could be understood as referring to the changeability and unreliability of human nature. Though spring holds the promise of pleasantness and beauty – just as the listener promises not to 'peck' at or judge her should she reveal her secret – such promises cannot be relied upon. Just as the beauties of spring can be marred by changes in the weather, so too can human nature reveal itself to be ugly and fickle, despite the best of intentions.

In the **fourth stanza**, the speaker reveals that summer is the season in which she is most likely to reveal her secret. Free of the 'wraps' (line 12) she is forced to wear in winter, she is in danger of revealing more of herself than before; however, this does not seem to cause her any anxiety: the imagery used in this stanza is temperate and calm, not suggestive of any sort of excess or urgency. In contrast to the desperate curiosity which characterised the enquirer's pleas in the first and second stanzas (which are associated with winter) and the instability which pervaded the third stanza (described in terms of spring), the summer is described as 'languid' (line 28), relaxed, unhurried and even 'drowsy' (line 29). The day

itself is described as moderate, neither too cloudy nor too sunny (line 31), too still nor too windy (line 32), and even the birds are quiet (line 29). It is against the backdrop of this temperate setting, the speaker suggests, that she will be able to reveal her secret. Read in conjunction with the previous stanzas, this could suggest that it is only when the enquirer's desperation to know her secret is tempered, diminished, that she will feel comfortable revealing it.

WHAT'S THE BIG SECRET?

"My Secret" has proved particularly vexing to readers and critics ever since its publication, as there is no indication in the poem itself to suggest what exactly that 'secret' might be. Even interpretations that assume the speaker is the poet and rely heavily on Rossetti's biographical details for clues are often highly speculative.

One of the most common interpretations of the poem suggests that the speaker's 'secret' is her **undeclared love** for someone, which she is not yet ready to divulge. Another suggestion is that the speaker's 'secret' is an unplanned or even scandalous **pregnancy**: while she is able to hide it in the winter beneath her heavy clothes, her 'shawl' (line 11) and 'wraps' (line 12), by summertime, when the pregnancy is well advanced and the baby arrives, she will no longer be able to conceal the 'secret'. The public 'may guess' (line 34) from her burgeoning belly that she is pregnant.

Yet another interpretation proposes that the 'secret' is a kind of **feminine mystique**, the mysterious allure of a woman who remains out of reach. Alternatively, the 'secret' is the true identity or nature of a woman who remains a mystery before she is married: during the 'winter' or courtship, she is wholly enigmatic, disclosing a little more of herself in the 'spring' of engagement before being fully revealed in the temperate summer of marriage. All of these interpretations engage with the strict, even prudish Victorian values that dictated the conduct of women, courtship and marriage.

Many readers suggest that **there is no secret** at all: that the speaker is simply playing a kind of joke or game with the reader. This is explicitly stated by the speaker in the second stanza when she coyly suggests that perhaps 'there is no secret after all' (line 8) and that she's simply having 'fun' (line 9). The poem, then, is not about a particular secret, but simply about taking pleasure in the manipulation of words and verse. This interpretation is supported by the title in the original manuscript of the poem, 'Nonsense', which emphasises the gentle playfulness of the speaker's tone.

Another critic, Emma Mason, has argued that the speaker of the poem is in fact God himself, declaring that he has secrets he has yet to reveal to his believers. This seems unlikely, as there is no ostensible reference to **God** or religion in the poem; although Rossetti was deeply religious herself, this early volume of poems was non-devotional.

One of the most convincing arguments, however, suggests that the poem is a playful and ironically detached commentary upon its own art form. Rossetti, it is argued, is commenting on the 'secret' **power of art**, and playfully mocking critics who try to tease out the 'secret' meaning of her poetry. The poem can therefore be read as a kind of parody of itself.

Intertextual references: Rossetti makes frequent references in "My Secret" to imagery used in other poems in the same volume *Goblin Market and Other Poems*. The first three lines of this poem also allude to Keats's odes, "To a Nightingale" and "To Autumn".

QUESTIONS

1. Identify the punctuation mark at the end of line 1, and comment on its function in the context of the poem. (2)

2. What effect is created by the repeated use of personal pronouns throughout the poem, and particularly in stanza 1? Provide examples from the poem to illustrate your answer. (3)

3. What evidence is there to suggest that the listener, to whom the speaker addresses the poem, is persistent in his or her enquiries? (2)

4. How does the poet's use of punctuation convey or change the tone of the speaker? Provide examples from the poem to illustrate your answer. (4)

5. Describe how the poem links the idea of secrets to the sensory associations of winter. (4)

6. Provide an example of an internal rhyme from the poem and explain its effect in context. (2)

7. Paraphrase stanza 3, and provide an explanation of its meaning in the context of the poem as a whole. (4)

8. Using your own words, describe the summer day characterised by stanza 4, and suggest why the speaker says these are the only conditions under which she might reveal her secret. (3)

9. Why is it that the enquirer may be able to 'guess' (line 34) her secret only in the summer? (2)

10. Consider the following two images and discuss which one you would choose to illustrate Rossetti's poem, indicating why your choice is more appropriate than the alternative offered. Provide a thorough and sound justification for your choice by referring to the poem for evidence. (9)

IMAGE A

Winter by Alphonse Mucha (1896) (Style: Art Nouveau)

OR

IMAGE B

The Roseleaf by Dante Rossetti (1870) (Style: Pre-Raphaelite)

[35]

THE 20TH CENTURY

WARS, REVOLUTIONS AND THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN AGE

In the 20th century, art, literature, music, architecture, philosophy and almost every other branch of the Arts was dominated by a style of expression and thought that came to be known as Modernism. Many critics consider the Modernist Movement to be the culmination of various different artistic movements of previous centuries: it began with the questioning of religion and man's place in the universe during the Renaissance, and was further developed by the rationality of the Enlightenment period, the excesses of Romanticism and the realism of the Victorian era. Modernism can therefore be considered as the pinnacle of artistic expression in western history.

Modernist artists recognised that the start of the 20th century marked the beginning of a 'modern age'. They were excited by this idea and wanted to reflect the new age in which they were living by challenging artistic rules and conventions and then reinventing them. On the literary front, the term Modernism brings together a number of sub-movements from across the globe that all had one thing in common: the urge of the writers to express themselves and their world in new and innovative ways.

> The use of the term 'modern' can be confusing: today, we use it to describe anything that was created in the last couple of decades; however, when we talk of **Modernism**, we are describing a particular artistic and philosophical movement.

Many Modernist writers in Europe, such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and William Butler Yeats, were heavily influenced by the political turmoil created by war, revolutions and imperialism in the years leading up to the early 1920s. The key event of this time period was, of course, **World War I**. This 'war to end all wars' was the culmination of almost 200 years of instability that had begun with the French Revolution and led to a shift in the way not only artists, but all citizens, understood the world. The structural frameworks of religion and politics, which had provided an illusion of stability, were now shattered, and artists and writers of the Western world were exploring what lay behind these illusions.

> Scholars continue to debate the definition of **Modernism**, but broadly agree that it is a style or movement in art, literature, philosophy and architecture that rejects classical or traditional forms and experiments with new methods of artistic expression.

The Son of Man *by Rene Magritte (1964) is a famous example of 20th century Surrealism, a 20th century artistic movement that was preoccupied with attempting to express the inner workings of the subconscious mind.* (Private Collection)

Modernism took on a slightly different character on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In Britain, the literary movement was best exemplified by novelists and poets who reflected on the political and social changes of the 'modern age'. In America, Modernism took a slightly different tack: the idea of a new, modern society had even greater meaning for American society, which was still relatively young, having gained independence a mere 200 years before. It has since come to be considered as the first authentic artistic movement to develop on that continent.

Modernism reached its peak around the outbreak of World War I, when profound trauma and a collective sense of disillusionment called into question the values on which an entire civilisation had been established. The 'hey days' of experimental Modernist expression were between 1910 and 1930; some scholars date the end of Modernism with World War II in 1945, while others argue that Modernist influences continued well into the 1980s.

A REACTION TO THE HORRORS OF WARFARE?

Pablo Picasso's Dora Maar Au Chat (1941). *Picasso has been hailed by critics for re-inventing the art of painting, and was one of the most influential artists of the Modernist era.* (Private Collection)

The period following Modernism is generally referred to as the 'Postmodern Era'. Defining Postmodernism, however, has proved to be a contentious task: some scholars use it simply to refer to the chronological time period that followed on from Modernism, while others describe Postmodernism as a 'condition' or mode of thinking that is preoccupied with the manner in which people interpret or understand their personal reality. Many academics believe that the term 'Postmodernism' encompasses so many broad and often conflicting definitions that it has essentially become meaningless.

Both Modernist and Postmodernist literature explore the issue of subjectivism, which emphasises the importance of individual experience and the inner consciousness over external reality. Despite this similarity, however, late Modernist and Postmodernist literature rejects many of the concerns of Modernism. Most notably, later writings question the idea of universality – the assumption of Modernist writers that one person's personal perspective can be applied to everyone else, too. Postmodern writers also believe that objective observation, which is free of all personal biases and prejudices, is impossible to achieve. This is because all people will naturally allow their own history, understandings and values to influence their assessment of the world around them.

ADRIENNE RICH (1929 – 2012)

'We may feel bitterly how little our poems can do in the face of seemingly out of control technological power and seemingly limitless corporate greed, yet it has always been true that poetry can break isolation, show us to ourselves when we are outlawed or made invisible, remind us of beauty where no beauty seems possible, remind us of kinship where all is represented as separation.' (*Defy the Space That Separates* (1996) The Nation)

Adrienne Rich was one of the most influential poets of the latter half of the 20th century, and is known for highlighting the issues surrounding women's oppression and the fight for equal gender rights. Referred to as a 'public intellectual', Rich's career as a poet, essayist and feminist activist spanned a period of 70 years, and her work often reflects the political upheavals experienced by American society from the years following World War II through to the 21st century.

Rich was born in Baltimore in 1929 and, from an early age, her parents pushed her to excel academically. Her love of literature was fostered by her father, who encouraged her to start writing poetry as a child. After graduating from high school, she attended Radcliffe College, the sister institute of Harvard (which was, at the time, an all-male university). Rich thrived in an academic environment and, in 1951, her final year at college, she published her first collection of poetry, *A Change of World*. The collection was a critical success, and was selected by famed poet W. H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award.

In 1953, Rich married a Harvard University professor whom she had met as an undergraduate student, and the couple had three sons together over the six years that followed. Her second volume, *The Diamond Cutters*, was published in 1955, the same year as the birth of her first child. Rich, however, found it difficult to acquiesce to the traditional expectations of herself as a wife and mother; many of her poems challenged these societal expectations and stereotypes, and called for a more equal balance of power between men and women.

The 1960s proved to be a turbulent period for her personally, but she continued to achieve success as a writer. She became increasingly involved in activism, campaigning for equal rights for women and protesting against the Vietnam War. As well as publishing poetry, Rich lectured at various universities. By 1970, the growing pressures of marriage and motherhood lead to her estrangement from her husband. He committed suicide later that year.

Rich's publication in 1976 of an essay collection entitled *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* explored the difficulties of modern womanhood. That same year, she came out as a lesbian, and established a relationship with novelist Michelle Cliff that was to last the rest of her life. Her poetry and essays retained their overtly politicised, feminist agenda, which she dealt with in a sophisticated, poetic and insightful manner.

Rich caused a media stir in 1997 when she refused to accept the **National Medal of Arts** for political reasons. In a letter to the *New York Times*, she wrote: 'I could not accept such an award from President Clinton or this White House, because the very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of this administration.'

A prolific and successful career that spanned decades saw the publication of some 25 volumes of poetry, numerous collections of essays and countless articles and other publications. Rich firmly established herself as the voice of the oppressed women of her generation, making public the problems and challenges that had until then remained repressed. She passed away in 2012 at the age of 82, following complications from rheumatoid arthritis.

In the early 2000s, Rich was prominently involved in **protests against the war** in Iraq; several decades previously, she was an outspoken protestor against the Vietnam War.

"AUNT JENNIFER'S TIGERS"

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's finger fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid.

Glossary
prance (line 1): dance, frolic or strut
screen (line 1): a frame used during needlework or embroidery
topaz (line 2): a dark yellow colour
denizens (line 2): inhabitants of a particular place
chivalric (line 4): relating to knightly chivalry, connoting loyalty, courtesy, and bravery
panel (line 11): piece of tapestry

ANALYSIS

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" was published in Rich's very first collection of poetry, *A Change of World*, in 1951, when she was just 22 years old. The collection was awarded the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poets Award and established Rich's reputation as a talented, astute young poet. Interpreted on its most literal level, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" is a simple poem about the speaker's aunt, who creates a beautiful piece of needlework tapestry depicting tigers; however, Rich is, in fact, dealing with what would become the most prevalent theme in her work: the disempowerment of women and the burdens of marriage and traditional gender roles.

Though this poem is one of Rich's earliest works, written before her own difficult marriage, she already demonstrates a sensitive and nuanced understanding of the sacrifices women make to fulfil the roles expected of them. 'Aunt Jennifer' of the title is a symbolic figure, representing all women who have been suppressed, undermined or held back because of their gender. This was a particularly pertinent and controversial issue during the 1950s, when the struggle for equal rights and women's equality was reaching its peak.

STRUCTURE

"Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" comprises three stanzas or quatrains, each of which is made up of two pairs of **rhyming couplets**. The rhyme scheme can thus be described as: AABB CCDD EEFF. This rhyme scheme lends a song-like quality to the verse which may make it seem deceptively simple, but which, in fact, belies the importance and complexity of its theme.

A **rhyming couplet** is made up of two lines which rhyme with each other.

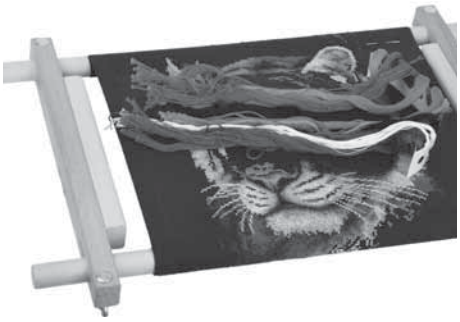
HOW MARRIAGE CAGES WOMEN?

The **first stanza** of the poem opens with a vivid description of the tiger tapestry that Aunt Jennifer is embroidering: her 'tigers prance across a screen' (line 1), suggesting that they are depicted in movement, dancing or strutting across the embroidery frame as she stitches them. They are vividly coloured, 'Bright topaz' (line 2) or yellow tigers on a 'green' (line 2) background. Although the tigers are only crafted images on a piece of fabric, the speaker's description of them as lively, vividly coloured creatures makes them seem alive, vital, and energetic.

The speaker continues to describe the tigers in lines 3-4 by **personifying** them, suggesting that they are brave and chivalric. (Remember, these are not real tigers – the speaker is describing what is suggested of their character by the manner in which Aunt Jennifer has depicted them.) These tigers are self-assured, confident, majestic animals that move in 'sleek chivalric certainty' (line 4). In this description, the speaker is attributing the qualities of traditional chivalry (usually associated with mediaeval knights) to the tigers, suggesting that they are honourable, brave creatures. The speaker points out that 'They do not fear the men beneath the tree' (line 3), further emphasising their bravery; this line, however, takes on a greater significance later on in the poem, as the symbolism of the tigers begins to take shape more clearly.

Personification occurs when a non-human creature, inanimate object or abstract idea is described as having human qualities.

In the **second stanza**, the speaker's focus shifts from the tigers themselves to describing the process by which Aunt Jennifer is crafting them. Her finger is 'fluttering through her wool' (line 5) as she deftly pulls the embroidery needle in and out of the fabric, forming the stitches that will make up her tigers. The speaker, however, notes that she finds 'the ivory needle hard to pull' (line 6) through the fabric. Her difficulty here suggests either that the fabric itself is resistant to her stitches, or that Aunt Jennifer herself is finding some difficulty in moving her 'fluttering' (line 5) hand to form the stitches.



An example of the equipment used to create embroidery, including the wooden frame and thread.

Lines 7 and 8 provide the reader with a clue as to why Aunt Jennifer finds it difficult to form her stitches: the speaker observes that 'The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band / Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand'. Understood literally, these lines mean that the physical weight of the wedding band on her finger is so great that she finds it difficult to move her hand. The speaker, however, intends these lines to be understood **metaphorically**: the wedding band is, in fact, a symbol for Aunt Jennifer's marriage. These two lines serve to guide the reader's understanding of the theme of the poem as a whole. The 'massive weight' (line 7) of her wedding band represents the burdens of her marriage, which weigh 'heavily' (line 8) on her and hold her back.

It is interesting to note that the ring is described as 'Uncle's wedding band' (line 7), rather than 'Aunt Jennifer's wedding band', suggesting that their marriage is dictated on her husband's terms. Aunt Jennifer is thus depicted as the property of her husband, subject to his control and wishes. The symbolically heavy weight of her wedding band suggests that Aunt Jennifer is unhappy in her marriage, and is also suggestive of how inhibited women, in general, are by the roles which are expected of them.

Aunt Jennifer's unhappiness is once again indicated in the **third stanza**. The speaker asserts that 'When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie / Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by' (lines 9-10). There is a distinct shift in **tone**, as the speaker rather morbidly predicts that Aunt Jennifer's suffering will continue even after her death. The speaker conveys Aunt Jennifer's terror in life

The speaker makes use of **metonymy** in line 7, by referring to 'Uncle's wedding band' when she is, in fact, discussing the couple's marriage. Metonymy is a Figure of Speech where a thing or concept is referred to using the name of something closely associated with it.

by suggesting that she will still be 'terrified' (line 9) in death, marked or scarred by the 'ordeals' (line 10) she has had to endure. The speaker also says that she was 'mastered by' (line 10) her ordeals, indicating how heavily they influenced her life but also once again suggesting that her traumas were caused by her marriage or 'master' – her husband. Once again, the poet is also making a more general comment about the institution of marriage by suggesting that women are inhibited, held back or even harmed by the roles they are expected to adopt.

A shift in tone once again occurs in the **final two lines** of the poem: despite Aunt Jennifer's suffering in both life and death, her tigers will live on, 'prancing, proud and unafraid' (line 12). The reader's understanding of the tigers as a symbol in the poem is key to interpreting these final two lines.

In China, the tiger is considered 'the king of the beasts' (not the lion) and represents willpower, personal strength and courage. Interestingly, the tiger also represents the masculine principle in nature in Chinese astrology. Other traditions suggest that the tiger symbolises raw feelings and desires — our unpredictable, but immensely powerful primal instincts.

SYMBOLISM

Throughout the poem, a stark contrast is created between the character of Aunt Jennifer and the tigers she stitches on her piece of embroidery. The tigers, as depicted in the first stanza, are proud, unafraid creatures that are self-assured, energetic and lively. By contrast, Aunt Jennifer is a nervous, unhappy, brow-beaten woman, who has been forced into submission by the 'master' in her marriage, her husband. Even when she has died, Aunt Jennifer continues to be 'terrified' (line 9), while her tigers will be 'proud and unafraid' (line 12). Her 'terrified' death also serves as a reminder that she never truly lived: her life was restricted and inhibited by the expectations demanded of her in the conventional role of a wife.

The speaker may simply be creating this contrast between the tigers and Aunt Jennifer to emphasise further how submissive, afraid and unhappy Aunt Jennifer is, even compared with the images that she has stitched out of wool. It would seem, however, that the tigers take on a greater symbolic significance: they could in fact represent Aunt Jennifer's inner life or character that is being suppressed by the oppressive institute of marriage, and she is expressing that inner life through her art of needlecraft. Aunt Jennifer herself may, on the inside, be a proud, self-assured tigress who 'do[es] not fear […] men' (line 3), but her fierce spirit has been down-trodden and squashed beneath the expectations that her husband and society have of her as a woman and wife.

It is interesting that Aunt Jennifer chooses to express her frustrated, quashed spirit through the art form of needlework. This may be viewed as somewhat ironic, as needlework is traditionally seen as a feminine craft; however, the speaker may be suggesting that even within the rigid confines of gender expectations, women find the means to express themselves. In other words, as a woman Aunt Jennifer might be expected to practise needlework, but she uses this craft to break free (in some small way) of those expectations and express herself. The speaker is also commenting on the immortality of art in the final stanza: even after Aunt Jennifer's death, her embroidered tigers – her expression of who she truly is – will live on.

Aunt Jennifer functions as a symbol in the poem for all women who feel oppressed by society's expectations of them. Rich is not limiting herself to the story of an individual woman here: this is clearly indicated by the third stanza, where the speaker speculates what will happen when Aunt Jennifer dies, suggesting that Aunt Jennifer's condition is a common one. Rich uses Aunt Jennifer to symbolise the position of all women who are trapped in oppressive marriages or who suffer under a **patriarchal society**, where they are not afforded equal rights and respect.

Patriarchy refers to a male-dominated society in which women are deemed as being naturally inferior to men, and where men hold ultimate authority and control.

QUESTIONS

1. What effect is created by the poet's choice in referring to her subject as 'Aunt Jennifer', rather than 'my Aunt Jennifer' or even simply 'Jennifer'? (3)

2. Identify the Figure of Speech present in line 1, and comment on its effect in relation to the context of the poem as a whole. (3)

3. To what does the 'world of green' (line 2) refer? (1)

4. Identify a synonym from the poem for the word 'smooth'. (1)

5. Suggest some connotations we associate with the word 'flutter' (line 5), and discuss how these connotations influence the reader's understanding of Aunt Jennifer's character. (3)

6. In your own words, explain why Aunt Jennifer 'Find[s] even the ivory needle hard to pull' (line 6). (3)

7. Identify the punctuation mark in line 7 and describe its function in context. (2)

8. Comment on the significance of the speaker's choice of diction in describing Aunt Jennifer's hands as 'Still ringed' by her 'ordeals' (line 10), and identify another closely associated image elsewhere in the poem. (3)

9. Discuss some of the connotations usually associated with tigers, and comment on how effectively you think they function as a symbol in the poem. (3)

10. One critic has described "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" as 'a two-sided poem, one side being negative, one at least tentatively positive'. Explain how the critic came to this conclusion, by discussing both the positive and negative themes and issues explored by the poet. (4)

11. Consider the following poem, also by Adrienne Rich, entitled "Translations". Rich published this poem more than 20 years after "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers", but both poems deal with very similar themes. Compare and discuss in detail the ways in which Rich explores the cultural constraints of gender roles in both poems. (9)

"TRANSLATIONS"

You show me the poems of some woman
my age, or younger
translated from your language

Certain words occur: enemy, oven, sorrow
enough to let me know
she's a woman of my time

obsessed

with Love, our subject:
we've trained it like ivy to our walls
baked it like bread in our ovens
worn it like lead on our ankles
watched it through binoculars as if
it were a helicopter
bringing food to our famine
or the satellite
of a hostile power

I begin to see that woman
doing things: stirring rice
ironing a skirt
typing a manuscript till dawn

trying to make a call
from a phonebooth

The phone rings unanswered
in a man's bedroom
she hears him telling someone else
Never mind. She'll get tired.
hears him telling her story to her sister

who becomes her enemy
and will in her own way
light her own way to sorrow

ignorant of the fact this way of grief
is shared, unnecessary
and political

[35]

UNSEEN POETRY

GETTING TO GRIPS WITH UNFAMILIAR POETRY: SOME GUIDELINES

WHY IS THERE AN UNSEEN POETRY QUESTION IN THE EXAMINATION?

The 'unseen' poetry component in an examination assesses whether you can produce a reasonably coherent explanation of a poem without the help of your teacher or other source of information. Its aim is to test your analytical and interpretive skills when you are faced with a text you have never seen before. Your task is to decode the words, explain the subtext, examine the images and get to the underlying meaning as far as possible. This ability – to make sense of, interpret and elucidate unfamiliar, complex and sometimes cryptic language – is a skill you will use in various different contexts and situations throughout your life.

LOOK FOR CLUES

This guide to tackling unseen poetry should be used in conjunction with the notes on pages 9-14, the guides to 'Reading and understanding poetry' and to 'Answering contextual poetry questions'.

- The title of the poem will often point you to the purpose the poet had in mind when writing it. Titles may be satirical or ironic, so be alert to this possibility; for example, Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum est" ("It is sweet and fitting to die for one's fatherland") has an ironic title, as the poem actually deals with the horrors young soldiers faced in the trenches in the First World War.
- If the unseen poem has a companion piece –perhaps one of the set poems, a popular song, a visual – then use it for clues to the theme(s) of the unseen poem.
- Be aware of poetic genres. If the word 'ode' appears in the title, then the poem will praise someone or something; if the title contains the word 'ballad', then there will be a story element to consider.

TACKLING THE TEXT

- Read the poem through slowly and thoroughly, remembering that the examiner will have set something well within your range, understanding or culture, and that it will probably deal with one of the common themes found in poetry, such as love, grief or anger.
- Read the footnotes (if there are any), as they will clear up any obscure words or phrases.
- Read the poem through again. Underline curious or difficult words, phrases and Figures of Speech. Jot down thoughts as they come to you.
- Read the poem a third time. Each time you read it you will notice more details and perhaps have new insights.
- Write a short paraphrase of the poem. Try to decide on its central idea or theme and the poet's reason for writing it.

AIDS TO FINDING MEANING

- As you read, be alert to the way the mechanics of the poem work: punctuation and line breaks indicate thought groupings.
- If unusual phrasing or syntax is proving difficult for you to decipher, find the subject of a sentence and its verb to help clarify meaning.
- Read through the set questions. These are often illuminating: a point you may not have understood is sometimes made clearer by the questions and may help you see the poem in a different light.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Remember that a poet does not use words randomly. He or she chooses them for their primary and possibly for their secondary meanings and connotations, for their sounds and for the pictures they paint. It is your task to be sensitive to the possibilities of the text and to create a coherent narrative from it.
- Also remember to explain images and Figures of Speech in clear and simple language so that the examiner knows that you have understood their full range of possibilities.

WRITING YOUR RESPONSE

- When answering the questions, first do rough work. Re-read the sections of the poem on which the question indicates you should focus, asking yourself whether your interpretation works when the poem is considered as a whole. If it does, then you are ready to write your final answers.
- Individual interpretation is acceptable provided you can prove your point by quoting from the text, and that you can make all the parts work to form a consistent and meaningful whole.

INTERTEXTUAL QUESTIONS

- It is likely that you will be asked an intertextual question in the examination – that is, you will be asked to compare the poem to another text, which might be a different poem, an image or visual, even a cartoon. The companion text will not have been randomly chosen. There will be some relationship or similarities between the two texts, which you will be asked to explore.
- Often, the two texts will feature two different or even opposing views on a similar subject or theme. Be aware of the tone of each text, or of any particular viewpoints or opinions that are being expressed.
- When answering intertextual questions, make sure that you draw on both texts for evidence to support your answer.

COMMON MISTAKES

- **Misinterpretation**: You may misinterpret a poem because you have not considered all the evidence with which the words and images are presenting you carefully enough. The poet provides pointers that will position you to share his or her perspective and meaning – be sure that you don't ignore these pointers.
- **Arbitrary answers**: The poet had a clear idea of where he or she was going. The poem does not present the reader with a set of disconnected or aimless concepts. Your answers must indicate that you have understood the central ideas of the poem. If they do not fit the context, rethink them or discard them, no matter how clever they seem in isolation.
- **Careless oversights**: Pay attention to key Figures of Speech and obvious mechanical features like the use of monosyllables, run-on lines, the isolation of a word on a line, and the use of rhyme or the lack of it. Everything that you learned when you analysed seen poetry will apply here, too.
- **Try to answer all of the questions**: A good percentage of them will be within your capabilities, while a few will be 'discriminators' that will require a little more thought. The questions that seem tougher, however, will present you with an opportunity to be creative. So write down that answer – the examiner may like your ideas and give you credit for them.
- **Don't panic**: Approach the poem positively, with an 'I can do this' attitude. Think laterally and creatively and let the poem speak to you – resist trying to force a particular interpretation or meaning on to it.

"DECOMPOSITION"

ZULFIKAR GHOSE (1935 –)

I have a picture I took in Bombay
of a beggar asleep on the pavement:
grey-haired, wearing shorts and a dirty shirt,
his shadow thrown aside like a blanket.

His arms and legs could be cracks in the stone,
routes for the ants' journeys, the flies' descents,
Brain-washed by the sun into exhaustion,
he lies veined into stone, a fossil man.
Behind him there is a crowd passingly
bemused by a pavement trickster and quite
indifferent to this very common sight
of an old man asleep on the pavement.

I thought it then a good composition
and glibly called it *The Man in the Street*,
remarking how typical it was of
India that the man in the street lived there.

His head in the posture of one weeping
into a pillow chides me now for my
presumption at attempting to compose
art of his hunger and solitude.

QUESTIONS:

1. Explain the double meaning of the title in the context of the poem as a whole. (2)

2. Identify the Figure of Speech in line 4, and comment on the effect created. (2)

3. In your own words, describe the man's appearance as it is depicted in the second stanza. (3)

4. What is suggested by the description of the passers-by as 'bemused' (line 10)? (2)

5. Provide a synonym for the word 'glibly' (line 14). (1)

6. Explain what, in the final stanza, the speaker realises about the man that he did not notice when he took the photograph. (2)

7. Consider the accompanying image, a famous photograph by Kevin Carter depicting a starving toddler being watched by a vulture in Sudan. Carter was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his photograph, but was also viciously criticised for taking it and failing to help the child. By referring to "Decomposition", suggest how Ghose may have responded to Carter's photograph. (3)

© Carter, K

[TOTAL: 15]

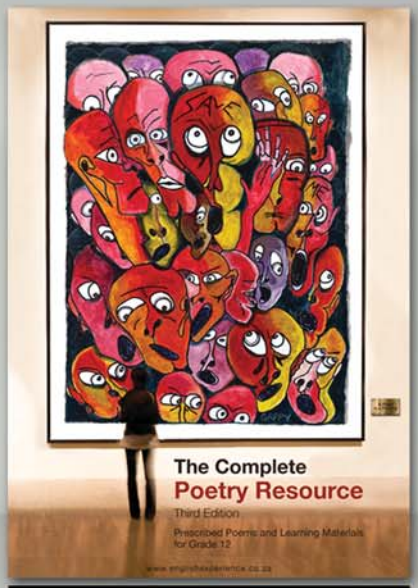
WE'VE GOT YOU COVERED!

Essential Guide to the IEB English Exam (Second Edition)

Hamlet: Complete Guide and Resource

The Beneficiaries: Complete Guide and Resource

The Complete Poetry Resource for Grades 10 and 11



The Complete IEB Poetry Resource (Third Edition)

www.englishexperience.co.za
info@englishexperience.co.za
Tel: +27 (0)11 786 6702
Fax: +27 (0)86 612 4437

the English experience

Publishers of innovative educational material

A NEW WAY TO EXPERIENCE ENGLISH

- COMPLETE AND UP-TO-DATE PRODUCTS THAT COVER ALL ASPECTS OF THE SYLLABUS AND PORTFOLIO
- COMPREHENSIVE TOOLS FOCUSED ON ACHIEVING EXAMINATION READINESS AND SUCCESS
- PRODUCTS DESIGNED TO SPARK DEBATE, ENCOURAGE GROWTH, OFFER PERSONAL ENRICHMENT AND CHALLENGE BOTH EDUCATOR AND LEARNER ALIKE
- TASKS DESIGNED TO ENCOURAGE HIGHER ORDER THINKING

the English experience

FIND OUT MORE:

TEL: +27 (0)11 786 6702

FAX: +27 (0)86 612 4437

E-MAIL: INFO@ENGLISHEXPERIENCE.CO.ZA

WWW.ENGLISHEXPERIENCE.CO.ZA

THE ENGLISH EXPERIENCE - FREEING EDUCATORS TO TEACH!