

**WORKSHOP: Critical and Analytical Writing on Poetry**  
**Monday June 5th 2017**  
**E304 Kowloon Tong Education Services Centre**

Facilitators: Prof Mike Ingham; Dr Andrew Barker

**PART 1:**

Poetry in HKDSE exam syllabus overview - set poems and unseen poems - transferring analytical skills from one to the other. Unseen poem task. (20 mins)

From reception (understanding, interpreting, appreciating) to production: how to develop critical written responses to poems in relation to language, tone, style, imagery, sound effects and other poetic techniques (30 mins)

Hands' on Activity: Responding to questions on Seamus Heaney's 'Digging' - working in groups of 3-4 produce short answers to set questions on form and content (30 mins)

**SHORT BREAK (10 mins)**

**PART 2:**

Introduction to Mycroft online lectures - play "Dulce et Decorum Est" lecture on YouTube - feedback and discussion (40 mins)

Hands-on Activity: Responding to questions on 'Dulce et Decorum Est' - working in groups of 3-4 produce short answers to set questions on form and content (30 mins)

Summing up (5-10 mins); Q & A (5-10 mins)

TASK: Read the poem below. Consider the following questions and discuss in small groups or pairs. Make brief notes. Then participate in general feedback.

‘Qingdao: December’ by Vikram Seth

Here by the sea this quiet night  
I see the moon through misted light.  
The water laps the rocks below.  
I hear it lap and swash and go.  
The pine-trees, dense and earthward-bent,  
Suffuse the air with resin-scent.  
A landward breeze combs through my hair  
And cools the earth with salted air.

Here all attempt in life appears  
Irrelevant. The erosive years  
That build the moon and the rock and tree  
Speak of a sweet futility  
And say that we who are from birth  
Caressed by unimpulsive earth  
Should yield our fever to the trees,  
The seaward light and the resined breeze.

Here by the sea this quiet night  
Where my still spirit could take flight  
And nullify the heart's distress  
Into the peace of wordlessness,  
I see the light, I breathe the scent,  
I touch the insight, but a bent  
Of heart exacts its old designs  
And draws my hands to write these lines.



1. How do the poem's techniques and poetic effects enhance its meaning and mood?

The poem represents a private meditation, consisting of three octets (8 lines) of iambic tetrameter (stress on even syllables; odd syllables generally unaccented). Its regular pattern of rhyming couplets (adjacent lines) can be said to imitate the sound of the waves on the shore, e.g. "The water laps the rocks below/ I hear it lap and swash and go" (stanza 1). The onomatopoeic word 'swash' is particularly evocative of the sound of the waves. The poem celebrates the sounds, scents and sights of the northern sea-coast city of Tsingtao (Qingdao). Enjambement or run-on is used in all three stanzas emphasizing the infinite continuity of life and nature, even though individual human attempts to affect its course are described as "irrelevant" in the second stanza. The beauty of the scenery and the feeling of liberation, lightness of being and disconnectedness from daily life in the foreign place – the poet is only a traveller passing through – prompts this meditation on the mysteries of life, time, the universe and the relative smallness and insignificance of human existence. Nonetheless the speaker/poet affirms his own existence by the act of writing the poem, and his assertion of existence in the moment is underlined by his use of active voice and first-person 'I' in the final stanza. Repetition ('Here by the sea' in stanzas one and three and parallelism/syntactic repetition - 'I see the light, I breathe the scent/ I touch the insight..' reinforce this change of mood after the more impersonal diction of 'irrelevant', 'futility' and 'yield'.

2. Why do you think the poet uses the metaphor 'the erosive years' in the second line of the second stanza?

The metaphor 'erosive' associates the literal meaning of erosion caused by the waves lapping against the seashore and the rocks with the figurative meaning of human lives being eroded by the passage of time. It suggests a contemplation on human mortality.

3. How and why are the senses of smell, sight, touch and hearing evoked in the poem?

References to the pine-tree resin scent and the 'salted air' in the 1st stanza and again in the 3rd stanza evoke the sense of smell while visual references to the sea and the rocks below, the pine trees and especially the moon and the light it casts combine to create a set of striking scenic images, sharpened by references to the night's tranquility. The reason for evoking the sensations of sight, sound, smell and touch so powerfully is that the experience puts the speaker in touch with the means by which he is connected to the world and which he can transform synaesthetically into art.

4. Why is the earth described as "unimpulsive" in line 6 of the second stanza?

The word unimpulsive is a personification used to contrast the impulses and emotions of the speaker with the impersonal and seemingly unmoving earth. The emphasis on rock in the first two stanzas suggests the hard, unyielding and seemingly permanent matter of earth, as opposed to the impermanent, softer and more yielding material of human life. This use of personification (anthropomorphism) by Vikram Seth attributing human qualities to non-human or animal matter is paradoxical in this context: the speaker feels himself to be in a solitary place with no interaction with other living beings.

5. What is the relationship between external nature and the speaker's thought and emotion?

The first stanza of the poem evokes a sensual experience of with references to the landscape and nature, specifically sea and waves, moon, the scent of pine-trees, the breeze and so on, which is connected physically with the speaker by the 'landward breeze' coming off the sea and metaphorically 'combing' his hair. The second stanza represents an inward turn in the poem and relates the vastness of nature and time with the littleness of human existence with the sense that the former is dwarfed by the latter. In the final stanza human the value of personal consciousness and human experience is reasserted inspired by the view of the sea in the first line, which inspires his spirit to 'take flight' and 'write these lines'. The more passive role of observer is thus transformed into the active one of creator.

6. What changes in the feelings and perceptions of the speaker experiences can be seen from stanzas 1-3?

In the first stanza the speaker has a sense of his own being and his place in the world; however in the second his feeling changes as he becomes aware of his own insignificance in the greater context of impersonal nature. In the course of the final stanza he returns to himself and recovers his individual identity through the impulse ("bent of heart") to write a poem to record the emotional journey of his meditation.

# Digging

by Seamus Heaney (from *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966)

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound  
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:  
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds  
Bends low, comes up twenty years away  
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills  
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft  
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.  
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep  
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,  
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.  
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day  
Than any other man on Toner's bog.  
Once I carried him milk in a bottle  
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up  
To drink it, then fell to right away  
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods  
Over his shoulder, going down and down  
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap  
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge  
Through living roots awaken in my head.  
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb  
The squat pen rests.  
I'll dig with it.

## Dulce et Decorum Est

by Wilfred Owen (from *Poems*, 1921)

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—  
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

Mycroft Online Lectures on the Poem:

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

Mycroft Online Lecture Series

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jv-LFxTFGkw>