

Resource Materials on Learning and Teaching of Poetry

The resource materials focus on developing senior secondary students' poetry analysis skills and provide guidelines on how to approach a poem and develop critical responses to it. It is intended for use by Literature in English teachers either as a learning task in the class or as supplementary materials to promote self-directed learning and extend students' learning beyond the classroom.

The materials consist of two sets, each with the Student's Copy and Teacher's Notes. The Student's Copy includes handouts and worksheets for students, while the Teacher's Notes provides teaching steps and ideas, as well as the suggested answers and resources for teachers' reference.

Set 1 focusses on ways to approach a poem and the fundamentals of poetry analysis. It includes the following parts:

- A. Ten Steps to Analyse a Poem**
- B. Key Aspects and Guiding Questions for Poetry Analysis**
- C. Writing an Analytical Paragraph**
- D. Writing Practice**

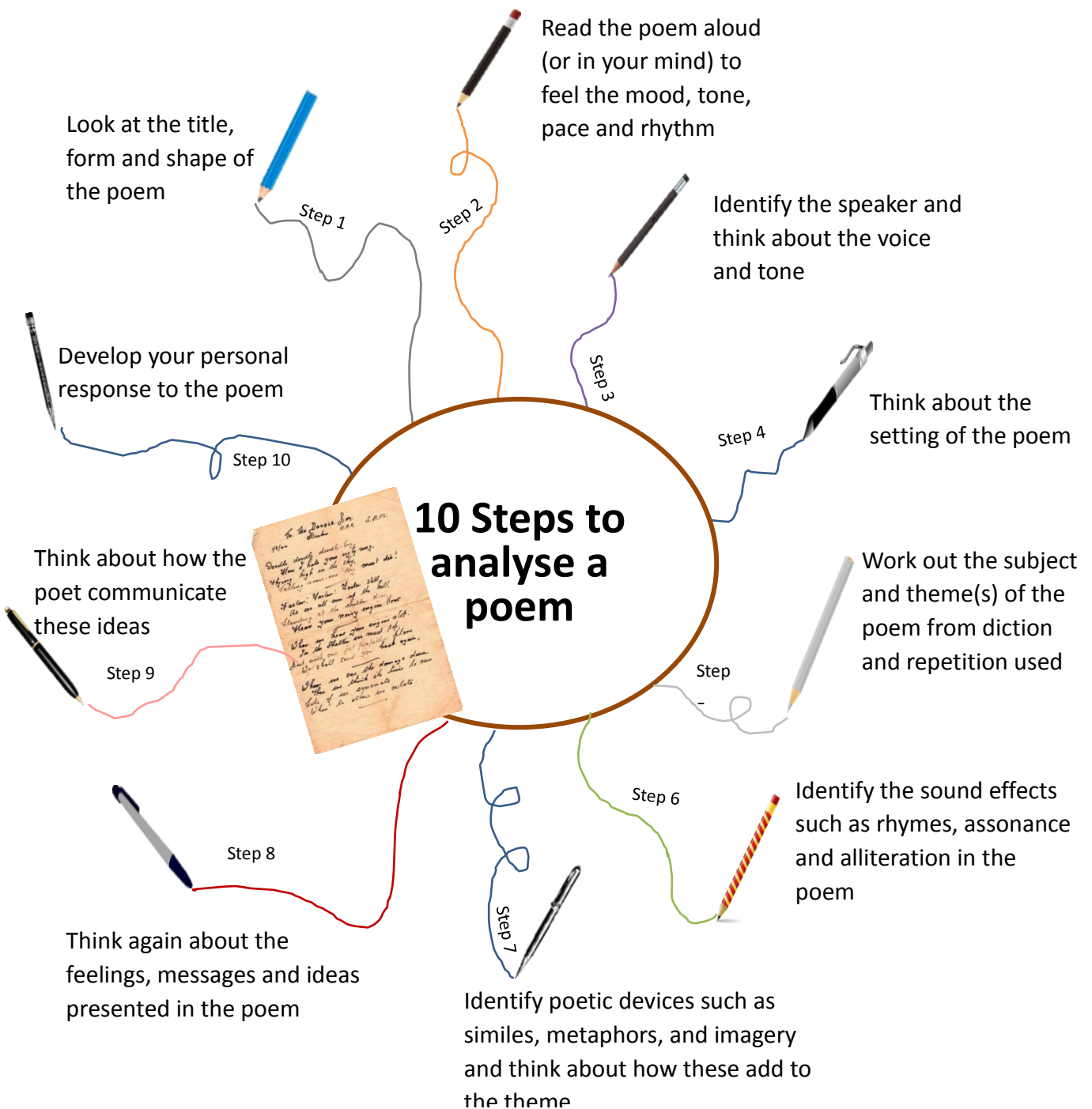
Set 2 helps students to consolidate the knowledge and skills acquired in Set 1 through applying them in an integrative manner to analyse a new poem. It includes the following parts:

- A. Pre-reading Activities**
- B. Reading the Poem – Comprehension and Appreciation**
- C. Follow-up Activities**

SET 1

A. Ten Steps to Analyse a Poem

When reading a new poem, it is important to identify the main ideas and the techniques used to present them. The diagram below shows the ten steps that take a reader to comprehend and explore the stylistic features of a poem.



B. Key Aspects and Guiding Questions for Poetry Analysis

After forming a general impression of the poem, it is necessary to progress from the comprehension to the appreciation level. For a more in-depth analysis of a poem, you should examine the following seven aspects in greater detail. Some guiding questions are provided below to guide you to notice and identify the features under each aspect.

1. Content/Subject and Theme(s)

- ✧ Does the title give you an idea of what the poem may be about?
- ✧ What is the poem about? What concept and ideas is the poem exploring? What is the writer's view on this subject?
- ✧ Can you summarise the main idea of the poem or paraphrase it in a few sentences?
- ✧ Are there messages or ideas that are repeatedly stated in the poem to draw the reader's attention?
- ✧ Are the themes and messages implicitly or explicitly stated in the poem?
- ✧ How are the ideas organised in the poem? Are they developed in a straightforward manner to a conclusion? Is there a shift or turning point in its development? If yes, when and why does the shift take place?

2. Speaker, Tone and Voice

- ✧ Who is the speaker of the poem?
- ✧ Is the speaker the poet or a character/persona the poet takes on?
- ✧ Who is the speaker speaking to?
- ✧ What is the tone of voice adopted?
- ✧ What is the speaker's attitude towards the subject in the poem?
- ✧ Does the poem sound happy or sad when you read it aloud?
- ✧ Can any of the adjectives of feelings and emotions listed below describe the tone and voice of the speaker?

Positive	Negative	Others
Appreciative	Aggressive	Apologetic
Calm	Angry	Bold
Cheerful	Annoyed/irritated	Cautious
Comforting	Anxious/agitated	Firm
Content	Apprehensive	Ironic
Devoted	Bitter	Mysterious
Delightful	Confused	Nostalgic
Enthusiastic	Cruel/harsh/hurtful	Regretful/remorseful

Excited	Defeated	Religious
Joyful	Depressed/melancholic	Sarcastic
Loving	Devastated	Secretive
Optimistic	Disappointed	Sentimental
Passionate	Guilty	
Sincere	Hostile	
Supportive	Hopeless	
Sympathetic	Indifferent/apathetic	
Warm	Lonely	
	Pessimistic	
	Resentful	
	Threatening	
	Troubled	
	Worried	

3. Setting and Atmosphere

- ✧ Where and when is the poem set? Does the setting create any prevailing feeling in the poem?
- ✧ Does the setting affect the mood of the speaker?
- ✧ Can any of the adjectives listed below describe the mood and atmosphere of the poem?

Positive	Negative	Others
Uplifting	Bleak	Solemn
Light-hearted	Confining	Quiet
Harmonious	Dark	
Idyllic	Desolate	
Peaceful	Gloomy/sombre	
Serene	Grim	
Warm	Heavy	
Welcoming	Lonely	
	Pensive	
	Scary/eerie/spooky	
	Tense	

Form and Structure

- ✧ Does the poem follow a regular poetic form (e.g. sonnets, ballads, haiku) or stanza form (e.g. quatrains)?
- ✧ Is the regularity in the form and structure broken in any part of the poem? How and why?
- ✧ Do the lines end with a completion of a thought or closed punctuation (i.e. end-stopped lines) or flow without pause from one to the next (i.e. enjambment, run-on lines)?
- ✧ How do the form and structure contribute to the development of ideas and themes in the poem?

4. Sound Effects

- ✧ What sounds are frequently used in the poem?
- ✧ Is there a rhyming pattern/rhyme scheme in the poem? Are there any examples of internal rhymes?
- ✧ What is the rhythm of the poem? Can you identify the metre of the poem or a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables?
- ✧ Does the poet use any sound devices (e.g. alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia)?
- ✧ What effects do the devices create and how do they help to present the themes of the poem?

5. Poetic Devices

- ✧ Does the poet use imagery in the poem? What senses (i.e. sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch) are appealed to?
- ✧ Does the poet use poetic techniques such as similes, metaphors, personification, metonymy or other figurative language such as symbolism in the poem?
- ✧ What effects do the devices create and how do they help to present the themes of the poem?

6. Diction/Word Choice/Use of language

- ✧ How would you characterise the language and diction in the poem? Is there a tendency to use a particular kind of language (e.g. colloquial/formal/slangy/archaic expressions, polysyllabic/mono-syllabic words, foreign terms or indigenised varieties of English)?
- ✧ Is there any unusual use of language (e.g. inverted order of words, coined words) that breaks the conventions and rules?
- ✧ Are there any lines or words that stand out in the poem (e.g. repeatedly used or

incongruous with the rest of the poem)?

- ✧ Is there any significance to the capitalisation and spelling of words?
- ✧ What effects does the choice of language create?

C. Writing an analytical paragraph on different aspects of a poem

Upon identifying the themes and stylistic features through underlining certain parts and scribbling some notes on the poem, you may need to write a critical analysis in the form of an essay or answer some short questions on the poem. It is important to present your observations and explain your views in a clearly structured paragraph.

An effective analytical paragraph on an aspect of a poem need not be long, but it should contain the following parts:

- A statement/main point
- Textual support and evidence (quoting directly or paraphrasing the poem)
- Elaboration and explanation

Examples on each of the seven aspects are provided below:

Example 1: Content/Subject and Theme(s)

Explain what the poem is about and identify the major ideas and themes.

To a Poor Old Woman

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand

They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her

You can see it by
the way she gives herself
to the one half
sucked out in her hand

Comforted
a solace of ripe plums
seeming to fill the air
They taste good to her

Source: William Carlos Williams' *Collected Poems: 1939-1962*, Volume II

Analysis

The poem explores the theme of poverty and deprivation through the vivid portrayal of an old woman eating plums eagerly on the street. The exceptional gratification and pleasure the plums offer her suggests the hunger the woman must be suffering. "They taste good to her" has been repeated four times in the poem. The exaggerated descriptions of how the old woman relishes every bite of the plum (e.g. sucking out one half) and the tremendous comfort the plum offers her (e.g. solace of the ripe plum filling the air) help to highlight the plight of the old woman and arouse the reader's sympathy.

Example 2: Speaker, Tone and Voice

Comment on the tone and voice of the speaker in the poem.

"This Is Just To Say"

William Carlos Williams (1883-1963)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Source: William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* (1923)

Analysis

In the poem "This is Just to Say", the speaker adopts a first-person voice and seems to be apologising to somebody whose plums he has eaten. However, his tone is more playful and mischievous than apologetic and regretful. The title "this is just to say" reinforces the unapologetic tone found throughout the poem. While the speaker admits in Stanza 2 that he knows the plums belong to "you" and are reserved for

breakfast, he expresses how he takes pleasure in his impulsive eating in Stanza 3 because the plums are too tempting and irresistible. He only feels obligated to apologise to “you” for placing his desire over his/her ownership but he does not regret eating the delicious, sweet and cool plums.

Example 3: Setting and Atmosphere

Where and when is the poem set? What mood and atmosphere does the setting create?

The Darkling Thrush

Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

I leant upon a coppice gate
 When Frost was spectre-grey,
And Winter's dregs made desolate
 The weakening eye of day.
The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
 Like strings of broken lyres,
And all mankind that haunted night
 Had sought their household fires.

The land's sharp features seemed to be
 The Century's corpse outleant,
His crypt the cloudy canopy,
 The wind his death-lament.
The ancient pulse of germ and birth
 Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
 Seemed fervourless as I.

At once a voice arose among
 The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-hearted evensong
 Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
 In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
 Upon the growing gloom.

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

Source: Thomas Hardy's *Poems of the Past and Present* (1903)

Analysis:

The poem "The Darkling Thrush" is set at in the twilight on the last day of the nineteenth century. The speaker is leaning on a wooden gate looking at the darkening countryside. The setting creates a bleak, gloomy and depressing mood, making the speaker "fervourless". The poet compares the setting sun to "a weakening eye" as night falls and he describes a "desolate" scene with frost taking over the land like a "corpse" and stems of trees standing "like strings of broken lyres (harps)". The time setting of the poem imparts a sense of loss and sorrow as the day, year and century are ending at once and it seems to suggest also the end of life and the world. The desolate winter landscape with no life growing, only the frost shrouding the ground and the wind making funeral music in the trees, is also eerie, spooky and ghostly. Both the time and place convey a sense of hopelessness and lifelessness.

Example 4: Form and Structure

Comment on the form and structure of Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" and discuss how they help to convey the ideas of the poem.

Analysis:

The poem "The Darkling Thrush" follows a regular form and structure, with four stanzas of eight lines each. The lines are even in length with a set rhyme scheme (i.e. every second line rhymes). The regularity mimics the pattern of seasons in nature. While the poet structures the words into sentences that can run on and take up to four lines, each stanza is closed with a full stop. The sense of closure matches the theme of death expressed in the poem, where the speaker laments the loss of life and ending of the day, the year and the century.

Example 5: Sound Effects

Identify the sound effects and devices in Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" and discuss how they help to present the theme.

Analysis:

In the poem "The Darkling Thrush", the regular rhyme and sound effects such as assonance, alliteration and sibilance are used to present the themes of death and rebirth of hope. The regular rhyme in every second line suggests a sense of stagnancy which matches the speaker's "fervourless" feeling that everything is speeding towards death. In Stanza 1 the assonance of long "e" sounds in various words such as "spectre-grey", "dregs" and "weakening eye" builds the eerie mood of the surroundings. The use of alliteration of the hard "k" sound in words such as "corpse", "crypt" and "cloudy canopy" in Stanza 2 further evokes the tread of a funeral march, creating a sad tone that matches the gloomy feelings of the speaker. In contrast, the alliteration of plosive sounds (i.e. "b" and "p" sounds) in Stanza 3 (e.g. "blast-beruffled plume") shows the strength and energy of the bird against the strong wind. The sibilance used to describe the thrush's lively singing in "cause for carolings of such ecstatic sounds" creates a soft music that differs from the harsh sounds used to portray the bleak wintry setting. The switch from using harsh sounds to soft sounds corresponds with the change in the speaker's feelings from sorrow to happiness, bringing out the contrast of the loss and rebirth of hope.

Example 6: Poetic Devices

Comment on the poetic devices used in the first two stanzas of in Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" and discuss the effects they create.

Analysis:

In the poem "The Darkling Thrush", imagery and comparison (i.e. similes and metaphors) are extensively used to build the desolate setting and depressing mood. In Stanza 1, the frost is compared to a grey ghost at dusk that shrouds the land, which creates a ghostly winter scene associated with death. The setting sun is described as a "weakening eye" and the metaphor of "dregs" is used to suggest the fading light of dusk. A simile is used when the poet likens the leafless stems and bare trunks to a

broken lyre/harp, showing the barrenness and inability to produce life and music. In Stanza 2, metaphors are used to compare the landscape to a corpse and the darkening sky to a tomb, which further accentuates the spooky mood. The rich visual, auditory and tactile imagery in the poem appeals to readers' sense of sight, hearing and touch, creating a vivid picture of the haunted countryside in a darkening dusk, which helps to present the theme of death and ending.

Example 7: Diction/Word Choice/Use of Language

Comment on diction of Thomas Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" and discuss the effects the use of language creates.

Analysis:

In the poem "The Darkling Thrush", archaic language (e.g. coppice [group of trees], spectre [ghost], darkling [in the dark], lyre [harp], crypt [tomb], illimited [free from limitations], nigh [near]) and some unusual combinations of words (e.g. death-lament" and "outleant") can be identified in various places. The use of archaism reflects the poet's Keatsian lyrical style and the Romantic literary tradition he belongs to.

In addition to the use of archaism, the poet uses a lot of single adjectives before nouns. A lot of negative adjectives (e.g. desolate, weakening, tangled, broken, haunted, cloudy, shrunken, hard, dry and fervourless) are used in Stanzas 1 and 2 to express the dark feelings and dejected mood of the speaker. In contrast, positive adjectives (e.g. full-hearted, illimited, growing, ecstatic, happy, blessed) and feelings words (e.g. joy, Hope) are used in Stanzas 3 and 4 to show the uplifted spirit of the speaker after listening to the joyful singing of the aged thrush.

It is also worth noting that words with religious meanings (e.g. evensong, soul, carolings, blessed) are often used in the description of the bird. This religious association is accentuated with the capitalisation of the word "Hope" towards the end of the poem. The thrush seems to symbolise a spiritual force in nature and represent a harbinger of hope.

D. Writing Practice

Read "The Wild Swans at Coole" by W. B. Yeats carefully.

The Wild Swans at Coole

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939)

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

Source: *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (1989)*

1. Choose three of the following aspects to focus on and write an analytical paragraph on each:
 - Content/subject and theme(s)
 - Speaker, tone and voice
 - Setting and atmosphere
 - Form and structure
 - Sound effects
 - Poetic devices
 - Diction/word Choice/use of language

2. Refer to the sample paragraphs provided and include the following elements in each analytical paragraph:
 - A statement/main point
 - Textual support and evidence (quoting directly or paraphrasing the poem)
 - Elaboration and explanation

3. Show and identify the different elements of your analytical paragraphs with colour-coding.

Teacher's Notes

A. Ten Steps to Analyse a Poem

In addition to introducing the ten steps for analysing a poem, it might be useful to introduce some websites, online resources and reference materials to facilitate students' self-learning. Below are some examples:

YouTube Videos:	Brief Descriptions
GCSE English: Analysing an Unseen Poem https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ey49S3Eb8E	The short clip suggests three simple guiding questions to help students to approach an unseen poem. The approach is manageable for even the less advanced students.
How to Approach the Unseen Poem https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVMN3EKFdVQ	Six stages are suggested for students to practise deciphering a poem in five minutes before attempting to answer questions and writing an analysis on it.
How to read an unseen poem https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQ8baj8O8Bo	The clip suggests a three-read system (the first for an overview, second for details, third for interpretation) when dealing with an unseen poem.
Sample Poetry Analysis https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HKiRvgi5-c	The clip illustrates different elements of poetry analysis with Emily Dickinson's "I am no body" as an example.

B. Key Aspects and Guiding Questions for Poetry Analysis

For concepts which may be hard for students to grasp with verbal explanation only (e.g. rhythm, tone, sound effects), teachers may use some online resources and reference materials with audio-visual or multi-sensory input to illustrate them. The following clips could be introduced to students:

YouTube Videos	Brief Descriptions
Studying Form, Rhythm and Meter, and Rhyme https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPkURJhd24c	The clip provides a clear explanation of the concepts of rhythm, foot and metre, which are challenging to students. It

	helps students to identify patterns in classical poems with a regular form and structure.
Tone and Mood https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-mW2VTUOSWs	The clip explains the difference between tone and mood with some easy and concrete examples.
The Vocabulary of Sound Devices in Poetry https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=su54Qn77TP8&spfreload=1	The clip goes through the literary terms used to analyse and discuss sound effects (e.g. rhyme, consonance, sibilance, alliteration, onomatopoeia) in poetry, using Edgar Allan Poe's poem "The Raven" as an example.
Poetic Devices https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0jepXp8qdc	The clip provides a clear explanation of commonly used poetic devices using straightforward examples accessible to even the weaker students.
Websites	
How to Analyse a Poem – Vanier College https://www.vaniercollege.qc.ca/tlc/tipsheets/reading-and-analyzing/how-to-analyze-a-poem.pdf Student Guidelines for Poetry Analysis – Melbourne High School http://resources.mhs.vic.edu.au/english/students/poetry.htm	These sites provide a quick guide on how to read, annotate and analyse poems effectively.
Glossary of Poetic Terms http://higher.ed.mheducation.com/sites/0072405228/student_view0/poetic_glossary.html Glossary of Poetic Terms : Learning Lab : The Poetry Foundation http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-terms	These sites provide definitions and explanations on a range of poetic terms and literary devices.

In addition to the websites introduced above, glossaries of commonly used poetic terms are also available in the resource packages on *The Learning and Teaching of Poetry (Secondary 1-3)* published in 2002 and *The Learning and Teaching of Poetry (Senior Secondary)* published in 2005.

Content/Subject and Themes

Abstract nouns are often used to talk about the themes and ideas expressed in poems. Some common examples are beauty of nature, motherhood, identity, transience of life, loneliness and solitude, isolation and alienation. Teachers may encourage students to brainstorm some universal and recurrent themes explored in literary texts. The following website may be useful for introducing some common themes in literature:

A Huge List of Common Themes

<http://literarydevices.net/a-huge-list-of-common-themes/>

Sound Effects

Sound effects can be the most challenging area in poetry analysis for second language learners, who often lack the phonological awareness and sensitivity to identify sound effects correctly. Sometimes, the spelling of words may also be misleading. To help students to identify the use of rhyming words, alliteration and assonance correctly, teachers may introduce some online tools that transcribe texts into phonetic symbols. Below are two examples:

Pho Trans Edit

<http://www.photransedit.com/Online/Text2Phonetics.aspx>

IPA Phonetic Transcription of English Text - Lingorado

<http://lingorado.com/ipa/>

After students can accurately identify the sound patterns and effects in poems, teachers may consider introducing adjectives that describe different sounds (e.g. nasal, plosive, glottal sounds) for students who are ready for more advanced analysis of the qualities of English sounds. The chart below could be used:

Chart of RP Consonants

Point⇒ Manner ↓	Bilabial	Labio Dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post- Alveolar	Palato- Alveolar ɹ	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Plosive or stop	p b			t d				k g	
Affricate						tʃ dʒ			
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z		ʒ ʃ			h
Nasal	m			n				ŋ	
Lateral				l					
Semi vowels	w						j	(w) ²	
Approximant					r				

Metre/Foot can be another difficult concept for secondary students. Some poetic forms are characterised by specific metrical patterns (e.g. the use of iambic pentametre in Shakespearean sonnets). The metric pattern affects the rhythm of the poem and metrical variations/irregularities often have implications on themes and ideas in the poem.

Teachers may introduce different foot and metre types to students with examples from poems students study or encounter. Common types are listed in the table below:

Foot type	Adjective to describe the style	Stress pattern	Number of syllables
Iamb	Iambic	Unstressed + Stressed da-DUM (x/)	2
Trochee	Trochaic	Stressed + Unstressed DUM-da (/x)	2
Spondee	Spondaic	Stressed + Stressed DUM-DUM (//)	2

Anapest/ Anapaest	Anapestic	Unstressed + Unstressed + Stressed da-da-DUM (x x /)	3
Dactyl	Dactylic	Stressed + Unstressed + Unstressed DUM-da-da (/ x x)	3
Amphibrach	Amphibrachic	Unstressed + Stressed + Unstressed da-DUM-da (x / x)	3
Pyrrhic	Pyrrhic	Unstressed + Unstressed da-da (x x)	3

Metre type	Number of feet
Monometre	1
Dimetre	2
Trimetre	3
Tetrametre	4
Pentametre	5
Hexametre	6
Heptametre	7
Octametre	8

Students may be guided to identify the metrical and stress patterns in poems through reading aloud and with the use of dictionaries or phonetic transcription tools. After identifying the stress patterns correctly, they can be taught to use terms from the two tables in combination to describe the patterns. For example, if the feet are iambs and there are five feet to a line, it is called an iambic pentametre. If the feet are primarily dactyls and there are six feet to a line, it is a dactylic hexametre.

C. Writing an Analytical Paragraph

Before asking students to read William Butler Yeats' "The Wild Swans at Coole", teachers should go through the seven sample paragraphs on different aspects of poetry analysis with students and heighten their awareness of the structure and elements in an effective analytical paragraph. Teachers may, where necessary, draw students' attention to words that help them to explain and discuss the effects created by certain devices they have identified. Here are some common verbs that help to explain the use of poetic techniques and their effects:

- ...**creates/builds** a (feeling adjective) mood and **adds/imparts** a sense of (feeling

- noun) in the poem.
- The use of (poetic technique/device/feature) helps to **bring out/present/convey/express ...**
 - The use of (poetic technique/device/feature) **foregrounds/highlights/emphasises/ accentuates ...**
 - The word “...” **suggests/implies/connotes...**

D. Writing Practice

Teachers may encourage students to approach the poem as an unseen text to practise the steps of analysis and annotation, instead of relying on secondary sources or online materials before formulating their own interpretation on the poem.

Teachers may advise students to take note of the year the poem was written or the year of birth and death of the poet and bring in their understanding of the historical events, literary and social conventions of the era to make sense of the poem. However, analysis must still be based on close reading and evidence. Conclusions cannot be drawn from the biographical and historical information. Textual support should be provided to substantiate and justify points made in the analytical paragraph.

The table below suggests some ideas that students may cover in their analytical paragraphs. They are by no means exhaustive and teachers should accept any other reasonable interpretations and answers backed up by textual evidence.

Aspects	Suggested points
➤ Content/subject and theme(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Beauty of nature (i.e. a peaceful autumn scene at Coole Lake) ✧ The passion and energy of the swans vs. the aging weary soul of the speaker ✧ Passage of time and transience of humans ✧ Permanence and immortality of nature as represented by the ever lively swans
➤ Speaker, tone and voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ The speaker is an aging man who visited the lake 19 years ago ✧ Calm, serene and placid tone in Stanza 1 ✧ Tone gets nostalgic and sentimental in Stanza 2 ✧ More melancholic and poignant tone from Stanza 3 onwards as he laments his aging and loss of energy ✧ Envious and admiring tone in Stanza 4 ✧ A sense of regret and loss in the tone towards the end of the last stanza
➤ Setting and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Set in the woodland beside a lake at twilight, on a dry

atmosphere	<p>October evening</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Peaceful/tranquil scene with beautiful autumn leaves on trees, fifty-nine swans paddling calmly on the lake and the lake reflecting the sky like a mirror
➤ Form and structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Regular lyrical form with five stanzas of six lines each ✧ The second and fourth lines rhyme in each stanza, while the fifth and sixth lines form a rhyming couplet ✧ Alternate long and short lines
➤ Sound effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Alliteration: “b” in “bell-beat”; “k” sounds in “cold companionable”; “w” sounds in “wander where they will” ✧ Assonance: repetition of “i” sound in “drift on the still waters, mysterious, beautiful” ✧ Consonance of ‘l’ throughout the poem ✧ The use of sound devices, rhyme and rhythm contributes to the harmonious musical effect of the poem, mimicking the fluid movement and paddling/flipping of the swans
➤ Poetic devices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Rich imagery to show the beauty of nature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Visual – “brimming water” ➤ Auditory – “bell-beat of their wings” ➤ Tactile – “trod with a lighter tread”, “paddle in cold companionable streams” ✧ Personification: swans are endowed with human qualities such as “passion or conquest” ✧ Metaphor: the lake is compared to a mirror; the flapping of the swans’ wings is likened to the beating of a bell ✧ Contrast: past vs. present; unwearied swans vs. the speakers’ aging fading self (transience vs. immortality) ✧ Symbolism: the swans symbolise permanence and immortality, as well as passion, energy, ambition and beauty that can stand the test of time
➤ Diction/word choice/use of language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✧ Simple and descriptive language ✧ Short everyday words ✧ Repetition of the word “still”

Through colour-coding different elements of the analytical paragraph, teachers can develop students’ ability to monitor, regulate and review their own writing, as well as to identify the inadequacy in their own answers. Peer feedback could be encouraged by engaging the class in identifying the strengths of some outstanding paragraphs in terms of the ideas, structure and language, as well as pointing out the problems in some less satisfactory paragraphs and suggesting ways to enrich and improve them.

SET 2

A. Pre-reading Activities:

1. Interviewing mum

Ask your mother to show you a few pictures of her teenage or early adult life, (i.e. around 18-22 years old/years before you were born) and ask her the following questions:

- What kind of life did you lead in your younger days?
- What was your favourite pastime? Who did you hang out with and where did you usually go together for fun?
- Has marriage and childbirth changed your life? How?

Take down her answers and bring the pictures to class (if your mum agrees) for sharing with your classmates.

2. Information search

To prepare for reading the poem, search online for information of the following:

- Carol Ann Duffy's biographical details (e.g. her family life and career as a poet)
- Marilyn Monroe
- Life of women in Scotland in the 1950-60s

B. Reading the Poem – Comprehension and Appreciation

Read the following poem by Carol Ann Duffy and complete the questions that follow.

Before You Were Mine

I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on
with your pals, Maggie McGeeney and Jean Duff.
The three of you bend from the waist, holding
each other, or your knees, and shriek at the pavement.
Your polka-dot dress blows round your legs. Marilyn. 5

I'm not here yet. The thought of me doesn't occur
in the ballroom with the thousand eyes, the fizzy, movie tomorrows
the right walk home could bring. I knew you would dance
like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close
with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it's worth it. 10

The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?
I remember my hands in those high-heeled red shoes, relics,
and now your ghost clatters toward me over George Square
till I see you, clear as scent, under the tree,
with its lights, and whose small bites on your neck, sweetheart? 15

Cha cha cha! You'd teach me the steps on the way home from Mass,
stamping stars from the wrong pavement. Even then
I wanted the bold girl winking in Portobello, somewhere
in Scotland, before I was born. That glamorous love lasts
where you sparkle and waltz and laugh before you were mine. 20

Carol Ann Duffy (1955-)

Source: Carol Ann Duffy's *Mean Time* (2004)

1. Who does the pronoun “you” refer to? Describe the relationship between “you” and “I” (the speaker) in the poem. Support your answer with two examples from the poem.
2. Summarise the main ideas expressed in this poem in 50 words.
3. How does the form and structure of the poem help to convey the message of the poem?
4. Comment on the use of tenses in the poem and discuss the effects it creates?
5. The poem is written in a conversational manner. Do you think this is appropriate to the subject matter?
6. Identify three examples of imagery from the poem. Explain how they appeal to our senses and enhance the meaning and impact of the poem.

Example of imagery	Sense(s) involved	Meaning and impact

7. What does the speaker mean in the lines: “Cha cha cha! You’d teach me the steps on the way home from Mass, stamping stars from the wrong pavement.” What may “the wrong pavement” refer to?

C. Follow-up Activities

1. Reviewing a short clip on the poem

Watch the following clip, which is a visual representation of the poem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WEIL9rJ9Ds8>

Write a short commentary on the clip. You may like to talk about:

- Whether the clip captures the emotions, tone and mood of the poem
- Whether the clip changes your understanding of the poem
- The cinematic techniques used (e.g. music, use of black and white or full colour shots) to convey the ideas and create the mood
- Whether you agree with the film-makers' interpretation of the poem and treatment of the themes

2. Writing a short poem

Ask your father or one of your grandparents to show you a few pictures of his/her younger days. Write a poem with several stanzas based on your imaginations or thoughts evoked by these pictures. You may talk about the dreams or ambitions you think s/he might have had or the life s/he might have lived before s/he got married and had children.

Teacher's Notes

Biography of the Poet

Carol Ann Duffy (born 23 December 1955) is a Scottish poet and playwright. She was appointed Britain's poet laureate in May 2009. She is the first woman, the first Scottish, and the first openly LGBT (initialism for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) person to hold this pre-eminent position.

Carol Ann Duffy was born to a Roman Catholic family in a poor part of Glasgow, the biggest city in Scotland. She started writing poetry when she was 11. Her work is widely read and critically acclaimed. She has won numerous awards including the Somerset Maugham Award, Dylan Thomas Prize, Whitbread Book Awards and T. S. Eliot Prize for her poetry.

Carol Ann Duffy's work explores both everyday experience and the rich fantasy life of herself and others. She also writes on themes related to language and the representation of reality, identity and gender issues, contemporary culture, and many different forms of alienation, oppression and social inequality.

This poem is taken from her poetry collection *Mean Time* published in 1993.

A. Pre-reading Activities

1. Interviewing mum

This activity encourages students to explore their mothers' past and discover the life their mothers had before they were born. It aims to create a sense of empathy for the mother (both in their life and in the poem), as students realise how their mothers were once teenagers like they are now. The activity also prepares students for putting themselves into the position of the speaker and helps them to understand the tone and mood of the poem.

2. Information search

The second activity allows students to understand the socio-cultural background underpinning the poem and prepares them for deciphering the cultural icons of the era (e.g. Marilyn Monroe) mentioned in the poem.

B. Reading the Poem – Comprehension and Appreciation

Before going through the questions and answers, teachers may encourage students to approach a poem following some basic steps and practice the skills regularly, especially if the students are afraid of unseen poems:

Read through the poems three times:

1 st time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ to read aloud and get an overview ➤ to form an impression of the mood and tone and identify the key ideas and themes
2 nd time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ to look at details and observe patterns ➤ to identify literary elements and figurative language (e.g. rhyme scheme, rhythm, simile, metaphors, assonance, consonance, pun) and label them
3 rd time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ to formulate one's understanding and interpretation of the poem ➤ to move from the literal to the figurative and interpretative level (i.e. figuring out the reasons for using literary devices and poetic techniques, the impacts created and the message conveyed)

The 7 questions are intended to draw students' attention to different aspects of poetry analysis. The table below shows the areas the questions touch upon:

Q	Content/ subject & themes	Speaker, tone & voice	Setting & atmosphere	Form & structure	Sound effects	Poetic devices	Diction/word choice/use of language
1	✓						
2	✓						
3	✓			✓			
4	✓	✓					✓
5	✓	✓					
6	✓		✓			✓	
7	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓

Suggested points/answers to the questions:

The answers below are for reference and not intended to serve as model answers. Teachers should accept any reasonable answers with textual support and alternative interpretations showing understanding of the ideas and appreciation of the poetic techniques.

1. *Who does the pronoun “you” refer to? Describe the relationship between “you” and “I” (the speaker) in the poem. Support your answer with two examples from the poem.*

“You” refers to the mother of the speaker. The speaker “I” has a very strong bonding and close relationship with her mother as reflected in the conversational tone of the poem and the use of words like “eh” (line 11) and “sweetheart” (line 15).

The poem shows the speakers’ strong sense of possessiveness towards her mother, as shown in the title “Before You Were Mine”. The possessive pronoun “mine” is used to suggest she dictates and controls her mother’s life. This sense of possessiveness is also admitted by the speaker when she describes her yelling as “loud” and “possessive” (line 11). The poem concludes with the same words of the title (i.e. before you were mine), which also creates the effect of locking the mother in a firm embrace of words.

The speaker has great reverence and admiration for her mother. She re-imagines her mother’s youthful days and idealises her as a “bold girl winking” (line 18) living a life of romance, vibrancy and pleasure. Her admiration for her mother is expressed through the use of strong and powerful verbs such as “shriek” (line 4), “sparkle” (line 20) and “waltz” (line 20), which all vividly depict her mother’s glamour and liveliness.

2. *Summarise the main ideas expressed in this poem in 50 words.*

In this poem, the speaker romanticises her mother and the glamorous carefree life she led before she was tied down with motherhood. While celebrating her mother’s period of youthful rebellion, reckless gaiety, passion and romance, the speaker recognises her mother’s sacrifice in bringing her up and laments her loss of freedom.

3. How does the form and structure of the poem help to convey the message of the poem?

The poem is written in four regular five-lined stanzas (quintains). The structure suggests a degree of regularity associated with the passage of time and the cyclical bonding between the mother and daughter – a circular relationship passing from one generation to the next.

Despite the regular stanza form, subtle changes in mood and emotions are hidden between the stanzas. The physical presence and emotional involvement of the daughter are escalating as the stanzas go. While the first two stanzas focus mainly on the description of the carefree young woman yet to be a mother, the daughter comes into existence and plays a part in the third and fourth stanzas, changing the youthful lady's role from a mover/dancer to a mother. Sentences of varying lengths and enjambment (run-on lines) are also used to introduce irregularity and vary the pace of the poem, which helps to express the changing emotions of the speaker from admiration to empathy to a tinge of poignancy towards the end.

4. Comment on the use of tenses in the poem and discuss the effects it creates?

In the poem, there are frequent switches from past to present, both in terms of the presentation of events and the use of tenses, to interweave the speaker's imagination of her mother's past and her thoughts and feelings as a daughter.

It is worth noting that the speaker uses the present tense when she describes what happened/might have happened ten years before she was born. What is described is the speaker's re-creation of her mother's past triggered from a photo she sees at present, rather than a factual account of her mother's past. In other words, the speaker is imagining and fantasising how her mother's life must have been like back before she was born. She describes the events of the photo as if they were happening now to make her mother's life as real as possible. The use of the present tense also allows the daughter who did not exist at the time when the photo was taken to witness and take part in the world of the "young mother" and bridges the temporal distance between them.

The use of the past tense at times serves to accentuate the speaker's sense of possessiveness towards the mother. For example, in lines 9-10, "I knew you would dance like that. Before you were mine, your Ma stands at the close with a hiding for

the late one”, the speaker attempts to assert her presence in her mother’s past with “I knew” even though she says “I’m ten years away” (line 1) and “I’m not here yet” (line 6) in the poem. She acts and speaks as if she were her mother’s mother watching out for her staying out late at night.

5. The poem is written in a conversational manner. Do you think the style is appropriate to the subject matter?

The poem is written in a highly conversational manner. The alternation of very short and long sentences creates a fluid rhythm and pauses in a natural speech. Informal and colloquial words such as “pals” (line 2) are used to create a warm and affectionate tone, which brings out the theme of the poem and the intimate mother and daughter relationship. The tender and loving tone is accentuated when speaker addresses her mother like a lover or her own child with expressions like “sweetheart” (line 15).

While the poem gives the impression of a speech from the daughter to the mother, this speech is more like a retrospective interior monologue inspired by a photograph, which is not intended to be delivered to or heard by the mother. The speaker asks her mum direct questions that require no answers, e.g. “The decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell was the best one, eh?” (line 11) and depicts her mother’s feelings and responses as if she could read her mother’s mind, e.g. “You Ma stands at the close with a hiding for the late one. You reckon it’s worth it.”(lines 9-10). An interior monologue adopting a first-person voice suits the content of the poem, which mainly focusses on the daughter’s re-creation of her mother’s past from her subjective experience and imagination. The limited perspective and one-sidedness of the speech also help to bring out the daughter’s self-centredness and sense of possessiveness towards the mother.

6. Identify three examples of imagery used in the poem. Explain how they appeal to our senses and enhance the meaning and impact of the poem.

Example of Imagery	Sense(s) involved	Meaning and impact
1. Your <u>polka-dot</u> <u>dress blows round</u> <u>your legs. Marilyn.</u> (line 5)	Visual imagery (sense of sight) Tactile imagery (sense of touch)	The mother was alluded to Marilyn Monroe, the sexy icon of the 1950s, with the wind blowing over her polka-dot dress to reveal her legs, which connotes sexual

		seductiveness. The use of imagery serves to highlight the enchanting youth and glamour of her mother.
2. The thought of me doesn't occur in the <u>ballroom with the thousand eyes</u> (lines 6-7)	Visual imagery (sense of sight)	The thousand eyes in the ballroom may be a metaphor of the mirror ball casting glittering light across the dance floor or a synecdoche/ metonymy of the potential suitors whose eyes are watching the charming dancer. The use of imagery enhances the excitement of the ballroom and creates the image of the mother being as an enchanting goddess and centre of attention in the ballroom.
3. I remember my hands in those <u>high-heeled red shoes, relics,</u> and now <u>your ghost clatters</u> toward me over George Square till I see you, <u>clear as scent,</u> under the tree... (lines 12-14)	Visual imagery (sense of sight) Audial imagery (sense of hearing) Olfactory imagery (sense of smell)	The clattering sound symbolises the mother's younger days when she moved on the dance floor in her high-heeled shoes. In likening her mother's red high-heeled shoes to "relics", some historical old objects, the speaker expresses mixed feelings of sadness and reverence for her mother's bygone youth. The mixing of senses (synaesthesia) in "I see you, clear as scent" shows the speakers' vivid recollection and imagination of her mother dancing, as if she could see the moving image ("your ghost" in line 13) and smell her perfume. The speaker then went on to imagine the romantic encounter her mother had with the love bites on her neck.

7. What does the speaker mean in the lines: “Cha cha cha! You’d teach me the steps on the way home from Mass, stamping stars from the wrong pavement.” What may “the wrong pavement” refer to?

The speaker recalls in the quoted lines an incident in her childhood, where her mother would teach her the “cha cha cha” dance on the way home from church. “Stamping the stars from the wrong pavement” has multiple possible meanings. “Stamping” provides a stark contrast with the “clattering” of red high-heeled shoes in the ballroom, showing a change in lifestyle from the glamorous social life to a practical and humble domestic life. Her mother is not dancing with her pals in her high-heels in the glittering ballroom, but going to church probably with plain comfortable shoes with the child.

“The wrong pavement” may suggest the pavement is not the right place for a sensual Cuban dance, nor a platform for realising the mother’s teenage dreams, implying that parental responsibilities has confined the mother’s freedom and suppressed her vibrancy. The stars further allude to The Street of Stars in Hollywood Boulevard, which echoes the reference to the actress Marilyn Monroe in Stanza 1. The speaker longs to see the mother’s younger self, who is imagined as a sparkling bold girl like Marilyn Monroe, with all her glamour and carefree liveliness.

C. Follow-up Activities:

1. Reviewing a short clip on the poem

Teachers may play the clip once in class and ask the students to view it again at home. It is important that students read the poem first to formulate their independent views and interpretation before showing the clip, as the visual presentation may limit students’ imagination.

For weaker students, teachers may vary the length of the writing and adapt the task from a critical review/commentary of the clip to a personal response/reflection. Students may simply talk about:

- Whether they like the clip
- Whether the visual representation enhances their understanding of the poem
- The most striking scene and reasons why the scene is powerful
- Any thoughts on mother-daughter relationships after watching the clip

- Differences between the poem and the clip in the presentation of mother-daughter relationship (e.g. the poem seems to present a warmer and more affectionate relationship between the mother and daughter than the clip. While the poem shows more the admiration of the daughter for the mother, the clip reveals more the darker emotions such as the sense of insecurity in the teenage daughter's mind as she flips through the album and discovers the exciting life her mother had before she was born.)

2. Writing a short poem

This activity provides an opportunity for students to discover and explore their father/grandparent's past, as well as practise writing a poem based on some pictures. Teachers may ask students to explain how their creation is inspired by Carol Ann Duffy's poem. The assessment of students' work could primarily focus on the following areas:

- Characterisation and description of the person (e.g. details on his/her physical appearance, actions and speech, thoughts)
- Use of tone to establish the relationship between the person and the speaker (i.e. the student)
- Complexity of feelings and thoughts expressed in the poem

For more advanced students, teachers may set more requirements and assess students' performance in the following additional areas:

- Use of poetic techniques (e.g. imagery)
- Structure and form