POETRY

Section overview

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The nature of poetry

Poetry is the most stylised and abstract of literary forms. Although narratives, characters and settings can be found in poems, they are not essential; in many poems, time and place remain ill-defined, and characters are rarely fleshed out or developed.

- **The focus of poetry is on language:** its many complexities and nuances of meaning; its sounds as well as its sense; the patterns words can form on the printed page.
- **Poetry condenses meaning** into the most compact, rich and suggestive form possible.
- **Many poems seek to capture and evoke a mood or image.**
- When a poem does tell a story, its tendency is invariably to abstract out from the details of the plot to a larger statement about human experience.

Because of the condensed and often abstract quality of poetry, the meaning of many poems is not immediately apparent, and the skills of interpreting and analysing poetry take a long time to develop.

Features and conventions of poetry

There are many technical features that poets deploy to construct meaning and to generate effects. It is important that you know how to identify these technical features – which are discussed throughout this section – but identifying or describing them is not sufficient. You must go further and explain how these features are relevant to the poem as a whole.

Always link observations of rhythm and rhyme, and patterns of imagery and language, to the meaning of the poetry.

Overview of features and conventions

- Line lengths are determined by the poet, not by the width of the page.
- Lines are grouped together to form stanzas, the lengths of which are also determined by the poet (although some poetic forms have stanzas with fixed lengths).
- The sound of the words is as important as their literal meaning, and contributes to the overall meaning of the poem.
- The narrator of a poem is known as the speaker, who should not be automatically identified as the poet.
- Rhythm and rhyme are key tools of the poet, and there is a specialised vocabulary for describing their conventional patterns.
- Images, including similes, metaphors and symbols, contribute to the wider meaning of the poem by:
  - drawing connections between ostensibly different objects or concepts
  - leading the reader's thoughts from the particular to the abstract
  - placing the specific details of the poem within a larger context – perhaps that of a nation, or of human history or experience, or of literature and art.

These features and conventions are now discussed in more detail, with numerous examples.
To simplify the text, sources of poems referred to are given on p.60.

★ Busy old fool, unruly sun,/Why dost thou thus,/Through windows, and through curtains call on us? ★

Line length

Prior to the 20th century, most poets adopted verse forms with regular line lengths. Irregular line lengths became much more prevalent in the 20th century as poets experimented with, and broke down, traditional forms in order to express new circumstances and attitudes.

Regular line lengths

- Regular line lengths result from a fixed number of syllables per line; the number of stressed syllables is usually constant, too (see 'Rhythm', pp.49–52).
- Lines of equal length generate a sense of order, regularity, predictability and coherence.

Irregular line lengths

- Irregular line lengths result from the number of syllables in each line varying according to the poet's creative choices.
- When line lengths vary, the poet has much greater freedom over how to end each line.

Irregular line lengths are a feature of much **poetry written in free verse** (see pp.53–4). They can generate an unpredictable or improvised quality; they can also help the poet to convey the feel and rhythms of ordinary speech. Consider these lines from the beginning of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's 'We are Going':

> They came in to the little town
> A semi-naked band subdued and silent,
> All that remained of their tribe.
> They came here to the place of their old bora ground
> Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.

The third line is slightly shorter, giving extra emphasis to its bleak statement; the following lines are longer, generating the sense of a story being told. The narrative continues from the point of view of the members of the tribe, until the final three short lines deliver a blunt message:

> 'The bora ring is gone.
> The corroboree is gone.
> And we are going.'

How to indicate line breaks in a quotation

When integrating poetry quotations within a sentence, indicate a line break with a forward slash, with no space before or after.

For example, consider these lines from Donne's 'The Sunne Rising':

> Thou sunne art halfe as happy'as wee,
> In that the world's contracted thus;
> Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee
> To warme the world, that's done in warming us.

You could discuss Donne's use of direct address as follows:

> the speaker addresses the sun as a contracted labourer, whose 'duties bee/To warme the world' ...

Punctuation and capitals should be retained from the original.

Stanzas

DEFINITION

A **stanza** is a group of lines that share an idea or set of images; stanzas are separated by a space. Stanzas in poetry are equivalent to paragraphs in prose.

In most traditional poetic forms, each stanza has the same number of lines: the number of lines determines how the stanza is named. The most common stanza lengths are:

- couplet – a two-line stanza
- tercet – a three-line stanza
- quatrain – a four-line stanza.

It is unusual for a poem to consist entirely of couplets, but rhyming couplets can be joined together to form longer stanzas. Similarly, tercets can be joined to form a six-line stanza (a sestet); quatrains can be joined to form an eight-line stanza (an octave) and so on.

Rhyme

DEFINITION

Rhyme is produced when the last syllables of two words have matching sounds. Lines rhyme when matching syllables occur at the ends of the lines.

- Rhyme was an important aid to memory when poetry was primarily an oral (rather than a written) tradition.
- Rhyme serves to group lines together, generating cohesion and structure.
- Rhyming lines are usually successive lines or separated by one or two other lines.

Notating rhyme schemes

Patterns of rhyme are conventionally notated by using lower case letters. The first line is *'a'* and subsequent lines use successive letters of the alphabet. (These letters are sometimes italicised, as they are here, but not always.)

Where a rhyme occurs at the end of a line, the appropriate letter is repeated. Thus:

- A rhyming couplet is indicated by *aa*:

> In the room the women come and go — ***a***
> Talking of Michelangelo. — ***a***
>
> (from TS Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock')

- A quatrain in which the second and fourth lines rhyme but the first and third lines do not is described as *abcb*:

> Break, break, break, — ***a***
> On thy cold gray stones, O Sea! — ***b***
> And I would that my tongue could utter — ***c***
> The thoughts that arise in me. — ***b***
>
> (from Tennyson, 'Break, Break, Break')

- The rhyme scheme of a limerick is *aabba*:

There was an old man of Calcutta,	***a***
Who coated his tonsils with butta,	***a***
Thus converting his snore	***b***
From a thunderous roar	***b***
To a soft, oleaginous mutta.	***a***

(Ogden Nash, 'Arthur')

Christina Rossetti's 'Maude Clare' consists of quatrains with an ***abcb*** rhyme scheme – the traditional rhyme scheme of a ballad. It also uses the ballad's regular rhythmic scheme, with lines of alternating iambic pentameter and iambic trimeter (see p.50 for explanations of these terms).

The use of rhyme in the second and fourth lines of each stanza reinforces the regular rhythm, and also groups the lines together in pairs, enabling the poem's narrative to flow smoothly. The rhyming words can reinforce each other (e.g. 'mien' and 'queen'; 'pride' and 'bride'), or they can highlight the poem's underlying tension (e.g. 'tears' and 'years').

Half rhyme and internal rhyme

Two more subtle uses of rhyme are:

- internal rhyme – which occurs when the rhyme occurs within a line rather than at line ends
- half rhyme – which occurs when the sounds are similar but not exactly matched.

Seamus Heaney often uses **half rhyme in combination with full rhyme**. This softens the impact of the repeated sounds (especially consonant sounds) while still creating echoes and resonances within the poem.

In 'Follower', a rhyming pattern which includes both half rhymes and full rhymes creates a subtle, shifting but coherent pattern of sounds that mirrors the pattern of furrows in the soil:

> My father worked with a horse-plough,
> His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
> Between the shafts and the furrow.
> The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

Each stanza contains a half rhyme (e.g. plough/furrow in the first and third lines of the first stanza) and a full rhyme (e.g. strung/tongue in the second and fourth lines). The lines which have half rhymes and full rhymes alternate in each stanza (e.g. in the second stanza the half rhyme sock/pluck occurs in the second and fourth lines), which prevents the rhyme scheme from being too obvious or predictable – just as the furrows in the soil are regular, but with the natural variations caused by the labour of man and animal.

Assonance and alliteration

Assonance and alliteration are repeated sounds that can occur anywhere within a line of a poem. To be most effective, assonance and alliteration should occur in words very close together – usually successive, or separated by only one other word.

DEFINITION

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds – this can produce a soothing effect if the vowel sounds are long.

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds – this can produce an edgy, brittle effect for consonants like 't' and 'p'.

Walt Whitman uses **alliteration and assonance** in 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life' to create a sense both of the water's movement and of the ebb and flow of the poet's thoughts. The repeated 's' sounds in the following lines clearly evoke the sound of waves on a beach:

> Chaff, straw, splinters of wood, weeds, and the sea-gluten,
> Scum, scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt-lettuce, left by the tide,
> Miles walking, the sound of breaking waves the other side of me ...

Notice too how Whitman varies the space between these 's' sounds, as well as varying the length of phrases, creating a natural, unforced rhythm to reflect the gentle coming and going of waves.

A slightly different set of sounds is used in the third part of this poem, as the poet's thoughts turn more inward:

> You oceans both, I close with you,
> We murmur alike reproachfully rolling sands and drift,
> knowing not why,
> These little shreds indeed standing for you and me and all.

The repeated 's' sounds are now joined by the more sonorous 'r' sounds and, especially, the **assonance** of a repeated long 'o' sound ('oceans', 'close', 'reproachfully rolling', 'knowing'). This sound contributes to a more reflective, meditative quality as the poet considers an analogy between the debris floating on the ocean or washed up on shores and his own place within the universe: 'I too am but a trail of drift and debris'.

Rhythm

Rhythm is an extremely important feature of poetry. The detailed attention poets give to rhythmic patterns means poetry has a very close relationship to music, which is even more evident when poetry is read aloud, as it is usually intended to be.

- The rhythm of a poem is produced by its pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.
- For example, in the line 'Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall', the syllables 'Hump', 'Dump', 'sat' and 'wall' are stressed or accentuated; they receive more emphasis than the other syllables, which are unstressed.
- A regular rhythm generates a sense of forward movement in the poem; it also creates a pleasing, reassuring quality, since the beat or pulse of the poem falls in a regular, predictable place.
- An irregular rhythm can convey a sense of unease or confusion.

Regular rhythmic patterns

Metre is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. Because of this regular pattern, each line can be broken down into a unit consisting of (usually) two or three syllables. This unit is known as a **foot**.

Metrical feet are named according to the number and sequence of stressed and unstressed syllables. The most common of these are defined in the table below.

How the metre is described	Name of the basic unit (the 'foot')	Definition	Example
iambic	iamb (pronounced 'i-am')	an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable	con**tent** (as in: 'I am feeling content with life')
trochaic	trochee (pronounced 'trokay')	a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable	**con**tent (as in: 'the content of this book includes poetry analysis')
anapaestic or anapestic	anapaest or anapest	two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable	Tennes**see**; with a **leap** | and a **bound**
dactylic	dactyl	a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables	**Ad**elaide; **Jo**sephine

The metre is named according to the *kind* of feet that each line is made up from (using terms in the left hand column above), and the *number* of feet in each line. The number is indicated by a Greek prefix (e.g. 'di-', 'tri-') in front of the word 'meter'.

Name of metre	Definition	Example of the metre	Example of poetry in this metre
dimeter	two feet per line	iambic dimeter (four syllables per line)	This like a dream Keeps other time (W. H. Auden, 'This lunar beauty')
trimeter	three feet per line	iambic trimeter (six syllables per line)	The heart asks Pleasure—first— And then—Excuse from Pain— (Emily Dickinson, 'The heart asks pleasure first')
tetrameter	four feet per line	anapaestic tetrameter (twelve syllables per line, two unstressed followed by one stressed)	For the Angel of Death spread his wings on the blast, And breathed in the face of the foe as he passed; And the eyes of the sleepers waxed deadly and chill, And their hearts but once heaved, and forever grew still! (Lord Byron, 'The Destruction of Sennacherib')
pentameter	five feet per line	iambic pentameter (ten syllables per line)	My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun (William Shakespeare, Sonnet 130) I love thee to the depth and breadth and height My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* No. 43)

Go tell court-huntsmen, that the King will ride,/Call country ants to harvest offices;

Note that:

- iambic pentameter is the most widely used of all metres; see 'blank verse' below (p.53)
- longer lines are sometimes used, though it is rare to have more than five feet per line.

Varying the rhythmic pattern

Poets vary the rhythmic scheme of a poem to:

- create variety
- draw attention to the meaning of particular words and phrases
- achieve an effect in sound or rhythm that mirrors or reflects the meaning of the words.

In analysing poetry, it is almost always more useful and interesting to comment on where the rhyme scheme is varied than simply to identify the main pattern.

Robert Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto' is written in **unrhymed iambic pentameter** ('blank verse'; see p.53). The poem is a dramatic monologue, presented as part of an argument between the speaker, Andrea del Sarto 'the faultless painter', and his wife Lucrezia. Browning uses variation in the metre and punctuation to help accentuate specific phrases and create moments of emphasis and tension. A consistent rhythm is established in the first line with the iambic metre, 'But **do** not **let** us **quar**rel **any more**', creating a calm and even tone for his entreaty.

However, his appeal '**No**, my Lu**cre**zia' begins the second line with a stressed syllable, giving his interjection more force than the usually unstressed first syllable of a line of iambic pentameter. This creates the impression that he is speaking over her attempts to argue and gives the line a tone of steadfastness and frustration. The tone is accentuated with the division of the line into shorter phrases, punctuated to create strong pauses with a comma and semicolon.

In the second half of the line the metre could be interpreted as returning to iambic feet, establishing a calmer tone: '**bear** with **me** for **once**'. Alternatively, the line could be read as continuing to disrupt the regular iambic metre to create a more insistent tone: 'bear **with** me for **once**'.

The iambic metre resumes in lines 3 and 4, producing a calmer tone that allows del Sarto to begin explaining his thoughts:

Sit **down** and **all** shall **hap**pen **as** you **wish**.
You **turn** your **face**, but **does** it **bring** your **heart**?

The 19th-century poet Christina Rossetti takes a **much more flexible approach to metre** in 'Memory'. The poem begins in iambic pentameter, but the fourth line of every quatrain has only three feet (iambic trimeter) instead of five, giving each stanza an abrupt, relatively terse ending. In the second part of the poem the second line of each stanza is also in iambic trimeter, and the fourth line of each drops another syllable to end on an unstressed rather than stressed syllable. The breakdown of the regular rhythmic scheme reflects the speaker's loss of control over their life, so that finally they can only look forward to 'how it will be in paradise/When we're together.'

Caesura

DEFINITION

A **caesura** is a pause or break in a line of poetry. It is often indicated by a comma, although it can also result from the natural rhythm of the words.

A caesura can signal a hesitation or brief rest, perhaps reflecting the meaning of the phrase, or simply regulating the pace and flow of the poem.

In 'Mid-Term Break', Seamus Heaney uses **caesura to create reflective pauses** as the speaker recollects the death of his brother in childhood. The early lines of the poem flow smoothly, but gradually the lines are interrupted more frequently by commas and then, after 'room' in the sixth stanza, by a full stop – signalling the moment when the speaker finally sees his brother in the coffin. In this stanza, the semicolon after 'bedside' and another full stop, after 'weeks', almost cause the forward movement of the poem to cease:

> Next morning I went up into the room. Snowdrops
> And candles soothed the bedside; I saw him
> For the first time in six weeks. Paler now ...

The poem's pace and rhythm, subtly controlled by caesura, thus perfectly capture the boy's sense of stillness, and perhaps of shock, in this transformative moment.

Enjambment

DEFINITION

Enjambment is the running-on of lines. This disrupts the conventional expectation of a pause at the end of each line, and breaks down a too-rigid adherence to a strict poetic form.

In the 20th century poets used enjambment extensively, sometimes running the last line of one stanza onto the first line of the next. This was part of an ongoing exploration and subversion of traditional boundaries and divisions in poetic form.

In 'The Joy of Writing' Wislawa Szymborska uses **enjambment and caesura** to help mimic the movement and reactions of the metaphorical deer she describes. In the first stanza of the poem, the doe stops to drink from a spring. The mood of this moment is quiet and gentle. The end-line punctuation of the first line creates a predictable, calm pause that is followed by two enjambed lines. The effect is to create a sense of flow, which reflects the undisturbed freedom and serenity:

> Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?
> For a drink of written water from a spring
> whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?

Yet in the fourth line, something enters the scene to disturb this natural balance, and the inclusion of a mid-line semicolon mimics the action of the doe stopping drinking, lifting her head and pausing to listen intently: 'Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?' The two short phrases, after the longer enjambed lines, create tension and a sense of anticipation that the safe, ideal world of the tranquil word-doe is about to be disturbed.

Major forms of poetry

There are a number of ways of defining the form of a poem:

- a fixed pattern of rhyme, rhythm and number of lines (e.g. a sonnet has fourteen lines and a rhyme scheme)
- the nature of the content and mood of a poem (e.g. ode; elegy)
- the way in which a story is told (e.g. dramatic monologue; epic).

Note that blank verse and free verse, two important types of verse, can be used in various forms of poetry.

Blank verse

DEFINITION

Blank verse is poetry written in unrhymed (hence 'blank') iambic pentameter.

- Most Shakespearean drama is in blank verse.
- The rhythm of blank verse is very close to that of normal speech in English.

The Romantic poets often used **blank verse**; the following example is the beginning of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey':

> Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
> Of five long winters! and again I hear
> These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
> With a soft inland murmur. —Once again
> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs ...

The (mostly) regular pattern of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables creates a consistent rhythm. This helps generate a suitable mood for this meditative reflection on the nature of memory.

Note, however, the emphatic tone generated by the unexpected stress on 'long' in the second line, emphasising the difficulty of enduring the winters as compared to the summers.

Free verse

DEFINITION

Free verse is poetry in which the line lengths and patterns of rhyme and rhythm are all irregular.

Free verse became widely used in the 20th century when poets experimented with form by breaking down traditional structures such as regular stanzas and rhyme schemes. There were strong precedents for the use of free verse in the work of 19th-century poets, especially that of the American poet Walt Whitman.

TS Eliot used **free verse** in his depiction of the alienating and dehumanising qualities of modern life (in the early 1900s). Eliot rejected traditional forms and regular patterns of rhyme and rhythm to reflect a sense that the former sources and structures of meaning could no longer convey the uncertainties of the time.

A famous example occurs at the opening of 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock':

> Let us go then, you and I,
> When the evening is spread out against the sky
> Like a patient etherised upon a table ...

The regular alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in the first line is immediately disrupted by the longer second line, in which stressed syllables are separated by two or three unstressed syllables (mimicking the meaning of the phrase 'spread out').

The strong sense of purpose established by the first line is thus immediately negated not only by the images of inertness and diffuseness, but also by the irregular rhythms and line lengths of the stanza.

Note that writing in free verse does not mean that rhyme is never used, but that it is used irregularly, and with a particular purpose rather than as an automatic consequence of the form.

Free verse can mean much more than the use of irregular line lengths; it allows the poet to experiment with every aspect of language, including:

- the placement of words on the page
- the unconventional use of punctuation marks – e.g. omitting punctuation entirely.

Lyric

DEFINITION

The **lyric** is the most common poetic form. It was originally accompanied by music, and the term retains this meaning (as in 'song lyric'). A lyric poem:

- is relatively short
- is in the voice of a single 'character', known as the speaker
- uses a personal tone that conveys the speaker's private thoughts and feelings to the reader/listener
- often focuses on a moment, mood or image.

There are many forms or structures in which a lyric can be written: a series of quatrains is the most common. In Renaissance Italy and Elizabethan England the most popular form of lyric was the sonnet, which usually focused on the subject of romantic love (see below). Lyrics can also be religious or mystical in nature.

Sonnet

DEFINITION

A **sonnet** is a fourteen-line poem usually written in iambic pentameter, and typically in one of a few established rhyme schemes.

Sonnets are conventionally about love, but can also be religious – Donne's *Holy Sonnets* are famous examples of the latter – or, more recently, about everyday experience.

The main sonnet forms are defined in the following table. Although apparently quite strict, the sonnet form has proved to be flexible enough for considerable variation and experiment.

Type of sonnet	Rhyme scheme	Structure
Petrarchan named after the Renaissance Italian poet Petrarch	***abbaabba cdecde*** or ***abbaabba cdcdcd***	• the first eight lines are the octave; the last six lines are the sestet • the octave develops the main idea or problem; the sestet provides a response or resolution
Shakespearean (sometimes known as 'English') Shakespeare used this form throughout his cycle of 154 sonnets	***abab cdcd efef gg***	• the three quatrains develop different aspects of the main idea • the final rhyming couplet resolves the argument
Spenserian named after the Elizabethan English poet Edmund Spenser	***abab bcbc cdcd ee***	• the three linked quatrains develop the main idea • the final rhyming couplet generates a sense of closure and resolution

Although Shakespeare is extremely consistent in his use of the rhyme scheme *abab cdcd efef gg* throughout his **154 sonnets**, there are some exceptions. One of these is Sonnet 126, the last of the group of sonnets addressed to a young man. Not only is the rhyme scheme different – rhyming couplets are used throughout – but the final two lines are missing.

The effect of this structure is to give the poem a slightly abrupt feel, consistent with poet's warning about Time. The first eight lines (the octave) express admiration for the young man's apparent control over Time's passing, with his youthful beauty being preserved by Nature. The final four lines, though, suggest that he cannot remain Nature's darling forever, and eventually she (Nature) will have to release him. This quatrain, two lines shorter than the usual sestet, thus appropriately delivers a blunt, emphatic message about the inevitability of physical decline and Time's ultimate mastery over our lives.

In the 19th century, Romantic poets such as John Keats (e.g. 'Bright Star') continued to use the sonnet form, as did poets in the Victorian period. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* – including 'How do I love thee?' – is a famous sonnet cycle about love. Christina Rossetti also used the sonnet form, often to express feelings of loss or unhappiness.

Poets in the 20th century used the sonnet form quite flexibly, not always adhering to fixed schemes of rhythm or rhyme, and exploring a wide range of subjects, though the length of fourteen lines is a constant feature. Seamus Heaney, for example, uses the sonnet to reflect on the history of relations between England and Ireland in 'Requiem for the Croppies' and 'Act of Union'.

Ode

DEFINITION

The **ode** is another type of lyric poem, often in the form of an address. Its distinguishing features are:

- a ceremonial, stately quality
- a formal rather than informal tone
- a complex stanza form.

There are two main kinds of odes:

- for a public occasion
- for private reflection.

John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is an **ode** of the private kind, in five ten-line stanzas which follow the rhyme scheme *abab cdedce* (or with a variation of this rhyme sequence in the sestet).

The speaker admires the urn's beauty, which transcends the passage of time; the two lovers depicted on its surface 'cannot fade'. Yet, nor can the 'Bold Lover' ever succeed in kissing his beloved.

Thus, the poem is a tribute to the beauty and permanence of art, while also acknowledging what art fails to capture – the vitality and sensuousness of life.

Dramatic monologue

DEFINITION

A **dramatic monologue** contrasts with a lyric: it is a longer poem in which the speaker is more strongly characterised and developed.

- The 'dramatic' quality of the poem comes from a situation described by the speaker.
- There is more of a 'storytelling' aspect to a dramatic monologue than in a lyric.

The (English) Victorian poets Lord Alfred Tennyson and Robert Browning wrote several **dramatic monologues**; 'Ulysses' (Tennyson) and 'My Last Duchess' (Browning) are examples.

Epic

DEFINITION

The **epic** is the longest and most narrative-driven form of poetry. Its subject is usually on a grand scale, encompassing events of a momentous nature and/or occurring over a number of years.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) is the most famous **epic** poem written in English. It describes the original sin of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the garden of Eden; each of its twelve 'books' is several hundred lines in length.

A much older epic poem is *Beowulf*, written between the 8th and 11th centuries in Old English, an early form of the English language. It has been translated into modern English a number of times: one of the most recent translations is by the contemporary Irish poet, Seamus Heaney (published in 1999).

Imagery: simile, metaphor and symbol

Because of poetry's close focus on language, the multiple meanings and suggestions of words are more fundamental to the overall sense of a poem than in any other literary form.

- Carefully consider the connotations of words alongside their literal meanings.
- Analyse the significance and impact of images as closely as you would study the narrative or plot of a novel.

Simile

DEFINITION

A **simile** compares two different things using 'like' or 'as'. The comparison:

- draws the reader's attention to a particular quality of the first term
- connects the first term with other terms that have similar images associated with them.

In Carole Ann Duffy's 'Warming Her Pearls', the speaker dreams about a woman referred to only as 'my mistress':

> I dust her shoulders with a rabbit's foot,
> watch the soft blush seep through her skin
> like an indolent sigh.

The **simile** 'like an indolent sigh' deliberately mixes two senses, sight (the blush is something seen) and sound (a sigh is heard), suggesting the extent of the speaker's infatuation: the senses merge and comingle in this rapturous fantasy. However, the 'indolent sigh' also suggests indifference, hinting that the speaker's longing will remain unfulfilled – as the end of the poem confirms.

Metaphor

DEFINITION

A **metaphor** describes one thing as if it is another thing.

- Metaphors are extremely effective in making us look at the world of familiar objects and experiences in unexpected, revealing and refreshing ways.
- Another way of thinking about a metaphor is as a statement of equivalence between two different things, e.g. 'the camel **is** the ship of the desert'.