Historical overview

This section offers a brief overview of some of the principal writers and movements in the history of English poetry.

Medieval English poetry

The leading English poet of the Middle Ages was **Geoffrey Chaucer**, who was born around 1340 and died in 1400. He is discussed in the next section of this chapter (pages 52–53). Longer works by medieval writers other than Chaucer are not usually set for AS/A2 study, though shorter poems may feature in examining board anthologies. The language of the period, known as **Middle English**, was very different from today's English and is described more fully on page 18.

Take note

Other important medieval poets include **William Langland** (who wrote *Piers Plowman*), **Sir Thomas Malory** and **John Skelton**.

Metaphysical poetry

Metaphysical poetry is a term used to refer to the works of a group of 17th-century poets, including **John Donne**, **Andrew Marvell** and **George Herbert**. The Metaphysicals are associated with an intellectual approach to emotional topics, and with the use of strikingly unusual **images**. Donne's love poetry, for example, displays his considerable learning and is full of references to scientific and geographical discoveries. His poems often take the form of complex, carefully developed arguments, incorporating clever **paradoxes** and **puns**. He is also noted for his ingenious **conceits**: surprising comparisons between things that are apparently dissimilar. In *Batter my heart (Holy Sonnet XIV)*, he compares himself to a besieged town, and in *A Valediction: forbidding mourning* the souls of two lovers are compared to a pair of geometric compasses:

If they be two, they are two so
  As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul the fixed foot, makes no show
  To move, but doth, if th'other do.

Checkpoint 1

Define the terms **paradox** and **pun**.

Checkpoint 2

What does this image tell us about the relationship between the lovers?

18th-century poetry

The 18th century includes the **Augustan** period in English Literature, which is generally identified as lasting from 1700 to 1745. The most important English poet from this time is **Alexander Pope**. In 18th-century poetry there is less emphasis on love and religion (the major themes addressed by 17th-century poets) and a greater preoccupation with society, manners and morals. There was also a belief in order, reason and control, and this was reflected in the widespread use of the **heroic couplet**: pairs of rhyming **iambic pentameter** lines, a verse form noted for its rhythmic balance and precision.

Take note

During the Augustan period, there was a strong interest in the classical writers of the ancient world, whose works were admired and imitated (the original Augustan age was under the Roman Emperor Augustus, from 27BC to AD14).

The jargon

Iambic pentameter is a metre comprising five pairs of syllables, with the stress falling on the second syllable in each pair.

Romantic poetry

The **Romantic** period runs roughly from 1789 (the year of the French Revolution) to the middle of the 19th century. Notable Romantic poets include **William Blake**, **William Wordsworth**, **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**, **John Keats**, **Percy Bysshe Shelley** and **Lord Byron**. The Romantic movement can be seen as a reaction against the 18th-century commitment to order and reason. The Romantic poets stress the importance of human emotions, and celebrate and explore the individual consciousness (they had a particular interest in the power of the imagination). There is an enthusiasm for nature, especially those parts of the landscape that had not been shaped and ordered by human intervention; mountains are a recurring symbol of beauty and mystery in Romantic verse. There is also a nostalgia for simple rural society, for an environment in which people lived and worked in harmony with nature, and a new interest in the attitudes and experiences of ordinary country people. The regard for unspoilt, natural man was accompanied by an exploration of the insights of childhood, an interest that is most evident in the poetry of Wordsworth and Blake. In Wordsworth's *Immortality Ode*, the child is addressed as *Thou best Philosopher* and *Mighty Prophet*.

Later poetry

Poetry since 1900 has been immensely varied, but it is possible to identify some broad patterns and movements. The poets of the **First World War**, such as **Wilfred Owen**, brought a new kind of realism to English poetry, with shocking images of violence and suffering. **Modernist poetry**, which is associated with the first half of the 20th century, can be seen in part as a response to the horrors of global conflict, and to the uncertainties of a world experiencing continual industrial and technological change. Modernist poets such as **T.S. Eliot**, **W.B. Yeats** and **Ezra Pound** deliberately rejected old poetic forms and conventions, producing complex, experimental poetry which reflected a sense of disintegration and confusion. They developed **free verse**, which broke the conventions of traditional metre, with its patterns of regularly stressed syllables and standard line lengths. The modernist approach has continued to be influential, and much late-20th-century poetry is in this tradition. In contrast, there have also been more conventional, anti-experimental poets – notably **Thomas Hardy**, who began writing in the 19th century but lived until 1928, and **Philip Larkin**, who became established as a major poet in the 1950s. The later decades of the century also saw the emergence of a number of important women poets, coinciding with the growing influence of **feminism**. Examples include **Sylvia Plath**, **Carol Ann Duffy** and **Fleur Adcock**.

Exam preparation (30 minutes)

Select a poem from the poetry text you are studying and consider how the poem reflects the time that it was written. (Alternatively, use a poem from the *Specimen texts* section, pages 68–69.) Consider such aspects as: language; form and structure; subject matter; attitudes and values; social and historical references.

Examiner's secrets

You will be given credit for showing knowledge and understanding of the **historical contexts** of literary works. However, you should make sure you focus on those aspects of context that are clearly relevant to, or reflected in, the works you are discussing.

Take note

English language poetry has also become increasingly **multicultural**. The poetry of **Grace Nichols**, for example, reflects on her experiences as a black woman living in Britain, and on the slavery of her West Indian ancestors.

Chaucer

If you are studying a Chaucer text and have not encountered Chaucer's poetry before, the text will inevitably appear strange when you first look at it. It is more than 600 years since Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, and written English has changed a great deal in that time. However, the language hurdle is really not too difficult to overcome, and it is worth the effort – Chaucer's poetry has tremendous energy, wit and descriptive power.

Take note

Chaucer was born around 1340 (his exact date of birth is unknown) and died in 1400. His father was a prosperous wine merchant, so Chaucer was familiar with the middle-class world of business from an early age. Later he moved in aristocratic circles, holding several positions in the royal court. His equivalent today would be a high-ranking civil servant: his posts included controller of customs in the port of London, and he also frequently travelled abroad on diplomatic missions.

Chaucer's language

The key to coming to terms with Chaucer's language is perseverance. If you try reading a page of Chaucer, you should find that you can pick up the general gist of much of it, though there will probably be some passages that are incomprehensible. You should make full use of the notes and glossary that are included in all good editions of Chaucer texts, and work carefully through the poem, a section at a time.

Here are some important aspects of Chaucer's language:

Historical context

Chaucer's life coincided with an important period in the history of the English language. Following the Norman conquest in 1066, French became the language of the ruling class and, in terms of prestige, English was a poor third to French and Latin (the language of the church). For centuries English, while continuing in use as a spoken language, was rarely written down. But during Chaucer's time English was slowly re-establishing itself. In 1362 Parliament was opened in English for the first time, and in 1399 (the year before Chaucer died) the first English-speaking king for three centuries, Henry IV, came to the throne. The English language of Chaucer's day (known as **Middle English**) had however been transformed by the influence of French: an estimated 10,000 words of French origin were added to our vocabulary over a 300-year period. These new words were often elegant and refined, in contrast to the older Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, which was more earthy and direct.

Examiner's secrets

Don't forget:

- In the exam you will have to refer to the original text. So you need to get used to reading and analysing Chaucer's language.
- Don't get so immersed in trying to understand the language that you lose sight of the bigger picture – the characters and themes. When you engage with the text on this level you should find that it is very accessible. Many of Chaucer's storylines are humorous and entertaining, and his tales have survived through the centuries because his characters have retained an instantly recognisable humanity.

Checkpoint 1

Name three groups of foreign invaders who influenced the development of English before the arrival of the French in 1066.

Lexis

The lexis of Chaucer's poems reflects the contrast between French and Anglo-Saxon: he often uses French-derived vocabulary to achieve a grander, more elevated tone, and Anglo-Saxon vocabulary when he is describing ordinary people or situations, or being deliberately crude and blunt. Many words used by Chaucer are recognisable to a modern reader, but some caution is needed, as in some cases the meaning of the word has changed over time. For example, the meaning of *sentence* when used by Chaucer is 'meaning' or 'opinion'.

Grammar

Word order is sometimes different from today's English. Syntax is often **inverted** (meaning the order of the grammatical elements is the reverse of what we would expect). The description of Alison in *The Miller's Tale* begins *Fair was this yonge wyf*, not 'This yonge wyf was fair' (incidentally, note how Chaucer's construction has the advantage of stressing *Fair*). Another grammatical feature of Middle English is that several **inflections** (word endings that serve a grammatical function) were in use that later disappeared from the language. These include *-th* or *-eth* at the ends of verbs (*maketh*, *toucheth*) and *-en* as a verb ending (*slepen*) or to indicate a noun is plural (*eyen* for 'eyes').

Checkpoint 2

Give two examples of inflections that still exist in contemporary English.

Phonology

Sound is especially important in Chaucer's poems because he was working within an **oral** literary tradition. Poetry was generally intended to be read aloud to groups of listeners. As you are reading your text, try to imagine how it would sound when spoken, and look for effects achieved by the sounds of words. If you can, listen to a tape of the text being read in Middle English. Alternatively, many editions of Chaucer's poems include some guidance on pronunciation.

The Canterbury Tales

The Canterbury Tales consists of stories told by a group of pilgrims who are on their way from London to Canterbury. In the opening poem, *The General Prologue*, the narrator (who identifies himself as one of the pilgrims) gives a description of his companions and explains the proposal for a story-telling competition. Each pilgrim is to tell four stories, two on the outward journey and two as they return. As there are over 30 pilgrims, a complete *Canterbury Tales* would have comprised over 120 tales. In fact Chaucer never completed the work, and there are only 24 tales, spread over an assortment of manuscripts, some containing sequences of several tales, some only one tale.

Chaucer seems to have chosen the situation of a pilgrimage because it enabled him to present a marvellous panorama of medieval life. His pilgrims cover a range of ages, occupations and classes, and their personalities and moral natures are equally varied. This diversity is also reflected in the stories they tell. In most of the poems there is a close relationship between the tale and its teller, and if you are studying one of the tales you will probably find that the **role of the narrator** is a key topic. The portrait of the relevant pilgrim in *The General Prologue* is a good place to start. You then need to look closely at how the tale reflects the pilgrim's attitudes, values and personality.

Take note

With some tales it is also useful to consider how the poem relates to other tales. For example, *The Miller's Tale* immediately follows *The Knight's Tale*, and while there are interesting parallels between the two stories, the contrasts are even more striking.

Exam preparation (45 minutes)

Write an essay examining the character and role of the narrator in the tale that you are studying. Refer closely to Chaucer's use of language in your answer.

Poetic form and structure

Examiner's secrets

Remember, your primary focus must always be on the **meaning** of the poem. How does the poet **use** the form of the poem to convey thoughts, feelings and ideas?

This section is concerned with the overall shape and organisation of poems. The terms **form** and **structure** are often used interchangeably, but form is really a narrower term referring to the kinds of poetry poets use to organise their thoughts and ideas – sonnets, couplets, blank verse and so on. Structure refers to the overall arrangement of a poem. This can include the poem's form, but it also includes such elements as the sequence of ideas (for example, how the poem begins and ends).

Stanzas

A **stanza** is a section of a poem consisting of several lines of verse. Many poems are divided into stanzas of equal length (e.g. three or four lines). Four-line stanzas, known as **quatrains**, are especially common, and are often combined with a regular **metre** and **rhyme scheme**. If a poem is organised into stanzas, you should think about why this is and about the relationship between the stanzas. How does the poem develop as it moves from stanza to stanza? Are there important contrasts between individual stanzas?

Links

Metre and **rhyme** are important aspects of poetic form. See pages 62–65.

Lyric poetry

The majority of poems can be classified as **lyric poetry**. A lyric poem expresses an individual's thoughts and feelings. Lyrics are usually quite short, and the most common subject is love. **Sonnets**, **odes** and **elegies** (see below) are all examples of lyric poetry. Apart from the lyric, the other dominant type of poetry is **narrative poetry** (see opposite page).

Sonnets

Links

For more on the **iambic pentameter**, see page 62.

A **sonnet** is a poem of 14 lines, with a rhythm usually based on the **iambic pentameter**. The two most common kinds of sonnet are the **Petrarchan** and the **Shakespearean**:

- The **Petrarchan** sonnet uses a rhyme scheme that divides the poem into two sections, an **octave** (the first eight lines) and a **sestet** (the last six lines). The rhyme scheme is usually *abbaabba*, *cdecde* (or *cdcdcd*).
- The **Shakespearean** sonnet has three **quatrains** (units of four lines each) and ends with a **couplet** (a pair of rhyming lines). The usual rhyme scheme is *abab*, *cdcd*, *efef*, *gg*.

The sonnet is an Italian form that entered English poetry in the 16th century. The earliest English sonnets were love poems. Love has continued to be the topic most strongly associated with sonnets, but poets have used the form for a great variety of subjects; religious sonnets are also common, and the Romantic poets wrote many sonnets about nature.

Checkpoint 1

Name three Romantic poets.

If you are analysing a sonnet, you should look closely at the relationship between the different sections of the poem, as the divisions often mark shifts in meaning or attitude. In Petrarchan sonnets, for instance, the octave sometimes outlines a situation or problem, while the sestet offers a response to it. In Shakespearean sonnets, the final couplet may express a concluding thought or introduce a new idea.

Odes

An **ode** is an elaborate lyric poem, often extending over several stanzas, usually addressed to a person, object or idea. Odes are also usually serious poems that praise the person or thing addressed, and meditate upon its qualities. Famous odes include Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, Keats's *Ode to Autumn* and Marvell's *Horatian Ode upon Cromwell's Return from Ireland*.

Elegies

An **elegy** is a poem that mourns someone's death, such as Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, which was written in memory of A.H. Hallam, a friend of the poet. The term is also sometimes applied more generally to solemn, contemplative poems. Thomas Gray's famous *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* is a reflective poem about death.

Narrative poetry

Narrative poetry is poetry that tells a story. Before novels became popular in the 18th century, stories were usually told in verse, and even after the advent of the novel many poets continued to write narrative verse. The two main forms of narrative poetry are the **epic** and the **ballad**:

- **Epics** are long poems, often about mythical heroes, and often with grand, impressive settings and elements of the supernatural.
- **Ballads** tell stories in simple, everyday language. The emphasis is on action and dialogue, with description usually kept to a minimum. Many ballads use the traditional **ballad metre**, which comprises rhyming **quatrains** (four-line stanzas) of alternate four-stress and three-stress lines. Also common is the use of a **refrain** – the regular repetition of words or lines, usually at the end of a stanza.

Exam preparation (30 minutes) answer: page 70

Text A on page 68 is a sonnet by Shakespeare, *My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun*. Explore the poet's attitude towards the woman described in this poem, referring closely to his use of language and of the sonnet form.

Links

The *Specimen texts* section on pages 68–69 includes three examples of sonnets.

Examiner's secrets

As well as identifying the form of a poem, consider other elements of its structure. How does it begin, develop and end? Does the structural pattern of the poem change or break down at any point?

Checkpoint 2

An example of an **epic** poem is *Paradise Lost*, a long 17th-century religious poem about the fall of man. Who wrote it?

Poetic imagery

The term **imagery** is sometimes used very broadly to refer to any aspect of a piece of writing that appeals to the reader's senses – a visual description, for example, or a description of a sound or a taste. More narrowly, the term also refers specifically to the use in literature of **comparisons**, especially **similies, metaphors** and **personification**. Imagery can occur in any kind of text, but is especially common in poetry.

Checkpoint 1

List five other figurative expressions in everyday use.

Take note

A word or expression that is not meant to be taken literally is also known as a **figure of speech**.

Examiner's secrets

Never simply write, 'There is a metaphor in the third stanza'. Always explain what is being compared, and what the effect or significance of the comparison is.

Figurative and literal language

Literal language means what it says. **Figurative** language is language that is not literally true. If the sentence *He kicked the bucket* refers to someone who lost their temper and kicked over a pail of water, it is literal. If it is a colloquial remark meaning someone died, it is figurative.

In the texts you are studying you will probably encounter a large amount of figurative language. Poets in particular use comparisons to make their writing more vivid, suggestive or precise. When you come across an image, you should ask yourself these questions:

- What are the two things that are being compared? Here the terms **tenor** and **vehicle** are useful – see **metaphors** below.
- How are they similar? Often there is more than one similarity.
- What is conveyed or achieved by the comparison? For example, the comparison may highlight a particular characteristic of the thing that is being described.
- What is the significance of the comparison in relation to the text as a whole? There may be links with other images in the text, or the comparison may relate in some way to an important theme.

Similes

A **simile** is a comparison that uses the words *like* or *as*. This example is from Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge* (see page 67).

> This City now doth, like a garment, wear
> The beauty of the morning

The simile *like a garment* compares London's early morning splendour to a beautiful piece of clothing. It suggests how the buildings are bathed in sunlight, and also implies that the beauty is transitory, that London is not always as beautiful as this (clothing is not worn all the time).

Metaphors

Whereas a simile acknowledges that the things being compared are separate (by using *like* or *as*), a **metaphor** goes one stage further and describes something as if it actually were something else – what is said is not literally true. In the following extract from the poem *Last Lesson of the Afternoon*, D.H. Lawrence (who briefly worked as a teacher) uses the metaphor of a hunt to describe the situation in a classroom as the school day draws to a close:

> When will the bell ring, and end this weariness?
> How long have they tugged the leash, and strained apart,
> My pack of unruly hounds! I cannot start
> Them again on a quarry of knowledge they hate to hunt,
> I can haul them and urge them no more.

Much of the language here is metaphorical. For example, the pupils are not really a pack of hounds, and they have not been tugging on a leash. The image is effective because the comparison with a hunt works in several different ways. The pupils are like a pack of hunting hounds in that they are noisy and restless. The teacher resembles a huntsman who has the hounds on a leash but is struggling to control them, just as the teacher is struggling to control the class. The pupils are meant to be searching for knowledge, in the same way that hounds are meant to pursue a *quarry* (which might, for example, be a fox). However, the pupils are not interested in the search for knowledge, so that they are like hounds being urged to pursue a quarry *they hate to hunt*.

A metaphor such as this which is introduced and then **developed**, either over several lines (as here) or over a complete text, is called an **extended metaphor**. Two other relevant terms are **tenor** and **vehicle**: the tenor is the subject of the metaphor (in this case, the situation in the classroom), the vehicle is what it is compared with (here, a hunt).

Personification

Personification occurs when something that is not human or alive is described as if it were. The earlier quotation from *Composed upon Westminster Bridge* is an example of personification, because London is compared to someone wearing a garment. There is more personification elsewhere in the poem:

> Dear God! the very houses seem asleep,
> And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Exam preparation (30 minutes) answer: page 70

Text B on page 68 is *Holy Sonnet XIV*, written by the Metaphysical poet John Donne (see page 50). Examine Donne's use of imagery in this poem.

Checkpoint 2

Comment on the effectiveness of the verbs in this extract.

The jargon

There are also terms for the ways that images appeal to our senses:

- a **visual** image appeals to our sense of sight;
- an **auditory** (or aural) image appeals to our sense of hearing;
- a **tactile** image appeals to our sense of touch;
- an **olfactory** image appeals to our sense of smell;
- a **gustatory** image appeals to our sense of taste.

Watch out!

The term **tenor** can also mean 'register'.

Lexis in poetry

Lexis is of course important in any kind of text, but as poems usually contain relatively few words, the words that are there have to work that much harder. As a result, poets choose their words with particular care and are very conscious of their suggestive power.

The jargon

The term **poetic diction** is sometimes used for the vocabulary employed by poets. **Lexical choice** is a term used for a writer's choice of vocabulary.

Watch out!

Be careful before making sweeping statements about how 'formal' or 'informal' a text is. Sometimes there are different levels of formality within the same text.

Levels of formality

As with other kinds of text, an initial point to consider when examining the lexis of a poem is how **formal** it is. Formal vocabulary tends to be associated with more serious subjects and also with older texts. If there is evidence of **informality**, you should look for examples to quote, and should also consider *why* the poet has chosen to use informal lexis. For example, it may help to suggest a speaking voice, give us a sense of the character of the narrator, or be appropriate in some way to the attitudes expressed in the poem or to the poem's subject matter. Although informality is more common in modern poetry, it can occur in older poems, as the opening of *The Good Morrow* by the 17th-century poet John Donne illustrates:

> I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
> Did till we lov'd?

Here the direct, largely monosyllabic vocabulary, the colloquial-sounding expression *by my troth*, and the rhythmic stress on *Did* combine to create the impression of natural speech.

The informal lexis may include **non-standard vocabulary**, especially if the poem seeks to recreate a regional or national **dialect**. Some of Grace Nichols's poems, for example, combine **Creole** and **Standard English** in order to reflect the narrator's Afro-Caribbean background. This extract is from *Caribbean Woman Prayer*:

> An talking bout politics Lord
> I hope you give de politicians dem
> de courage to do what they have to do
> an to mek dem see dat tings must grow
> from within
> an not from without

"I like working in both Standard English and Creole. I tend to want to fuse the two tongues because I come from a background where the two worlds were constantly interacting... Some Creole expressions are very vivid and concise and have no equivalent in English."

Grace Nichols

Checkpoint 1

What points could be made about **phonology** and **grammar** in the extract from *Caribbean Woman Prayer*?

Connotation

The **connotations** of a word are its associations – the emotions, sensations and attitudes that it evokes. Very broadly, words can have **positive** or **negative** connotations, but you should also try to be more precise about the particular connotations of specific words. Consider, for example, the beginning of William Blake's *London*:

> I wander thro' each charter'd street
> Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
> And mark in every face I meet
> Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

The connotations of several of the words in this stanza can be commented upon. Most obviously, *weakness* and *woe* both have connotations of suffering (though *weakness* may also suggest powerlessness). *Charter'd* is a more complex word. Literally, it means having official approval and recognition, usually from the ruling monarch or the government. In Blake's poem as a whole a theme of oppression emerges, and his use of *charter'd* suggests how much of life is controlled and regulated – even the River Thames, which ought to *flow* freely. The **repetition** of *charter'd* reinforces the point: there is no escape from the power of authority. *Marks* is **ambiguous** (i.e. it has more than one meaning). As an **abstract** word, it suggests that the expressions on people's faces are an indication of their misery. As a **concrete** word, it is more powerful, implying that people's suffering is physically etched on their faces. Again, **repetition** is important: as well as *marks* occurring twice, there is also *mark*, which here means 'notice'. The pattern of repetition in the poem suggests that the despair Blake observes is all around him, and creates linguistically a feeling of imprisonment – a sense of being trapped in a cycle of words.

Take note

This analysis illustrates some important aspects of lexis that can be noted when you are analysing a poem. Look for:

- words with similar **connotations**;
- words with **contrasting** meanings or connotations (in this example, *charter'd* and *flow* contrast);
- **repetition** of particular words;
- **ambiguity**;
- whether words are **abstract** or **concrete**, and the effects this has.

Archaisms and neologisms

An **archaism** is a word or expression that is no longer in general use. Obviously the presence of archaic diction will usually indicate an older text, though poets occasionally use archaisms deliberately, for example if a poem is set in the past and the poet wants to create an authentic mood and atmosphere.

A **neologism** is a newly **coined** word or expression. A poet might use up-to-date language to give the poetry an added sense of contemporary relevance, or because neologisms have a freshness and vitality sometimes lacking in older vocabulary. Poets also sometimes create words and expressions of their own. In *Dulce et Decorum Est* Wilfred Owen describes a group of First World War soldiers:

> Many had lost their boots,
> But limped on, blood-shod.

The **coinage** here is the **compound** *blood-shod*. 'Shod' means 'wearing on the feet', and is usually applied to shoes. Owen means the soldiers who have lost their boots have feet caked with blood. He has created an original expression by combining two words in an unexpected way, and by changing a single vowel in the existing word 'bloodshed'.

Example

The use of *mark* to mean 'notice' in the Blake extract above is an example of an **archaism**.

Checkpoint 2

What is a **compound**?

Exam preparation

See page 61 for a practice question relevant to this and the following section.

Grammar in poetry

Watch out!

When analysing texts, refer to 'non-standard' grammar rather than to 'wrong' or 'incorrect' grammar.

There is more deviation from the usual rules of grammar in poetry than in prose. This is partly because a flexible attitude to elements of grammar such as word order is sometimes needed to meet the demands of poetic form (e.g. rhyme and metre). At the same time, modern poetry tends to be less respectful of traditional poetic conventions (see page 51), and part of this freer approach is a greater willingness to break normal grammatical rules. This section looks at some areas of grammar to focus on if you are analysing a poem.

Word classes

Checkpoint 1

Explain the difference between **dynamic** and **stative** verbs.

Does a particular type of **word class** tend to recur, either in the poem as a whole or in a particular part of it? If so, does this have any effect? For example, a large number of **dynamic verbs** might create an impression of action and excitement.

Types of sentence

Links

The terms for different types of sentence are explained on page 12.

What **kinds of sentence** are used – **declarative, imperative, exclamatory, interrogative**? In *Composed upon Westminster Bridge* (see page 67), exclamatory sentences stress how moved Wordsworth is by the scene before him:

> Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
> And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Sentence length

Consider the effects of **unusually long** or **short sentences**. Philip Larkin's *MCMXIV* describes Britain at the outbreak of the First World War. The entire poem, which is 32 lines long, consists of a single sentence. Because the poem never moves forward to another sentence, the effect is to reinforce the impression that Larkin has tried to freeze a moment in time, evoking a world that was about to change irrevocably (the last line of the poem is *Never such innocence again*).

Word order

Look for unusual **word order**, which may cause particular words to be **foregrounded** (brought to the reader's attention). In *The Best of School*, D.H. Lawrence (the author of *Last Lesson of the Afternoon*, referred to on page 57) describes teaching children who are absorbed in their studies:

> and I,
> As I sit on the shores of the class, alone,
> Watch the boys in their summer blouses
> As they write, their round heads busily bowed

Note how the word order and the punctuation stress the word *alone* by isolating it (Lawrence does not write 'As I sit alone'). The positioning of the word at the end of the line reinforces this. The effect is to emphasise the teacher's separation from the pupils.

Look also for **patterns** in the grammatical constructions used, such as **parallelism** (the repetition of similar grammatical structures). In the second stanza of Blake's *London* (see page 58), parallelism strengthens the impression that Blake is surrounded by misery and oppression:

> In every cry of every Man,
> In every Infant's cry of fear,
> In every voice, in every ban,
> The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

The parallelism here is created by the series of **noun phrases** beginning *every* . . .

Take note

The word *ban* in this extract means 'curse' (though the word may have a double meaning).

Checkpoint 2

What do you think Blake means by *mind-forg'd manacles*?

Non-standard grammar

As explained in the introduction to this section, **non-standard grammar** occurs more commonly in poetry than prose. Nevertheless, when you encounter it, it is still important to consider why it is a feature of a particular poem. For example, as with non-standard vocabulary (see page 58), non-standard grammar may be part of an attempt to evoke a narrator's social or regional background.

Use of first person

If the poem is written in the **first person** (using words such as *I* and *me*), be careful not to assume that the poet is necessarily the narrator. What kind of feelings, attitudes and tone does the narrator have, and how does the language of the poem reflect this? What view of the narrator does the poet have, and what view is the reader intended to have?

Tense

Tense may be significant, especially if it changes (e.g. switching from past to present, or vice versa). The present tense tends to be associated with a feeling of immediacy.

Exam preparation (30 minutes) answer: pages 70–71

William Blake's *London* has been referred to in this section and the preceding one (pages 58–59). The poem in full appears on page 69 (**Text C**). Write an analysis of the poem, focusing in particular on Blake's use of lexis and grammar.

Watch out!

As some of the examples on this page illustrate, individual lines will often contain slight variations on the metre the poet is using. These prevent the metre sounding rigid and predictable.

Checkpoint 1

The example of dactylic metre is from Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Is the metre appropriate to a description of cavalry charging into battle?

Rhythm is a general term for the pace, speed or 'movement' of a poem. An important component of rhythm is **metre**, which is a more technical term for the regular patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables used by poets – the 'beat' that a poem has.

Metre

The **metre** of a line or lines of poetry is the distribution within the verse of stressed and unstressed syllables. Especially in older poetry, this distribution will usually conform (with occasional variations) to a standard pattern. Depending on the metre, this pattern will be made up of groups of two or three syllables. Each of these groups is called a **foot**. There are five main patterns or metres:

Iambic

Here an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one:

The *cur*few *tolls* the *knell* of *par*ting *day*

This line has five pairs of syllables, or five feet. This particular form of the iambic metre is known as the **iambic pentameter**, the most common metre in English poetry. Unrhymed poetry based on the iambic pentameter is known as **blank verse**.

Trochaic

This is the second most common metre, and is the reverse of the iambic metre. Again there are pairs of syllables, but here the pattern is stressed-unstressed:

*Sim*ple *Si*mon *met* a *pie*man

As this example illustrates, the strong 'marching' rhythm makes this a common metre in nursery rhymes.

Dactylic

Each foot has three syllables, one stressed followed by two unstressed:

Half a league, *half* a league,
Half a league *on*ward

In this example the last foot is trochaic: '*on*ward'.

Anapaestic

Again the feet have three syllables, this time two unstressed followed by a stressed:

Through *all* the wide *bor*der his *steed* was the *best*

The first foot here – 'Through *all*' – is iambic.

Spondaic

Two successive stressed syllables; this metre is usually only found in part of a line:

Rocks, *caves*, *lakes*, *fens*, *bogs*, *dens* and *shades* of *death*

Here there are three spondaic feet, then the poem returns to its usual iambic metre for the last two feet.

Rhythm: other terms

Enjambement

This occurs when the sense of one line continues into the next, and the end of the first line has no punctuation mark. This example is from Wordsworth's *Composed upon Westminster Bridge*:

Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky

End-stopped line

This is when the end of a line coincides with a grammatical pause, which is usually indicated by a punctuation mark.

Caesura

This is a pause, usually in the middle of a line, and usually shown by a punctuation mark:

To be, or not to be: that is the question

Here the caesura is indicated by a colon.

Analysing rhythm

Metre can be difficult and you need not worry too much if you cannot identify the metre being used in a poem. It is certainly not worth wasting precious time in an exam trying to work out the metre if it is not clear to you quite quickly. It should still be perfectly possible to comment intelligently on the rhythm of the poem. Try to imagine how the poem would sound when read aloud, and think about the effects of heavily stressed words, of enjambement and of the pauses suggested by the punctuation. Does the rhythm seem to be fast or slow? Look for changes in the rhythm and, above all, try to identify places in the poem where the rhythm corresponds in some way to the **meaning**. In Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, for example, the rhythm quickens when it is describing a ship travelling at high speed:

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew

Later, when the ship is becalmed, the rhythm slows:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion

Exam preparation

See page 65 for a practice question relevant to this and the following section.

Checkpoint 2

This example of spondaic metre describes a difficult journey. Why is the spondaic metre appropriate here?

Checkpoint 3

Comment on the effect of the **enjambement** in this example.

Examiner's secrets

If you are able to identify the metre, remember to comment on how and why it is used.

Checkpoint 4

Identify and comment on some of the other **phonological** features present in these two examples.

Sound in poetry

This section looks at some of the phonological techniques commonly associated with poetry. Remember that devices such as alliteration and sibilance should never be mentioned for their own sake; you should always try to explain the effects that the poet's use of sound has.

Rhyme

The most common form of **rhyme** occurs when the last one or two syllables of two or more lines of poetry have a matching sound. A pair of rhyming lines is called a **couplet**, though rhyming lines are not always next to each other. Rhymes are easy to spot, and you won't get much credit for simply saying they're there. Instead, you should think about what **effect** the rhymes have. This effect will very much depend upon the individual poem. Sometimes rhymes help to give a poem a lively, jaunty rhythm, a sense of narrative pace or a feeling of order and harmony. The **words** that are rhymed may be significant – rhyming brings them together, and you should consider whether linking them in this way has any effect. In *Essential Beauty*, Philip Larkin rhymes words with very different connotations in order to emphasise the contrast between the images of perfection that appear on advertising hoardings and the drab reality of the streets they occupy:

> High above the gutter
> A silver knife sinks into golden butter

Checkpoint 1

Comment on the use of **pre-modifiers** in this extract.

Internal rhyme is when words rhyme *within* the line:

> The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared

Half-rhymes occur when the rhyme is not quite complete; usually the consonants in the rhyming words match but the vowels do not. Many 20th-century poets, such as Wilfred Owen (whose poems are mostly about the First World War), use half-rhymes. In the poem *Miners*, thinking about miners digging for coal reminds Owen of soldiers digging to make trenches in France:

> I thought of some who worked dark pits
> Of war, and died
> Digging the rock where Death reputes
> Peace lies indeed.

Checkpoint 2

Does this extract have any other significant **phonological** features?

Half-rhymes can have a jarring, discordant effect. The half-rhymes here (*pits – reputes*, *died – indeed*) – as in other Owen poems – are unsettling, and confirm that Owen wants to disturb the reader rather than to reassure us.

The arrangement of rhymes within a poem as a whole is called the **rhyme scheme**. Certain types of poem, such as the **sonnet** (see page 54) have standard rhyme schemes. The rhyme scheme is part of the overall **structure** of a poem. Think about the effect the rhyme scheme has.

For example, it may help to divide the poem into different stages or sections. Any change in the pattern of rhyming lines may correspond to a significant change or development in the meaning of the poem.

Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia occurs when words imitate the sounds they describe: when we say the words out loud, we can actually hear the sound. *Wind*, a poem by Ted Hughes describing a violent storm, begins with these lines:

> This house has been far out at sea all night,
> The woods *crashing* through darkness, the *booming* hills

Alliteration

This is when two or more words begin with the same sound. You should only refer to alliteration if you can also explain the effect that you think it has. In *Ageing Schoolmaster* by Vernon Scannell, the narrator recalls his schooldays:

> And think of when I rolled, a gormless boy,
> And rollicked round the playground of my hours

Checkpoint 3

Comment on the use of **imagery** in the first line of this extract.

Watch out!

Words sometimes begin with the same letter but not the same sound: *the whole world*. This is *not* alliteration.

Take note

Note how the repeated *r* sounds in *rolled*, *rollicked* and *round* help to convey a sense of energetic activity.

Sibilance, assonance and dissonance

Sibilance, which is from a Latin word meaning 'hissing', is the repetition of *s*, soft *c*, *sh* and *z* sounds.

Assonance is the rhyming of vowel sounds within two or more words. This quotation from Philip Larkin's *The Trees* illustrates both assonance and sibilance:

> Yet still the unresting castles thresh
> In fullgrown thickness every May.
> Last year is dead, they seem to say,
> Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

Take note

The **sibilance** creates an effect of rustling trees, and combines with **assonance** (*unresting – thresh – every – afresh*) and other kinds of **repetition** to evoke an impression of natural growth and movement.

Dissonance contrasts with assonance as it occurs when sounds are so different that they clash with each other. In Ted Hughes's *Wind* (see above), the effect the strong wind has on birds is described:

> The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
> Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly

Take note

Here the difficult sequence of sounds in *black-/Back gull bent like* prevents the verse flowing smoothly, reflecting the gull's hard struggle against the wind.

Exam preparation (30 minutes) answer: page 71

Text D on page 69 is *God's Grandeur* by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Write an analysis of the poem, focusing in particular on Hopkins's use of rhythm, metre and sound.

Analysing poetry

This section offers some tips on analysing poems. They are especially relevant if you are studying a poem for the first time or tackling a previously unseen poem in an exam.

Examiner's secrets

Read the poem carefully. Don't jump to conclusions concerning what it is about. If the meaning is unclear, look again at the beginning and end: as this often helps. If there are particular lines or phrases you can't understand, don't worry too much. You don't need to comment on every word in the poem, and you won't be penalised for admitting that you find part of a poem obscure (providing you don't keep saying this!).

Stage one

Begin by asking yourself these questions about the poem:

- What is it about?
- What is it *really* about?

In answering the first question, you only need to address the simple, surface meaning of the poem. Who is narrating the poem? What are they describing? If the poem tells some kind of story, what happens? In answering the second question, you need to think more deeply about the poet's intention. What attitude does he or she have towards the subject matter of the poem? How is the reader intended to react? How would you describe the theme (or themes) of the poem? Does the poem have some kind of moral or 'message'?

Stage two

Develop your response to the poem by looking in more detail at what different parts of the poem mean, and by looking at the poem's **style**. Identify important literary and linguistic features, and consider how these contribute to the overall effect and to the meaning the poem has. Key aspects to consider include:

Form and structure

How has the poem been organised? Does it conform to an identifiable poetic form (e.g. the sonnet)? How does it begin, develop and end? Do particular sections of the poem contrast with each other?

Watch out!

Remember to avoid feature-spotting: picking out language features (such as similes and exclamatory sentences) without explaining their effect or significance.

Poetic voice

What tone does the poem have – bitter, playful, ironic, regretful? If the poem is in the first person, has the poet created a **persona** (a narrator who is clearly distinct from the author)? If so, what view does the poet have of this character, and what view is the reader intended to have (sympathetic? disapproving?).

Lexis

What general points can be made about the lexis of the poem? Is it formal or informal? Simple or complex? What kind of mood or atmosphere does the lexis create? Are there any other **patterns** in the lexis, such as groups of words with similar connotations? Are there individual words and phrases that are especially powerful or significant? Are there words that contrast with each other?

Imagery

Does the poem make use of metaphors, similes or personification? How do the comparisons work and what effects do they have? Are there any links between the images used?

Grammar

What types of sentence are used (interrogative, declarative, imperative, exclamatory)? How about sentence length – are any sentences unusually long or short? Are there parts of the poem where word order is especially unusual or significant? Is any of the grammar non-standard? What tenses are used in the poem (past, present, future)? Are there changes of tense that are significant?

Phonology

Does the poem have a regular rhythm or metre? Are there places where the rhythm changes? If so, why? Is there any use of devices such as alliteration, assonance and onomatopoeia?

Stage three

Finally, how successful do you consider the poem to be? Which aspects of the language are especially effective? Does the poem 'work' for you?

Checkpoint 1

Give brief definitions of the four types of sentence mentioned here.

Checkpoint 2

What is the opposite of **assonance**?

Exam preparation (30 minutes) answer: page 71

Earlier in this chapter references have been made to Wordsworth's poem *Composed upon Westminster Bridge* (see pages 56, 57 and 60). The poem appears in full below. Write an analysis of the poem, examining closely the attitudes expressed in it and the poet's use of language. How does Wordsworth's vision of London compare with Blake's vision in the poem *London* (**Text C** on page 69)?

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Examiner's secrets

You will get credit for including a genuine, well argued personal response to the poem.

Answers
Poetry

Historical overview

Checkpoints

1 A paradox is a statement that appears to contradict itself but is nevertheless true. A pun is a play on words, usually involving the use of a word with a double meaning.
2 The image emphasises that the lovers are inseparable; even when they are physically apart their souls are still joined. It may also imply that the woman is more faithful and steadfast (*Thy soul the fixed foot*).

Chaucer

Checkpoints

1 The Romans invaded in the first century BC, though Latin left little mark on the language at this time. More influential were the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who invaded England from northern Germany and southern Denmark in the fifth century. Viking invaders began arriving towards the end of the eighth century.
2 Two examples are *-s*, used at the end of a word to indicate it is plural, and *-ed*, used to indicate past tense.

Poetic form and structure

Checkpoints

1 The best known Romantic poets include Wordsworth, Blake, Keats, Shelley, Byron and Coleridge.
2 John Milton.

Exam preparation

The poem consists of a series of comparisons, all of which are rejected as *not* applicable to the woman described. These comparisons are generally conventional romantic images of Shakespeare's time (cheeks like roses, walking like a goddess etc.). Shakespeare's rejection of these images can be interpreted in a variety of ways: 1. The woman is not conventionally attractive, but he still loves her. 2. He loves her for her inner qualities, implying this is more important than physical beauty. 3. He is mocking the traditional love poetry of his time, emphasising that the romantic clichés included in the poem are unrealistic.

It is important to note the element of humour in the poem, and also how the sonnet form is used in the final couplet, where the poet reveals that despite all that has been said earlier he thinks the woman is *rare* or special.

Poetic imagery

Checkpoints

1 Examples of figurative expressions in everyday use: *under a cloud, miss the boat, round the bend, bend over backwards, a fair crack of the whip.*
2 The dynamic verbs *tugged* and *strained* convey the restless energy of the pupils, and how the teacher struggles to control them. His exhausting efforts to stimulate their interest in learning are evident in the verbs *haul* and *urge*. The use of several dynamic verbs effectively helps to create the atmosphere of a noisy, unruly class.

Exam preparation

In this poem Donne calls upon God to take possession of his soul and wrest him away from the devil. In the first four lines of the poem Donne compares himself to a piece of metal that has to be hammered into a new shape. Two extended metaphors appear in the remainder of the poem. The first is the idea of a besieged town, introduced in line 5. Donne means he is under the control of the devil but wants God to take him back. His powers of reason should be like the *viceroy* in a town, representing the authority of the ruler (God). But the viceroy is *captiv'd* and *weake*. Other words that relate to this image are *defend, enemie* and *imprison*. The other image is of a love relationship (in which Donne is the woman). He is *betroth'd* to the devil but calls on God to *divorce* and *ravish* him.

Lexis in poetry

Checkpoints

1 Non-standard spelling suggests the narrator's accent: *an, bout, mek* etc. Non-standard grammar similarly suggests her speaking voice and also her dialect: *I hope you give de politicians dem/de courage to do what they have to do.*
2 A word formed by joining two other words together.

Grammar in poetry

Checkpoints

1 Dynamic verbs refer to actions. Stative verbs refer to states or processes.
2 This is an unusual image, which combines abstract and concrete words. It suggests that people are repressed and restricted by society's – and their own – attitudes and values. The *manacles* that limit their freedom are forged in the *mind*.

Exam preparation

The first stanza is analysed on page 59, and there is some comment on the second stanza on page 61. A feature of the lexis in this second stanza (and in much of the poem) is its directness and simplicity. However, on a semantic level (i.e. in terms of meaning) some of the lexis is more complex. For example, *ban* means an oath or curse, but it also has connotations of today's usual meaning, and therefore strengthens the idea of repression. For a comment on *mind-forg'd manacles*, see answer to Checkpoint 2 above. In the rest of the poem Blake focuses on more specific social ills, and on the institutions that must bear some responsibility for them. The *Chimney-sweeper's cry* symbolises poverty and child labour, the *black'ning Church* pollution but also how the established church is shamed by the existence of social injustice. The *hapless Soldier* seems to represent those who are sent out to die in wars, while the state that sends them has a stony indifference to their fate (the soldier's blood runs down *Palace walls*). The last stanza is about prostitution. Young women are driven into it by poverty, and the pregnancies that result are a curse rather than a blessing. The last line suggests the diseases spread by prostitution. As in the first two stanzas, Blake uses striking visual and auditory imagery to convey his ideas. The use of language is very concentrated, with powerful and evocative pre-modifiers (e.g. *black'ning Church*). In the final stanza, noun phrases combine words with contrasting associations in order to show the corrupting effect of prostitution (*youthful Harlot, the Marriage hearse*). Parallelism is a feature (*the Chimney-sweeper's cry . . . the hapless Soldier's sigh*) and word order foregrounds certain words (e.g. *But* and *Blasts* are both positioned at the beginning of a line).

Rhythm and metre

Checkpoints

1 Yes – the metre suggests galloping horses.
2 The spondaic metre slows the line down with a series of heavy stresses. This helps to suggest a long, arduous journey.
3 The enjambement reflects the 'openness' of the scene. The buildings merge seamlessly with the fields and the sky.
4 In the first quotation, alliteration helps to quicken the pace of the line. In the second, the repetition of sounds reinforces the idea of a lack of movement.

Sound in poetry

Checkpoints

1 The pre-modifiers *silver* and *golden* both have connotations of luxury. These contrast strongly with the connotations of *gutter*.
2 The alliteration of the hard *d-* sound suggests the difficult physical work of the miners and the soldiers.
3 The house is compared to a ship at sea. This creates a sense of isolation and instability, and suggests how the house has been lashed by wind and rain.

Exam preparation

Hopkins was a very original poet. The aspects of style he is noted for include powerful phonological features and strong, energetic rhythm. Both are evident in this poem, which celebrates natural beauty as an expression of God. Even though nature has been partially spoilt by man, its essential glory remains. The opening of the poem has a tremendous energy, which reflects the idea that the world is *charged* with God's grandeur. This is partly created by the use of alliteration (*flame/foil, shining/shook, gathers/greatness*). Onomatopoeia is another feature, used for example to suggest an intense, concentrated beauty: *like the ooze of oil/Crushed*. In the second half of the octet, repetition of sound evokes the dreariness of men's daily lives, and the deadening effect this has on the world: *have trod, have trod, have trod/And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil*. In the last four lines of the poem the emergence of daylight, and the hope it represents, is mirrored in the use of enjambement over successive lines.

Analysing poetry

Checkpoints

1 An interrogative sentence ends with a question mark, an exclamatory sentence with an exclamation mark. A declarative sentence makes a statement. An imperative sentence gives a command.
2 Dissonance.

Exam preparation

The opening line of this sonnet immediately evokes a scene of breathtaking beauty. Words with connotations of magnificence are used to describe the city: *majesty, splendour, mighty*. Exclamatory sentences stress the poet's sense of awe. The man-made elements of the scene blend appealingly with the natural beauty of the surrounding countryside, suggested by the enjambement of lines 6–7. It is the serenity of the scene that Wordsworth responds most strongly to, especially at the close of the poem. However, the imagery of the last two lines suggests the transience of this calmness. If the houses are *asleep* they must soon awake, and if the city is not dead the *mighty heart* must resume beating. The earlier image of the beauty of the morning being worn like a *garment* similarly indicates that it is transitory.