**SAMPLE PRESENTATION OF SUBJECT MATTER ON SELECT POEMS FROM GROWING UP WITH POETRY**

**BY KATEEGA HERBERT**

**POEMS ON LOVE – SUBJECT MATTER**

**LULLABY** *– Akhan*

In the poem a poor woman expresses profound, unconditional love for her child. She is however worried about her strong suspicion that a rich person out there is scheming to snatch the child from her by taking advantage of her impoverished state where she can only raise the child on a torn old mat. She says the suspected child thief intends to raise the child on an expensive camel blanket. Despite her poverty, the speaker emphatically swears her resolve to keep and love the child no matter what happens.

**MY WILL –** *Lorna Goodison*

The speaker in the poem is a father who foresees his inevitable departure from the earth and therefore wishes to pass on his legacy. He bequeathes his wishes to his son, not in form of an estate as is usually the case but in form of advice on good morals and attitudes that will sustain his life in future. He asks his son to respect elders regardless of their status in life. He commits the boy to the care of the Lord reminding him to be thankful for all blessings. He emphasizes the value of education or books and advises him to keep good friends and to take care not to offend them because friendships are delicate. He finally warns his son to be wary of money and material things because they are the root cause of every evil and have led many to crumble.

**ZULU GIRL –** *Roy Campbell*

The speaker in this poem is a concerned observer watching a group of unfortunate people toiling with incredible work in the very hot sun somewhere in South Africa. The speaker is specifically attracted to a mother in that gang who is forced to get off work to breast feed her baby. She is a poor woman judging from her condition, mistreated and drained on the baby.

As the baby sucks the breast, this shows that the baby is tormented by the flies. In the last stanza, the poet notes that the sin is typical of these peolpe’s suffering under apartheid in South Africa.

**THE BELOVED -** *Fulani*

The speaker in the poem is a young man who is praising his lover, Diko. He highlights and

praises her attractive features. He is obsessed with her gorgeous beauty such as the light, smooth and long hair. He praises her white teeth and the sweet smell. He adores her soft skin which is sweet and gentle to touch and her general elegance.

**AND WHEN YOU BALANCE YOUR HEAD –** *Okotp’Bitek*

The poem is a description of a lovely spectacle of an African girl in an African environment as she balances a container on her head, walking gracefully along the pathway and as she goes for her daily duties at the well or in the freshly burnt woodlands. The speaker is a young man who is an admirer of this young woman in typical African landscape that is full of lilies and butterflies. The young lady is very attractive. She has a long neck and is very attractive as her graceful walking gait blends harmoniously with the natural environment around her. She is an attraction to many young men who yearn for her favour as she goes to the well and freshly burnt woodlands.

**LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS –** *William Shakespeare*

The speaker in this poem is the poet himself with a clear purpose to clarify what true love is and is not. He contends that love doesn’t go changing with change in situations but remains firmly steadfast regardless of the weather. He says true love withstands storms of life and doesn’t obey the selfish wishes of fools. He emphasizes that true love lasts forever and it’s not affected by time. It remains strong for hours, weeks, years and forever. To prove the truth in his ideas, he swears that if he’s wrong, then no one has ever loved.

**ARMANDA –** *Jared Angira*

The poem Armanda is about an ill-advised romantic affair that ends in sorrows. Armanda is a very enigmatic / eccentric / maladjusted personality whose life is marred by serious contradictions. Whereas she is a graduate and sparklingly beautiful, she is lazy, selfish, heartless, materialistic and dreamy. Attracted by her beauty, a cripple named Ray falls in love with her. The two elope to foreign land to find happiness in romance. While there, an attempt at surgery to enable Ray move well is a miserable flop. In reaction, Armanda sweeps Ray’s account clean, writes him a regret note and abandons him in his wheelchair in a foreign land. Ray is shocked but not surprised or astonished because he has expected it all along though not in this way. He is abandoned, broke and lonely.

**Relevance to the world.**

Modernity has produced many cases of young women who fleece many young men for their unearned money and property. Many times, abandoning them to go and do the same thing to others. True love is very scarce in today’s world beyond the craze for material things. People worship money the way they would worship God and are willing to do anything to get and retain money. The gold-diggers are everywhere.

**POEMS ON IDENTITY - SUBJECT MATTER**

**WHAT IS MAN? –** *D.H. Lawrence*

In this poem, DH Lawrence is trying to probe what makes a man in the society basing on his occupations. The poem has two speakers engaged in a dialogue. The dialogue turns controversial when the two try to use people’s occupations to define man. Their arguments come to a dead lock because of using different parameters (reason). In the end, they agree that man is just man regardless of what he does in life.

**Relevance.**

Different societies today attach different values on the concept of manliness. While others believe that man is just a natural state, others insist on using virility, achievements or occupations to define man. At the end of the day they usually agree with this poem that a man is a man by nature (example of the Bagisu)

**HOLDING MY BEADS –***Grace Nichols*

Holding my beads is a declaration of principles. The Black woman who is the speaker is uprooted from her African homeland and enslaved in a foreign land. She demands her rights to be in charge of her own destiny, identity and freedom based on her African cultural heritage expressed through the image of the beads that African women use to decorate their bodies by declaring “I am a woman” “Chatting my own future” “A woman holding my beads in my hands”. The speaker affirms the need for the black women to stand against any factors that have deprived them of their liberty and identity as women.

**Relevance**

In the world today just like in the past, people try to dominate others by enslaving and depriving them of their rights. The speaker in the poem is an enslaved woman crying for her rights as a true African woman as shown by the beads. Many Ugandans today find themselves in foreign countries mostly for work but many times they are deprived of their right, harassed, brutalized, sometimes leading to their death. Given a chance, they always seek justice and demand to be brought back home where they belong.

**THE GRACEFUL GIRAFFE CANNOT BECOME A MONKEY –** *Okotp’Bitek*

The speaker in the poem is a wife appealing to her husband to accept her the way she is because she is not ready to copy the ways of the white people since that makes her depart from her cultural values that have nurtured her. She explains that her husband has recently become obsessed with the dressing of the white women, their long hair, lipstick and general appearance. The husband has changed to admiring those women who copy this attire, in the name of modernity. The speaker despises this kind of behaviour asserting that it is ridiculous and immoral to African women.

**Relevance of the poem to the world today.**

The modern African women are doing everything today to copy the ways of the white women to look modern and acceptable to the changing times. Today they wear man made things sometimes replacing their natural ones or amplifying them. These items include, bums, hips, nails, breasts, eyelids, eye lashes etc. In addition to dressing in weird attire by African fashion, materials or silk, e.g. damage, skimpy skirts with very long slits, transparent clothes, fittings, body hugs, leggings. This is the fad in vogue.

**AFRICA –** *David Diop*

In the poem Africa, David Dioph is the persona. As an American of African origin, he misses the land of his ancestors where he has never been since his birth. He therefore describes the evil things that have been done to Africa including slave trade, exploitation, humiliation and brutality by foreigners. Despite this, David expresses profound love and pity for the land of his ancestors. The poem becomes a conversation when another grave voice interjects by giving Diop hope that the continent will soon achieve the “bitter taste of liberty”. By this rate, it means that Africa is on the right course to bitter and liberation and development. This is what makes the poem optimistic for Africa.

**PIANO AND DRUMS –** *Gabriel Okara*

The speaker in the poem “Piano and Drums” is a young African lad born and raised in the African culture. The young man is in a state of confusion due to the conflicting sounds that come to his ears making it hard for him to identify with them by choice. The first sound is that of the traditional drums which is rhythmical in an exciting way. The jungle drum is culturally intended to summon the young men to the jungle to hunt down wild animals like the panther and the leopard. This experience is so exciting to the speaker because it reminds him of fond memories of childhood full of fun and care. Then he hears the sound of the piano wailing with the attributes of modernization which are very complex to the young man. In the end, he is overwhelmed with confusion not knowing which way to go or which sound to identify with. This poem underscores the cultural confusion between modernity and tradition facing the young African people.

**I SPEAK FOR THE BUSH –** *Everett Standa*

The poem is an attack on the self-proclaimed civilized Africans who are culturally alienated from their heritage and as a result reduced to copy cats of the western ways. They have turned into mannerless infidels who dress indecently, engage in promiscuous behaviours and acts of violence. As a result, their uncaring attitude has led to an influx of improvident beggars and homeless people. The speaker is challenged on how to cope with these lost brothers who despise him and refer to him as a bushman because he does not know the ways of modern life.

**PROTEST FROM A BUSHMAN –** *Albert Malikongwa*

The speaker in the poem is a true African very fond of the beauty of his land including the birds, bright flowers with their magic scent, the bright warm sunshine, the wild animals, the vast water bodies. The speaker’s love for the native land is in contrast with a looming desecration by sorrow. The poem is a testimony that the once beautiful, glamorous environment full of melodious sounds of singing birds, the marvelous sites of the night skies, the colourful rainfall and the charming women’s breasts is all no more. The speaker now lives in constant anxiety and fear that something disastrous is about to happen. This is because of the clash of cultures that has interfered with the natural heartbeat of the Africans.

**I, TOO, SING AMERICA –** *Langston Hughes*

In the poem, the speaker is an African – American man, mostly likely a slave or a domestic servant by saying he too can sing America. He is claiming his rights to feel patriotic towards America although he is a darker brother who is isolated to eat along in the kitchen. However, he does not despair. Instead, he uses the chance to eat very well and become more beautiful / strong. That way, he is optimistic / hopeful that in future no one will deprive him of his right to belong through discrimination, racism, segregation. He finally asserts that he is a good an American as any other.

**WE NEW WORLD BLACKS -** *Grace Nichols (Guyana)*

The poem is about the collective experiences of African immigrants. The speaker seems to blame the blacks for their tendency to give up the fight for their heritage. He says that however much they try to fight; they can never kill the past in them. By referring to the “river stone”, the speaker suggests that roots cannot be completely denied in the poem, the spirit of the past has been tried to be buried in the black garden. However, it is still there because it fights back. The poem emphasizes that pretending to be someone we are not is a ridiculous way of betraying our past and heritage.

**POEMS ON DEATH AND THE ANCESTORS**

**Subject matter**

**WHAT IS DEATH LIKE? -** *Eric s. Ng’Maryo (Tanzania)*

The poem deals with the concept of what happens to people after death. The speaker is a worried person thoughtfully wondering whether the death of a person is the ultimate end or the beginning of another life. In the first stanza, the speaker wonders whether there is external stillness coming suddenly like a clap of thunder. In the second stanza, the same speaker wonders whether a secret door suddenly opens into a colourful existance. The last line of the poem leaves question hanging unanswered in the speaker’s mind.

**DEATH -** *Kuba (Sudan)*

The poem is about the image of death to an anonymous Kuba tribes man. In the poem he states death is a clear reality to every creature living on earth. After this unpleasant reality which must be faced, he gives himself some kind of comfort by dedicating the conditions of his burial to be buried under the great shade of trees in the market to hear the drums beating and feel the dancer’s feet. In other words, the speaker wishes for some solace when he dies. The importance of the conditions he gives is to show the inevitable reality of death and to similarly show communication between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Therefore, the goal of life is to become ancestors after death.

**FROM THE OUTSIDE -** *M.P. Gwala (S.Africa)*

The speaker in the poem is one of the mourners who has just attended the burial of a dear friend, Madaza, which turned out to be peculiar. The dead man is respected and treasured by many people from all walks of life who turn up to give their last respects. The burial is unique because it is attended by police officers as well but these are silent all through. Later it is realized that Madaza should have been an offender of the law who is “wanted”. However, the crowd looks at him differently as a freedom fighter or liberator that they have lost. To them he is “wanted” in a different way.

**LAMENT FOR THE DEAD MOTHER -** *Ewe (Ghana)*

The speaker in the poem is an orphaned child, crying out to the mother to respond to the call. The child expresses fond memories of the mother’s generosity at preparing fresh food and cooked meals. The child innocently wonders in sorrow why the dead mother is not responding. The poem is a traditional song from Ghana.

**DEATH BE NOT PROUD -** *John Donne (England)*

The poem is argument against the power of death. The speaker personifies and addresses death like a human being warning him against pride in his power. He says such power is a mere illusion and that death is wrong to think that those he takes come to their ultimate end. The persona criticizes death as a mere slave to other forces such as fate, chance, kings, sickness and desperate men. Death is therefore not in control because numerous other forces create situations for death to take his victims. Death is therefore told that the victims he claims to take only sleep for a short time after which they live eternally. Finally, the speaker predicts the end of death itself by stating assertively : “Death, thou shalt die.”

**DEATH THE LEVELLER –** *James Shirley*

This is a philosophical poem about the way death subdues both the strong and weak, the poor and rich, the royals and commoners, creating a levelled ground. It presents a clear picture of death as the ultimate conqueror. The poem reminds the reader that it is a mistake to take pride in one’s birth and greatness. He says the achievements of life (titles) are also no protection against death. The leveler comes and lays his hand on kings and clowns alike. The sceptor and the clown of the king fall down and lie equally in the dust with the poor man’s scythe and spade. In the end, world victory and success are in the hands of death. Some men rape and reap enemy heads in the battle fields. These too will one day bow down their heads in the same way the poor people kill one another like mere beasts. Strength and courage also pass because we all die helpless and weak.

**PRAYER TO THE MOON** - *Bushman*

The poem is a strong appeal to the moon to give the speaker the brightness with which it shines every time it appears. The moon appears and disappears only to emerge brightly the following day. This then becomes a daily routine when the moon is in season. The speaker appeals to the moon to have an exchange of faces so that he too may wear a joyous lively bright face because of the light shining on it each time it returns from slumber. The speaker likens that slumber to death because the moon “dies” and resurrects every other day.

**TO A SMALL BOY WHO DIED AT DIEPKLOOF REPORMATORY -** *Alan Paton (S.Africa)*

The speaker in the poem is one of the mourners addressing the dead boy. He says that the little boy has no idea that his small crime would attract the attention of such a large number of institutions and professionals, nor did he know that they would benefit from it because their jobs depend on such.

In the second stanza, the speaker presents the small boys documents including his birth certificate. In stanza three, he studies the boy’s death certificate and says that death has released him from suffering. In the final stanza, he finds the document that sent the boy to the reformatory noting that millions of people are involved in the boy’s crime. The speaker believes that the dead boy will go straight to paradise.

**VILLAGE LIFE**

**INSIDE MY ZULU HUT -** *Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali*

Is a guided description of a typical African dwelling place showing the beauty, grace and serenity of the indigenous (traditional) households. The various household items include the three-legged pots, calabashes of sour milk, clay pots of foaming beer. To add colour to the situation, respectability and dignity of the items are employed to show the charm and grace of the house. These images appeal to some of our inner senses e.g. sight and smell using bees, honey and smoke respectively. The use of images in the poem shows that the poet values African culture and tradition.

**THE MAGNIFICENT BULL -** *Dinka*

The poem is about an African village herd man expressing his fond bond with his bull using a series of similes and metaphors, he describes the attractive nature of his bull in terms of looks, strength and value. To him the bull is more of a friend than an animal. He also performs his duty of watering it at the well and protecting that well against intruders for the profound love of this bull

**ZEBU –** *Flavien Ronaivo*

The speaker in the poem is the proud owner of the cow of the Zebu type. In the poem, the speaker gives detailed, vivid description of his Zebu cow focusing on appearance and behaviour while the cow’s lips are always moving, the teeth are spectacular to look at and the horns curve into a circle. The eyes are big and shiny and the cow uses its long tail to fight of the flies and has four legs

**AN AFRICAN THUNDERSTORM –** *David Rubadiri*

The poem is a live description of the stampede triggered by the looming African storm. The speaker in the poem is an observer of what happens in an African village when the storm comes. He begins with description of the weather that changes suddenly with strong wind, dust, clouds and eventually a stormy down pour. The speaker watches from a safe distance the rushed movement of women and children excitedly running about, saving things from getting wet, protecting children and taking care of themselves as this goes on, the human activity blends well with the drama created by the weather.

**DROUGHT –** *Denys Lefebvre*

The speaker probably referring to a Veld in South Africa is describing the discomforting season of drought affecting the environment, people and animals. There is too much heat in the air drying up all vegetation, scorching the animals and the people and leaving a hot dry air in the atmosphere. The flies swarm around animals; there is too much heat and blazing light leading to dry cracked up soils. The description shows that all things wither and die due to drought.

**GRASS WILL GROW** *– Jonathan Kariara*

The poem is a prayer to God to bestow mercy and favour on the speaker when the inevitable problems come. The speaker prays to God to sustain him through the various disasters that come his way. He prays for rain. This poem is about resilience and endurance in the face of calamities. It expresses the fact that with God’s blessing through prayer, it is possible to move on with life regardless of the hardships that come our way. It is a call for optimism and faith in God when serious problems come in our lives.

**I AM BECOMING MY MOTHER –** *Lorna Goodison*

The poem is a tribute by the speaker to the memory of a mother who has won respect and admiration because of everything she endured in order to raise the family. The smell of onions all the time for the good of the children. The speaker also remembers the sound of bathing water when still young. The poem reflects the bond between the mother and the speaker who is her child. Another memory is the mother’s unique clothes and the whipping she used to do for the children. She remembers her complexion with the state yellow/brown women. The speaker therefore wishes to identity with her and be exactly like her.

**OLD GRANNY –** *Bonus Zimunya*

The speaker in the poem describes a pathetic sight that met his eyes at Harare market of the poor, homeless, improvident woman huddled together for warmth making her appear like a spider. The time of the night when there is coldness everywhere. The poor old woman is shivering because the torn old blanket cannot cover her. She also looks sickly and hungry.

**THE SWEET BREW AT CHITAKALE –** *Jack Mapanje*

Is a description of African leisure involving the activities of revelers at a drinking point or place called Chitakale. The sweet brew is served by an old woman from a clay jar, a job she performs wonderfully the customers come in big numbers, get the service and pay, there is everything to show that they enjoy the drink and sometimes they break the containers when drunk. The old woman picks up the pieces simply, business style.

**GOSSIPS (MAAKA) –** *Grace Setlalekgosi*

The speaker is a resident of a village, disgusted by the gossiping ways of some women. The gossips create imagined stories about others, tarnishing their names and causing conflicts in society. Their victims sometimes confront them to explain their empty stories. The game is mostly played by women to pass time. The men who gossip are despised.