

# Unit 1.12

## Poems

### Learning objectives

- learn to identify some of the key features of poetry
- develop the skills to analyse and interpret poems, including your critical thinking skills.

What makes English poetic? Are there styles and structures in the English language that naturally appeal to readers' ears? Poetry, after all, is meant to be read aloud. In this unit you will study several poems, reading them aloud. You will discuss what makes poetry 'poetry', analyse several poems and read an essay on a poem. Through this study of poetry, you may come to appreciate how writers use language and structure to articulate some of the more intricate ideas in life.

## Getting started

**12.1** What is poetry? Write your own definition of poetry on a sticky note and display it on a board for your classmates to read. What commonalities do you see between the definitions?

**12.2** Read these famous quotations by poets about poetry. How are these definitions similar to or different from your answers to Activity 12.1? What do you think each poet means by their definition?

- a** 'Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words.' – Edgar Allan Poe
- b** 'Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found its words.' – Robert Frost
- c** 'Poetry comes from the highest happiness or the deepest sorrow.' – A.P.J. Abdul Kalam
- d** 'Poetry: the best words in the best order.' – Samuel Taylor Coleridge
- e** 'Poetry is a state of free float.' – Margaret Atwood
- f** 'Poetry is the lifeblood of rebellion, revolution, and the raising of consciousness.' – Alice Walker
- g** 'Poetry is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during the moment.' – Carl Sandburg
- h** 'Poetry, at its best, is the language your soul would speak if you could teach your soul to speak.' – Jim Harrison
- i** 'Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.' – William Wordsworth

### Word bank

metaphor  
simile  
imagery  
alliteration  
assonance  
consonance  
syllable  
metric foot  
rhythm  
verse  
metre  
enjambment  
stanza  
rhyming scheme  
prosody  
internal rhyme  
free verse  
blank verse  
couplet  
English sonnet  
volta  
caesura  
scansion

## Exploring text types

**12.3** Here are several lines (a–i) taken from poems, speeches, songs and films. How poetic is each line? In small groups, rate each line, using a five-star scale: five stars being the most poetic and one star not very poetic at all. For each line, discuss how and why you would rate each line. Explain your group's choices to other groups in your class. Comment as a class on the kinds of challenges you faced in doing this activity.

- a** 'Boom, boom, boom, I want you in my room.' – Vengaboys
- b** 'Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.' – John Newton
- c** 'Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get.' – Forrest Gump
- d** 'How many roads must a man walk down, before you can call him a man?' – Bob Dylan
- e** 'Look at me! Look at me! Look at me NOW! It is fun to have fun, But you have to know how.' – Dr. Seuss
- f** 'Parting is such sweet sorrow, That I shall say good night till it be morrow.' – William Shakespeare
- g** 'Fly like a butterfly, sting like a bee. The hands can't hit what the eyes can't see.' – Mohammed Ali
- h** 'How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. I love thee to the depth and breadth and height, My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight, For the ends of being and ideal grace.' – Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- i** 'As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know.' – Donald Rumsfeld

**12.4** As a class, and based on your discussions from Activity 12.3, think of several criteria for describing and defining 'poetic language':

- When does language become 'poetic'?
- When does a text become a 'poem'?

## International mindedness

Do different cultures find different forms of language more poetic than others? Activity 12.3 asks you to identify poetic forms. Will these be different, depending on your cultural background? Or is poetry absolute and universal? Would you be able to identify poetic language, when read aloud in a foreign language?

**12.5** Have you ever wondered why students are asked to study poetry in school? Have you ever discussed with your teacher *how* you should study poetry? Read Text 1.43, a poem about teaching poetry and discuss your answers to these questions:

- a** How does Billy Collins suggest students should explore poetry?
- b** How does he use **metaphor** and **simile** to make his point?
- c** How poetic is his poem? Does it meet one or more of your criteria for poetry from Activity 12.4?
- d** What kinds of approaches to learning poetry have you taken in English class before?
- e** How far do you agree with Collins's approach? How do you like to study poetry?

## Text 1.43

## Introduction to Poetry

Billy Collins 1988

I ask them to take a poem  
and hold it up to the light  
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem  
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room  
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to waterski  
across the surface of a poem  
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.

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Billy Collins is an American poet and teacher of poetry, who has been celebrated around the world for his achievements.

## TOK

Text 1.43 ends by suggesting that students want to find out what poems 'really mean'.

- How do we ascertain meaning in the arts in general?
- Is it possible to understand the meaning of a poem with any level of certainty? Do you think poets always know the meaning of their own poems?
- How is the word 'meaning' different from 'purpose'?

Discuss these questions as a class.

## CONCEPT

## Transformation

Does Text 1.43 change your understanding of textual analysis and close reading of poetry? In this course you explore how a text can be 'transformative'. *Transformation* refers to how the reader's outlook on the world changes as the result of what they have read. Does Billy Collins do this for you? Discuss.

## Model text

**12.6** At home or in a quiet space, record yourself speaking aloud 'Bright Star' by John Keats (Text 1.44) using audio or video. Aim for an effective reading that allows listeners to appreciate Keats's language.

- Listen to your recording. If you are not happy with it, record a new version. Once you are happy with the recording, send it to your teacher.
- Write a 200-word reflection piece in which you comment on the process you took to create this recording. What challenges did you face, and how did you overcome them?
- Share your reflection piece with your teachers and classmates.

No one has to hear your recording unless you are happy to share it with others in the class.

## LEARNER PROFILE

## Reflective

Activity 12.6 encourages you to write a reflection piece in response to your reading of a poem. The philosopher John Dewey once said that learning is experience plus reflection. After listening to a recording of yourself reading a poem, what have you learnt from the experience?

## Text 1.44

**Bright Star**

John Keats 1819

syllables and metric feet

imagery

volta

caesura

alliteration

Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art –

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

And watching with eternal lids apart

Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,

The moving waters at their priestlike task

Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask

Of snow upon the mountains and the moors –

No – yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,

To feel forever its soft fall and swell,

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,

And so live ever – or else swoon to death.

a

b

a

b

c

d

c

d

e

f

e

f

g

g

verse and metre

stanza and rhyming scheme

5

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## TEXT AND CONTEXT

- An eremite is a hermit or recluse, someone living in isolation and devoting themselves to their religious beliefs.
- Ablution means 'washing' or 'cleansing' with the sense of a sacred ritual.

## Key features explained

**12.7** The key features of poetry are outlined here and highlighted in Text 1.44. Are there any features that you recognise from working on your recording for Activity 12.6? After reading these terms and examples, how would you change your recording of your reading of the poem 'Bright Star' by John Keats?



Key features	Examples from Text 1.44
<b>Imagery:</b> Poems are often full of imagery, as they aim to appeal to the senses to engage the reader.	In 'Bright Star' the narrator paints several pictures in the mind of the reader, by describing snow on the moors and the breathing of his lover.
<b>Alliteration:</b> Poems are meant to be read aloud. Many poems include alliteration, the repetition of a consonant at the beginning of words in sequence. The repetition of the same vowel sound is known as <b>assonance</b> . The repetition of consonants in the middle of a word is known as <b>consonance</b> .	'feel forever' and 'soft . . . swell' are examples of alliteration; 'pure', 'ablution' and 'human' are examples of assonance with the long 'u' sound. In the line 'watching with eternal lids apart' the 't' sound is repeated throughout the words in the middle or ends of the words. All of these examples make the poem read more fluently and musically.
<b>Syllables and metric feet:</b> Every word in English consists of one or more syllables. A syllable is the unit of sound, when speaking a word, which usually has one vowel. Syllables provide the beats of the <b>rhythm</b> of a poem. Some syllables are stressed, while others are naturally unstressed. When analysing poetry, you can look for the clusters and patterns of stresses in a line. Each unit of stressed and unstressed sound is known as a metric foot (see Activity 12.8).	Keats opens the poem with the words 'Bright star', two strong syllables that seem to echo throughout the remainder of the poem as the narrator contemplates which characteristics of the star he wants to emulate. The rest of the poem mostly includes iambs, unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables, which make the poem bounce along in a dream-like way. 'No – yet' is the only interruption in this dream.
<b>Verse and metre:</b> Each line of poetry is called a 'verse', which should not be confused with sentences. When a sentence carries on over the end of a line, it is called <b>enjambment</b> (or enjambement), which poets may use for artistic reasons. The rhythmic structure of each verse is called metre. It may consist of any number of metric feet (see Activity 12.9).	Generally speaking, 'Bright Star' has five iambic feet in each verse, meaning it uses iambic pentameter (see table with Activity 12.9). This format, traditionally used by poets in the 19th century, was characteristic of Romanticism.
<b>Stanza and rhyming scheme:</b> Studying poetry is, to some extent, a study of <b>prosody</b> , which refers to the patterns of rhythm and sounds used in poetry. To find patterns, look to the stanzas. Stanzas are to poetry what paragraphs are to prose. They give the reader a sense of structure and organisation. When studying the structure of poems, you may notice the use of rhyme, sometimes within a verse ( <b>internal rhyme</b> ) or at the end of each verse. Many poems, however, do not rhyme at all. <b>Free verse</b> does not rhyme. <b>Blank verse</b> , which follows a certain metre such as iambic pentameter, also does not rhyme.	Notice how the first line of 'Bright Star' rhymes with the third, the second line rhymes with the fourth, and so forth, until the final two lines (g), which are known as a <b>couplet</b> . This is the pattern of an <b>English sonnet</b> . This traditional format, inspired by the Italians, was commonly used by Romantic poets.
<b>Volta:</b> Sonnets sometimes take a turn or shift in their message or argument, which is known as a volta.	The narrator is contemplating the kinds of traits of the star that he wants to emulate. Rather than shining like a lonesome hermit, he would rather shine on his lover's breast.
<b>Caesura:</b> Apostrophes, full stops and hyphens can be used to make the reader take a break or pause while reading the poem aloud. This use of caesura allows the reader and listener to contemplate the poet's words.	Keats uses hyphens in lines 1, 8, 9 and 14. The narrator opens the poem by commenting on the steadfast quality of the star. After the caesurae in lines 8 and 9, he returns to the reasons why he wants to shine like a star. And if he cannot shine on his lover and hear her breath, then he would rather die, another sharp contrast indicated by the caesura in the last verse.

## Exploring text types

**12.8** As suggested in the table, there are various kinds of metric feet or patterns of syllables. Analysing the use of metre in poetry, though not an exact science, involves **scansion**. This is the process of scanning a verse to determine its rhythm. You can do this by annotating the poem and placing symbols above the syllables or words. The  $\cup$  symbol can be used to indicate unstressed sound. The / symbol can be used to indicate stressed sound. You can also use italics when editing texts electronically to show which syllables are stressed. Both italics and symbols have been used in this table.

### Five sorts of metric feet used in poetry

Name	Pattern	Examples
iamb	$\cup$ / unstressed, stressed	$\cup$ / would /
trochee	/ $\cup$ stressed, unstressed	/ $\cup$ pillow'd
spondee	/ / stressed, stressed	/ / Still, still
anapest	$\cup$ $\cup$ / unstressed, unstressed, stressed	$\cup$ $\cup$ / ripening breast
dactyl	/ $\cup$ $\cup$ stressed, unstressed, unstressed	eremite

Copy these lines of poetry and annotate them, showing where the stressed and unstressed sounds appear. Break the words and syllables up into feet by using a line '|'. See example 'a'.

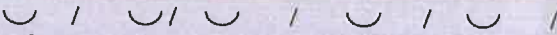
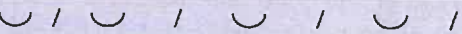
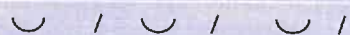

- a | The *mov* | *ing wa* | *ters at* | their *priest* | like *task* |
- a 'The moving waters at their priestlike task' – John Keats
- b 'anyone lived in a pretty how town' – E.E. Cummings
- c 'If I should die think only this of me' – Rupert Brooke
- d 'Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout would not take the garbage out' – Shel Silverstein
- e 'Now only words in a rhyme' – Carol Ann Duffy
- f 'Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! – An ecstasy of fumbling' – Wilfred Owen

**12.9** Poetic verse comes in all sizes and shapes. Within the world of poetry there are several types of poems and traditions of poetry writing.

- a Get into groups and assign each group a different poetry type from this list. Do some research to find the defining features of your type of poetry.
- b Find an example of your poetry type and share it with your classmates. In a short group presentation, comment on the use of rhyming scheme, metre (see table) and other defining characteristics.

- English sonnet
- Italian sonnet
- ode
- villanelle
- limerick
- ballad
- haiku
- epic poem
- elegy.

### Rhythmic metres used in poetry

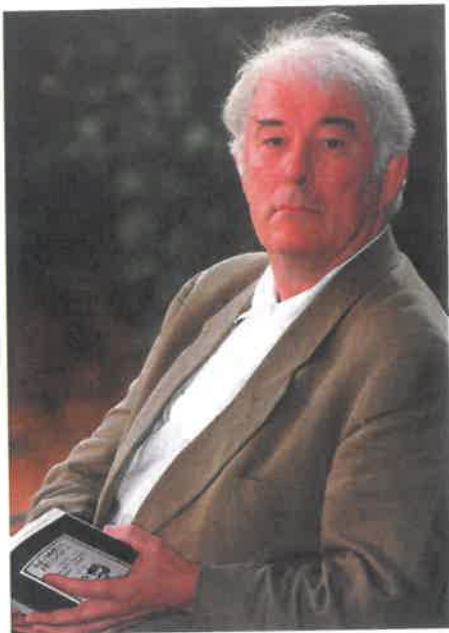
Number of feet	Name of metre	Examples (all iambic)
5	Pentameter	   Of snow   upon   the moun   tains and   the moors
4	Tetrameter	   Amaz   ing Grace   how sweet   the sound
3	Trimeter	   That saved   a wretch   like me
2	Dimeter	   be gone   be gone

## Over to you

**12.10** Structural features of poetry are useful, but how do you incorporate these into a meaningful analysis of a poem? As you analyse a poem, you should avoid focusing too much on form, structure and features ('beating it with a hose', in the words of Billy Collins) and not focusing enough on themes, purpose and meaning. As well as identifying and commenting on the features of poetry, it is important to comment on the *effects* these features have on the reader.

- a** Start by listening to what the poem is telling you. Text 1.45 has been highlighted with four different colours. The student who has highlighted the poem has identified common themes within the text. They have included a colour-coded key to show the commonalities in the text.
- b** Find a poem that you want to analyse and write about in an essay. Ask your teacher to provide you with a poem if you do not have any ideas. Use four or five different colours and highlight four or five ideas or themes in the poem.
- c** Create a colour-coded key to accompany your highlights and annotations.





Seamus Heaney was a Nobel Prize-winning poet from Ireland. 'Blackberry-Picking' is taken from one of his best-known collections of poetry called *Death of a Naturalist* (1966).

## Text 1.45

## Blackberry-Picking

Seamus Heaney 1966

Late August, given heavy rain and sun  
 For a full week, the blackberries would ripen.  
 At first, just one, a glossy purple clot  
 Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.  
 You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet 5  
 Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it  
 Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for  
 Picking. Then red ones inked up and that hunger  
 Sent us out with milk cans, pea tins, jam-pots  
 Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots. 10  
 Round hayfields, cornfields and potato-drills  
 We trekked and picked until the cans were full  
 Until the tinkling bottom had been covered  
 With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned  
 Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered 15  
 With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.  
 We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.  
 But when the bath was filled we found a fur,  
 A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.  
 The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush 20  
 The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.  
 I always felt like crying. It wasn't fair  
 That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.  
 Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.

### Colour-coded key

- A sense of eagerness and hope
- Rural images, a celebration of the countryside lifestyle
- Sensual language and imagery that embellishes blackberry-picking
- Hardships and the disappointment of decay

### AOE question

*How useful is it to describe a work as 'classic'?*

You have read three poems in this unit. Is there any reason to attach the label 'classic' to any one of these? The word 'valid' is also interesting, as it relates to logic. How can you validate their 'classic' status? As a class, define the term 'classic' and explain your answers to these questions in a group discussion.



**12.11** Text 1.46 is an HL essay that explores 'Blackberry-Picking' by Seamus Heaney (Text 1.45).

- Where, in the essay, do you see literary terms about poetry from this unit?
- Where, in the essay, do you see evidence that background information about the poet, Seamus Heaney, has been researched and incorporated into the essay?
- How are the paragraphs organised and structured? What is the purpose of each paragraph?
- What phrases could you take from this essay and use in an essay that analyses any text?
- Where in the essay do you see evidence of critical thinking?
- How would this essay score as an HL essay? Use the assessment criteria in the introduction to give it marks and a grade. How could it be improved to score a higher mark?

Compare your marks and comments to those of the examiner, provided after the essay.

### TIP

You may want to analyse a poem or collection of poetry by the same poet for your HL essay. You could use the sample HL essay provided as a model for your essay.

### AOE question

*How can texts present challenges and offer insights?*

Notice how the line of inquiry for the sample HL essay almost mirrors this question from 'Readers, writers and texts'. For your HL essay, you may wish to 'tweak' one of the questions from one of the areas of exploration, turning it into a 'line of inquiry' which focuses on a text that you have explored in class.

### ATL

#### Thinking skills

Activity 12.11 asks you to find evidence of critical thinking in the student's HL essay that analyses the poem 'Blackberry-Picking'. *Thinking skills* are part of the approaches to learning in the IB Diploma Programme, and include skills such as:

- analysis
- evaluation
- the ability to find patterns
- the ability to build conceptual knowledge.

Can you find evidence of these skills in the sample HL essay? What do they look like?

## HL Essay – Sample 1

### Line of inquiry

How does Seamus Heaney's poem 'Blackberry-Picking' offer insight into the challenges of growing up in rural Ireland?

#### Essay

Poetry can offer readers a window into the life of a poet. When reading Seamus Heaney's first-published collection of poems, *Death of a Naturalist*, the poem 'Blackberry-Picking' (see Appendix) in particular offers readers a window into the poet's life. It raises the question: 'How does Seamus Heaney's poem 'Blackberry-Picking' offer insight into the challenges of growing up in rural Ireland?' The poem recalls Seamus Heaney's memories of gathering blackberries, giving audiences a better understanding of the life lessons he learnt growing up on a farm. Through the author's use of language and structure, Seamus Heaney shows readers how futile and disappointing it is to cultivate nature.

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While it is good to open with a 'hook' or a sentence that grabs your reader's attention, be careful not to overgeneralise. This opening sentence is general but still relevant to the line of inquiry. In fact it sets up the line of inquiry nicely.

If you are analysing a poem, add it as an appendix to your HL essay. 'Blackberry-Picking' is Text 1.45 in this unit.

Try integrating your line of inquiry into the introduction, so as to give your essay a sense of direction.

A good introduction ends with a thesis statement. This thesis statement answers the line of inquiry, comments on the author's purpose and refers to the author's use of 'language and structure'.

In a good piece of textual analysis, examples of linguistic features are given to support any claims or points.

This is an example of an 'integrated' quotation, meaning that the student's ideas include a few words from the primary source. This is good practice.

Notice how the last line of each paragraph does not end with a quotation or illustration. Instead, the last line of a paragraph should link back to the thesis or topic sentence.

The phrase 'through the use of ...' is perhaps the most common phrase in students' work. Nevertheless, it is used for good reason, as it allows you to make a connection between form and meaning. That, after all, is what textual analysis is about.

Notice the student's effective use of parentheses, commas, full stops and quotation marks. Including coherent references will help you both on Criteria A and C.

Use language from the line of inquiry in order to keep the essay focused and relevant.

Be careful not to include such ideas as common knowledge. It is important to cite secondary sources where necessary. This essay could use a bibliography to list 'works consulted' and 'works cited'.

The poem 'Blackberry-Picking' carries a sense of eagerness and hope, which Seamus Heaney presumably held as a boy, growing up in rural Ireland. This sense of eagerness is exemplified in his choice of verbs, such as 'sent out' (line 9), 'trekked', 'picked' (line 12) and 'hoarded' (line 17). The use of the past tense suggests that the poem is based on the poet's memory of a regular, recurring activity on the farm. This poem, like many of Heaney's poems in *Death of a Naturalist*, is in the tradition of poetry of William Wordsworth, which takes inspiration from 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. Furthermore, his heavy use of consonance within these verbs, such as the 't' sound in 'sent out' (line 9), the 'k' sound in 'trekked and picked' (line 12) and the 'd' sound in 'hoarded' (line 17), emphasises his boy-like sense of eagerness. Similarly, the verb 'hoped' in the last line uses two plosives 'p' and 'd' in close proximity, which is not easily pronounced by the reader but easily noticed by the listener. By including this word in the past tense at the end of the poem, it becomes clear that the sense of hope and eagerness would both come and go 'each year' (line 24) for the poet. Seamus Heaney shows the reader how nature provides a recurring sense of hope that dissipates as quickly as it comes.

Through the use of imagery and diction, Seamus Heaney both celebrates rural life and comments on its hardships in his poem 'Blackberry-Picking'. The nouns often point to material objects found around farms, such as 'milk cans', 'pea tins' and 'jam-pots' (line 9), natural elements, such as 'briars', 'wet grass' (line 10), and 'bush' (line 20), and farmland in 'hayfields', 'cornfields' and 'potato-drills' (line 11). These nouns are examples of imagery, as they appeal to the senses and enable the reader to picture rural Ireland and the narrator's lifestyle. In one sense the images are celebratory, as they appear in conjunction with his boyhood eagerness and hope. For example, the natural elements, such as the 'rain and sun' (line 1) would make the blackberries 'ripen' (line 2), and the material objects such as 'the cans' would be 'full' (line 12). In an opposite sense though, the imagery is associated with the hardships of the rural life. The natural elements, such as the 'wet grass' (line 10), would bleach the narrator's boots, and the 'briars' (line 10) would scratch his hands. The 'rat-grey' (line 19) colour of the 'fungus' (line 19) 'fur' (line 18) is perhaps the most striking image in the poem, as it appeals to both tactile and visual senses, with associations of the plague and disease. The fungus symbolises nature's inevitable turn towards decay, with which the narrator must come to terms. With this use of imagery, Seamus Heaney gives the reader insight into both the beauty of rural Ireland and challenges of cultivating nature.

Interestingly, 'Blackberry-Picking' includes sensual language, which is also used to develop the theme of growing up. The poem is full of rich, deep colours such as 'purple' (line 3), 'red' (lines 4 and 8) and 'stains upon the tongue' (line 7), which not only have associations with human sexuality, but also sound quite sensual when spoken. The consonance of the 'l' sound in 'glossy purple clot' rolls off the speaker's tongue in an almost suggestive manner. The fifth verse, 'You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet' (line 5) and the sixth verse, 'summer's blood', seem to refer to the loss of virginity. The sensual language runs parallel with the boy's eagerness to pick the berries, as seen with the use of enjambment in verses seven and eight 'lust for [line break] Picking'. The allusion to Bluebeard is the first sign that sexual discovery, like the excitement of picking blackberries, will eventually fade and spoil. 'Bluebeard' (line 16) is a reference to a French folktale about a wealthy man who marries and kills women habitually. His insatiable appetite for sex was coupled with violence, leaving the women he seduced dead. In a similar way, the narrator and his friends see the result of their picking, 'dark blobs burned Like a plate of eyes' (lines 14-15) and their 'hands were peppered With thorn pricks' (lines 15-16), with astonishment and horror. 'Palms sticky as Bluebeard's' (line 16) suggests that the berry stains on their hands were comparable to the bloodstains on Bluebeard's hands. This juxtaposition of desire and grief is seen throughout



the final lines of the poem: 'juice' appears in conjunction with 'stinking' (line 20), 'fruit' with 'fermented' (line 21), 'sweet flesh' with 'sour' (line 21) and 'lovely canfuls' with 'rot' (line 23). This contrast shows the reader that hedonism and delight are paired with sorrow and decay, a life lesson that the narrator learns growing up on the farm in Ireland.

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The constant juxtaposition of beauty with hardship, naiveté with experience, and hope with despair is perhaps best observed by studying the structure of Seamus Heaney's poem. While each verse uses pentameter, there is no symmetrical rhyming structure or use of rhythmical feet. The poem begins with a spondee followed by four iambs, '*Late Aug | ust gi | ven bea | vy rain | and sun*', followed by a trochee at the end of the second line, '*rip en*,' which seems to throw off its sense of rhythm. Just when the listener senses a rhyming pattern after lines three and four with 'clot' and 'knot,' there are no rhymes until the final two verses. These act as tidy book ends with chaos in between, a juxtaposition that relates to the themes of the poem. The structure of the poem implies that nature cannot be contained or managed by people, as most rhymes are half rhymes, such as 'sweet' (line 5) with 'it' (line 6), 'lust for' (line 7) with 'hunger' (line 8) and 'jam-pots' (line 9) with 'boots' (line 10). Just when the listener is used to this imperfection, the poem ends with a perfect rhyme: 'That all the lovely canfuls smelt of *rot*. Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would *not*.' This final word echoes the word 'knot' from verse four, suggesting nature has unravelled the narrator's plans to pick and eat all the berries. This unravelling is first signalled in verse 18 with the word 'But', which acts as a volta, or turning point in the poem: 'But when the bath was filled we found a fur' (line 18). From this point, the disappointment of decay sets in. The 'fungus' (line 19) makes the berries 'rot' (line 23), and the narrator feels like 'crying' (line 22). 'It wasn't fair' (line 22) sounds like the language of a child, rather than the language of a sonnet. This use of language and structure depicts the narrator coming to grips with the hardships of farm life and growing up in rural Ireland. Nature, it seems, taught Seamus Heaney's to deal with and accept the futility of trying to harness nature.

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On the surface, the poem 'Blackberry-Picking' depicts Seamus Heaney, the author and narrator, struggling to understand why all of his precious berries would rot each year. However, as the reader digs deeper into this poem, the messages of the poem become more abstract. Eagerness and hope often gravitate towards hardship and despair. Lust leads to disappointment. Nature is full of life but also decay. The author shares these messages with the reader through language and structures that match their sentiment, with regular but irregular rhyming schemes, beautiful but ugly images and sensual but harsh diction. These careful juxtapositions are what make Seamus Heaney's poem timeless and effective, giving readers an understanding of both the author's life and life in general.

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Notice how this essay refers to the reader and listener frequently. This is good practice and will help you score well on Criterion B.

Several sentences in this paragraph begin with 'this' or 'that'. Such words point to previous ideas and give the essay coherence.

Do not worry about sounding repetitive by returning to your main points in each paragraph. This gives the essay coherence and unity.

The student's own writing is full of parallelisms and effective stylistic devices. Proofread and edit your writing before you submit your essay to ensure that it is your best work.

## HL Essay – Sample 1 – Examiner's marks and comments

### Criterion A: Knowledge, understanding and interpretation: 4 out of 5 marks

The essay is very analytical, focusing exclusively on one primary source. The scope of the inquiry on the 'challenges of growing up in rural Ireland' is very broad and therefore difficult to cover entirely. A better line of inquiry might have read: 'How does Seamus Heaney's poem "Blackberry-Picking" offer insight into the challenges that he faced when growing up in rural Ireland?' The student's interpretations of the poem are very focused on Heaney's experiences. References to the poem are integrated effectively into the argument. Arguably, the student's knowledge and understanding of the poem are not based solely on an analysis of the text, meaning that secondary sources should have been referenced.

### Extended essay

Perhaps you are inspired by the student's HL essay on 'Blackberry-Picking' to write an extended essay on poetry. You may want to compare the works of two poets (Category 2) or how the poetry of one poet evolves over time (Category 1). Any element of comparison will inevitably increase your level of analysis and marks for critical thinking (Criterion C).



**Criterion B: Analysis and evaluation: 5 out of 5 marks**

The essay offers a careful analysis of the language of the poem, focusing narrowly on the use of verbs, imagery and diction in constructing meaning. This insightful analysis is consistently relevant to the line of inquiry. The student evaluates the author's use of language and structure, commenting on the effects of juxtaposition, rhyme, allusion and consonance (among other devices) on the poem's reader and listener.

**Criterion C: Coherence, focus and organisation: 4 out of 5 marks**

A bibliography or 'works cited' section is necessary for this essay. Besides quotations from the primary source, there is also a quotation from William Wordsworth, which needs a citation. Besides this, the essay is organised effectively around different stylistic features. While its focus on the poem is consistent, it loses sight of 'rural Ireland' at times.

**Criterion D: Language: 5 out of 5 marks**

The essay shows good command of the English language. The essay includes varied sentences, correct use of literary terms and an academic tone.

**CAS**

Writing your own poetry and performing it at 'slam' poetry events in cafés or clubs is another good way of meeting your CAS requirement. Reflect on how this creative process is transformative for you as both a poet and a student of English.

**12.12** After carefully reading this sample HL essay and discussing your answers to the questions from Activity 12.11, try writing your own essay of 1200–1500 words, which analyses a poem in detail (see 'Further reading' for suggested authors). The writing process could take these steps:

- a** Annotate and highlight the words and lines of a poem with careful detail.
- b** Create a mind map of ideas that you want to put into your essay.
- c** Return to the 'key features' section and see if you can find evidence of these in your poem.
- d** Draft an outline of your essay.
- e** Write a rough draft of your essay and show it to your teacher. Ask your teacher to comment on the quality of your work, applying the assessment criteria.
- f** Rewrite your essay, based on your teacher's comments.
- g** If the essay has been written about a work that you are reading for class at HL, you may wish to submit your essay to the IB as an HL essay.

**12.13** Writing essays about poetry is one thing. Writing poetry is another. Have you ever written a poem? Why not give it a try? After carefully reading Seamus Heaney's poem about growing up in Ireland and picking blackberries, you may wish to write a poem about your experiences growing up where you live. What 'life lessons' have you learnt? What messages do you wish to communicate to a wider audience in an artistic, poetic way?

Whether or not you decide to write about 'growing up', write a poem that you could read aloud to your classmates or possibly at a poetry evening at school for family and teachers. Enjoy the process and reflect on its challenges after your reading of your poem with classmates.

**LEARNER PROFILE****Risk taker**

Does Activity 12.13 sound scary? Writing and performing your own poetry can be intimidating but rewarding. What kind of risks are you taking by doing this? What can you do to overcome your fears and see the value added in writing poetry about your own life?

## Further reading

- There are many enjoyable poets and lyricists on the prescribed list of authors for your English A: Language and Literature course, such as: Seamus Heaney, Margaret Atwood, Grace Nichols, Carol Ann Duffy, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Philip Larkin, Robert Frost, William Shakespeare, John Keats, Bob Dylan, Les Murray, John Lennon, Joni Mitchell, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Edgar Allen Poe, W.H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath, William Wordsworth, Judith Wright or William Butler Yeats, to name a few names in no particular order.
- *How to Read Poetry Like a Professor* by Thomas Foster offers a fun approach to reading poetry. It explores verse from Dr. Seuss to Robert Louis Stevenson in a way that is accessible and enlightening.
- *The Poetry Toolkit* by Rhian Williams gives very clear and thorough guidance for students who wish to unpack poetry in more depth. It breaks down poetry into subgenres and analyses the use of many literary devices.

### TIP

You can study 15–20 song lyrics by a songwriter as a literary work in the English A: Language and Literature course. Ask your teacher if you can study the lyrics of your favourite artist as a 'freely chosen' work. Remember, when analysing lyrics, terminology from poetry can be relevant. Do not forget to explore other devices, such as chorus, verse and bridge.

### REFLECT

Twelve text types have been explored in this chapter by focusing on model texts, explaining their key features and encouraging you to write your own texts. How has this method helped you understand these types of texts better, in preparation for various forms of assessment? How can you use this method to explore other text types?

Make a list of other text types that you would like to explore as a class, and use this method to analyse them effectively. Document your findings in your learner portfolio by creating a section on text types.