

Important questions and answers on the course « African Poetry »

Overview of African poetry.

African poetry is a rich and diverse art form that encompasses the many **languages, cultures, and traditions found on the African continent**. It reflects the experiences, struggles, and joys of African peoples, past and present, and is often deeply rooted in oral traditions and communal storytelling.

Historically, African poetry has been passed down through **generations via oral traditions, with poets reciting their works at public events, festivals, and ceremonies**. Many African cultures also use music and dance as an integral part of their poetry, with rhythms and melodies adding an additional layer of meaning and emotional resonance to the words.

In more recent times, **African poetry** has also been written down and published, with poets exploring a wide range of themes and styles. These may include *political and social issues, such as colonialism, racism, and inequality, as well as personal and universal themes, such as love, loss, and identity*.

Some notable African poets include :

Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) – Achebe is perhaps best known for his novels, but he was also a celebrated poet. His poetry often reflects on the complexities of modern African society, as well as the legacy of colonialism and its impact on African identity.

Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) – Soyinka is one of Africa's most celebrated writers, and his poetry is known for its political and social commentary. He has written about everything from war and conflict to the environment and human rights.

Maya Angelou (USA) – While Angelou was not born in Africa, her work often explored themes of African identity and heritage. Her poetry is deeply personal, exploring issues such as racism, love, and the struggle for self-acceptance.

Leopold Sedar Senghor (Senegal) – Senghor was a prominent poet, philosopher, and politician who played a key role in the fight for independence in Senegal. His poetry often reflects on the beauty and richness of African culture, as well as the challenges faced by African peoples in the modern world.

Okot p'Bitek (Uganda) – p'Bitek is known for his innovative use of traditional African forms and structures in his poetry. He often explores themes of cultural identity, social injustice, and the impact of modernity on traditional African societies.

In conclusion, **African poetry** is a **rich** and **varied art form** that reflects the **experiences** and **voices** of a diverse continent. It continues to evolve and grow, providing a vital and important space for African writers and poets to share their stories and perspectives with the world.

What is Poetry ?

In the African context, **poetry** is often viewed as an **art form** that reflects **the cultural values, traditions, and experiences of a particular community or society**. Poetry is deeply embedded in the oral traditions and storytelling practices of many African cultures, and it is often recited or sung during important ceremonies and events.

African poetry can take many **different forms**, including **narrative poetry, lyrical poetry, and performance poetry**. Many African poets also incorporate **music, dance, and other forms of artistic expression** into their work, creating a **rich** and **multi-layered** art form that is both **deeply personal** and **deeply communal**.

At its **core**, **African poetry** is often focused on **themes of community, identity, and connection to the land and the natural world**. Many African poets draw on traditional symbols and metaphors to explore these themes, weaving together personal experiences with broader cultural and historical narratives.

In African traditional poetry, poets can be categorized into three main categories based on their roles and functions within their communities :

1. **Professional Poets (Griots):** **Griots** are **professional poets** and **musicians** who are responsible for preserving and **transmitting** the **oral traditions** of their communities. They are often associated with West African societies and are known for their ability to **recite long epic poems that tell the history and mythology of their people**. Griots also play important social roles, serving as advisors, mediators, and entertainers within their communities.
2. **Second Category(semi-professional poets) (Bards) :** **Bards** are poets who are known for their ability to **compose** and **recite** poetry on a wide range of topics, often in response to **specific events or occasions**. They may be amateur or professional, and their poetry is often characterized by its improvisational nature and its ability to respond to the needs and concerns of their communities.

3. **Third Category (Less specialized poets : Diviners):** Diviners are poets who are responsible for communicating with the **spirits and ancestors of their communities**. They often use poetry as a means of entering into a **trance-like state**, where they can communicate with the spiritual realm and receive guidance and wisdom for their communities. Diviners play important roles in many African societies, serving as **healers, advisors, and spiritual leaders**.

These three categories of poets in African traditional poetry each have their own unique roles and functions within their communities, but all share a **common commitment to preserving and transmitting the oral traditions of their people** through the art of poetry.

Groups of oral poetry.

Here are some **groups of oral poetry**. Among them are :

1. **Occupational poetry** : This is a type of oral poetry that is associated with **specific occupations or trades**. Occupational poets often use their poetry to communicate **knowledge** and **skills** related to their **work**, and to create **a sense of community and shared identity among workers** in a particular trade.
2. **Cult poetry** : This refers to the poetry that is associated with **religious or spiritual practices**. In many African societies, cult poetry is used as a way of communicating with **spirits or ancestors**, and is often performed in **ritual contexts**.
3. **Social poetry** : This type of poetry is used to comment on **social issues** and **current events**. Social poets often use their poetry to critique **social injustice, advocate for political change**, and **call attention** to issues affecting their communities. Also, **love, war and children poetry** are included.
4. **Drum poetry** : This is a type of oral poetry that is performed with **drumming accompaniment**. Drum poetry is often associated with **West African traditions**, and is used to communicate important **cultural** and **historical** information through a combination of **rhythm, melody, and spoken word**.

All of these different groups of oral poetry are **important parts of African cultural traditions, and each serves a unique function within its particular context**. By **preserving** and **transmitting** these traditions through the **art of poetry**, African cultures are able to **maintain a strong sense of identity** and **connection** to their **history** and **heritage**.

What is Written poetry .

In the African context, **written poetry** refers to poetry that is **written down** and **recorded in written form, often in a literary language or in a language that has been standardized for writing**. **Written poetry in Africa** has a rich history and encompasses a wide **variety of styles, themes, and forms**, including **oral traditions** that have been transcribed, translations of traditional oral poetry, and modern literary works. Some examples of written poetry from Africa include **the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and other notable African poets who have contributed to the continent's vibrant poetic traditions**.

What are they the different phases of African poetry ?

Here are the different phases of African poetry with examples.

1. **Pioneering phase** : This phase took place during the **pre-colonial era** and included **oral poetry forms** that were passed down through generations. Examples of this type of poetry include **praise songs, dirges, and epics**.

Example : **The « Epic of Sundiata »** from Mali, which tells the story of the founder of the Mali Empire through oral poetry.

2. **Transitional phase** : This phase occurred during the **colonial period** and was characterized by a **fusion of traditional and Western poetic forms**. African poets began to use Western literary techniques while also addressing issues of colonialism and African identity.

Example : **Christopher Okigbo's « Limits » (1962)**, which blends **Western poetic forms** with Igbo traditional imagery to explore themes of identity and loss.

3. **Modernist phase** : This phase emerged after **independence** and was marked by a search for African identity and a rejection of Western literary traditions. Poets in this phase experimented with form, language, and theme to create a distinct African poetic voice.

Example : **Chinua Achebe's « Refugee Mother and Child » (1971)**, which uses **free verse** and **vivid imagery** to explore the universal theme of motherhood in the context of the Nigerian civil war.

4. **Contemporary phase** : This phase started in the **1980s** and continues to the present day. It is characterized by a **diverse range of voices, styles, and themes**, reflecting the complexity of modern African societies. Contemporary African poetry often addresses issues such as **globalization, environmental degradation, and gender identity**.

Example : **Warsan Shire's « Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth » (2011)**, which explores themes of *displacement*, *violence*, and *identity* in the context of the Somali diaspora.

Literary terms associated with poetry.

Here are some common literary terms associated with poetry and their definitions :

1. **Alliteration** : The repetition of initial consonant sounds in a sequence of words.
2. **Assonance** : The repetition of vowel sounds in a sequence of words.
3. **Connotation** : The emotional and cultural associations attached to a word.
4. **Denotation** : The literal, dictionary definition of a word.
5. **Enjambment** : A line of poetry that continues into the next line without punctuation.
6. **Imagery** : The use of sensory language to create mental images.
7. **Metaphor** : A comparison between two things without using « like » or « as ».
8. **Onomatopoeia** : The use of words that imitate sounds.
9. **Personification** : Giving human qualities to non-human things.
10. **Rhyme** : The repetition of similar sounds, often at the end of lines in poetry.
11. **Simile** : A comparison between two things using « like » or « as ».
12. **Stanza** : A group of lines in a poem, usually separated by a blank line.
13. **Symbolism** : The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities.

14. **Tone** : The author's attitude or perspective towards the subject matter of the poem.

15. **Theme** : The underlying message or idea conveyed by a poem.

Africa is a continent rich in cultural diversity, history, and complex social issues that are reflected in its literature. Here are some themes in African literature and a brief discussion of each :

1. **Colonialism and Postcolonialism** : African literature often explores the **impact of colonialism** and **postcolonialism** on African societies. Authors such as **Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Wole Soyinka** wrote about the **political, economic, and cultural consequences of colonialism**, including the loss of **traditional cultures** and the **struggle for independence and self-determination**.
2. **Gender and Sexuality** : **Gender roles** and **sexuality** are major themes in African literature. Some writers explore the tension between **traditional gender roles and modernity, while others** examine the ways in which sexuality is stigmatized or celebrated in African societies. Examples of authors who explore these themes include **Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Yvonne Vera**.
3. **Identity** : Many African writers explore the theme of identity, including the **search for personal, cultural, and national identity**. The works of authors such as **Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri, and Tsitsi Dangarembga** examine issues of **race, ethnicity, and cultural heritage**.
4. **Violence and Conflict** : **Political violence, civil war, and other forms of conflict** are common themes in African literature. Authors such as **Chinua Achebe, Nuruddin Farah, and Bessie Head** write about the **impact of violence** on individuals and communities, and explore issues such as social justice, reconciliation, and healing.
5. **Poverty and Inequality** : Many African writers explore the theme of **poverty** and **inequality**, including the **struggle for basic human rights such as education, healthcare, and housing**. Examples of authors who explore these themes include **Nadine Gordimer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Binyavanga Wainaina**.
6. **Tradition and Modernity** : The tension between **tradition** and **modernity** is a recurring theme in African literature. Some writers explore the **impact of modernization** on traditional cultures, while others examine the ways in which traditional cultures can be a source of resilience and resistance against modernization. Examples of authors who explore these themes include **Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Bessie Head**.

7. **Diaspora and Exile** : The African diaspora is a major theme in African literature, with many authors exploring **issues of displacement, identity, and cultural hybridity**. Examples of authors who explore these themes include **Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, and Jamaica Kincaid**.

These are just some of the **themes in African literature**, and there are many more that are explored by different writers across the continent.

What is to study a poem ?

Studying a poem involves **analyzing** and **interpreting** the various elements of the poem to understand its meaning, message, and the emotions and ideas it conveys. This process includes examining the **poem's form, such as its rhyme scheme and meter, as well as its language, imagery, symbolism, tone, and themes**. Additionally, **studying a poem** involves **exploring the historical and cultural context in which it was written, as well as the author's biography and intentions**. Through a careful analysis of these elements, readers can gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of a poem's artistry and meaning.

*****Case Studies*****

A brief summary and analysis of the poem « The Way I Would Like To Die » by R.E.G. Armattoe

« The Way I Would Like To Die » is a poem by R.E.G. Armattoe, a Ghanaian poet. The poem is a meditation on death, and the speaker describes how they would like to die. The poem is structured in four stanzas, with each stanza presenting a different scenario for the speaker's death.

In the first stanza, the speaker imagines dying peacefully in their sleep, surrounded by their loved ones. They want to be remembered fondly by their family and friends, with no regrets or unfinished business.

In the second stanza, the speaker imagines dying in the midst of a creative pursuit, such as writing or painting. They want to leave behind a legacy of their art and have their work appreciated by future generations.

In the third stanza, the speaker imagines dying in service to their country, fighting for a cause they believe in. They want to be remembered as a hero, with their sacrifice inspiring others to continue the fight.

In the final stanza, the speaker concludes that they are content with however they die, as long as they have lived a life of purpose and meaning. They want to leave a positive impact on the world and be remembered for their contributions.

The poem is characterized by a contemplative tone and a sense of acceptance of death. The speaker recognizes that death is inevitable but seeks to make the most of their time on

earth. The poem is also notable for its use of vivid imagery, particularly in the second stanza where the speaker describes the colors and sounds of their creative pursuit.

Overall, « The Way I Would Like To Die » is a thoughtful and introspective poem that encourages the reader to reflect on their own mortality and the legacy they want to leave behind.

A brief summary and analysis of poem « Dry Your Tears Africa » by Bernard Dadie

« Dry Your Tears Africa » is a poem by Bernard Dadie, a prominent Ivorian poet and writer. The poem was written in the context of the decolonization movement in Africa and serves as a rallying cry for African unity and pride.

The poem is divided into two stanzas, each with four lines. In the first stanza, the speaker addresses Africa as a person, telling her to dry her tears and stand up strong. The speaker acknowledges the history of oppression and exploitation that Africa has endured, but also highlights the resilience and strength of her people.

In the second stanza, the speaker urges Africans to unite and work together towards a better future. The speaker calls on all Africans, regardless of their language, religion or ethnicity, to come together in solidarity and build a new Africa.

The poem is characterized by its use of powerful and emotive language, including repetition of the phrase « dry your tears Africa » and the use of strong verbs such as « rise », « stand », and « fight ». The poem also uses metaphor to convey its message, describing Africa as a person with tears and a wounded heart.

Overall, « Dry Your Tears Africa » is a powerful and moving poem that speaks to the struggles and hopes of the African people. It calls for a united and determined effort to overcome the legacy of colonialism and build a better future for all Africans.

A brief summary and analysis of poem « Servant-Kings » by R.E.G. Armattoe

« Servant-Kings » is a poem by R.E.G. Armattoe that explores the theme of leadership and the qualities that make a good leader. The poem is structured in three stanzas, each containing four lines.

The first stanza introduces the concept of servant-kings, leaders who are humble and put the needs of their people above their own desires for power and glory. The second stanza expands on this idea, emphasizing the importance of kindness and empathy in a leader. The third stanza concludes the poem with a call to action for readers to strive to become servant-kings themselves.

Overall, the poem suggests that true leadership involves serving others and putting their needs first, rather than seeking personal gain or glory. The use of the term « servant-kings »

emphasizes the idea that true leaders are both humble and powerful, able to lead through service and selflessness rather than force or coercion.

Armattoe's use of imagery and metaphor, such as comparing leaders to shepherds and the people they lead to sheep, adds depth and richness to the poem. The language is simple and accessible, making the message clear and easy to understand.

In conclusion, « Servant-Kings » is a thought-provoking poem that encourages readers to think about what it means to be a true leader and to strive for humility, kindness, and empathy in their own lives.

A brief summary and analysis of poem « The Mesh » by Kwesi Brew

« The Mesh » by Kwesi Brew is a poem that explores the interconnectedness of all living things, a theme that is central to many works of African poetry. In African poetry, the natural world is often portrayed as a source of wisdom and guidance, and human beings are seen as part of a larger community that includes both the living and the dead.

Brew's use of the metaphor of the mesh to describe the interconnectedness of life is a powerful example of this theme in African poetry. The mesh represents the complex web of connections that exist between all living things, and emphasizes the idea that every action we take has consequences that ripple outwards, affecting others in ways we may not even realize.

The poem also emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for our actions and their impact on others. This is a common theme in African poetry, which often emphasizes the importance of community and the need for individuals to act in ways that benefit the greater good.

The language of the poem is simple yet powerful, and the imagery and metaphor used by the poet are evocative and memorable. This is another hallmark of African poetry, which often uses vivid imagery and metaphor to convey complex ideas and emotions.

Overall, « The Mesh » is a powerful example of African poetry that explores the interconnectedness of all living things and emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for our actions. The poem's use of metaphor and imagery, as well as its simple yet impactful language, make it a memorable and thought-provoking work of poetry.

By E-learning.

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