

WJEC GCSE English Language and Literature (Single and Double Award)

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Poetry Anthology: Unit 1 and Unit 5

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Contents

Unit 1: Relationships	1
Valentine by Carol Ann Duffy	1
Modern Love by Douglas Dunn	2
Unit 1: Identity	3
I Come From by Dean Atta	3
Miz Rosa Rides the Bus by Angela Jackson	4
Unit 1: Conflict	6
The End and the Beginning by Wislawa Szymborska	6
A Century Later by Imtiaz Dharker	8
Unit 1: The Natural World	9
Ark by Simon Armitage	9
Like an Heiress by Grace Nichols	11
Unit 1: Children and Parents	12
Catrin by Gillian Clarke	12
Coming Home by Owen Sheers	13
Unit 5: Relationships	14
La Belle Dame sans Merci by John Keats	14
Unit 5: Identity	16
I Am! By John Clare	16
Unit 5: Conflict	17
The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred, Lord Tennyson	17
Unit 5: The Natural World	19
God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins	19
Unit 5: Children and Parents	20
On my First Son by Ben Jonson	20
Acknowledgements	21

Unit 1: Relationships

Valentine by Carol Ann Duffy

From a collection of Carol Anne Duffy's poetry released in 1993 this poem uses the giving of an onion as a gift to explore ideas about love and relationships and the commercialisation attached to Valentine's Day in modern times.

Valentine

Not a red rose or a satin heart.

I give you an onion.
It is a moon wrapped in brown paper.
It promises light
like the careful undressing of love.

Here.
It will blind you with tears
like a lover.
It will make your reflection
a wobbling photo of grief.

I am trying to be truthful.

Not a cute card or a kissogram.

I give you an onion.
Its fierce kiss will stay on your lips,
possessive and faithful
as we are,
for as long as we are.

Take it.
Its platinum loops shrink to a wedding ring,
if you like.
Lethal.
Its scent will cling to your fingers,
cling to your knife.

Carol Ann Duffy

Modern Love by Douglas Dunn

This poem is from the collection of work written between 1964 and 1983 by the Scottish poet Douglas Dunn. It is written as a piece of observation about a modern relationship. The poem suggests that the relationship is limited in some ways and quiet, but whether this is positive or negative is left to the reader to decide.

Modern Love

It is summer, and we are in a house
That is not ours, sitting at a table
Enjoying minutes of a rented silence,
The upstairs people gone. The pigeons lull
To sleep the under-tens and invalids,
The tree shakes out its shadows to the grass,
The roses rove through the wilds of my neglect.
Our lives flap, and we have no hope of better
Happiness than this, not much to show for love
But how we are, and how this evening is,
Unpeopled, silent, and where we are alive
In a domestic love, seemingly alone,
All other lives worn down to trees and sunlight,
Looking forward to a visit from the cat.

Douglas Dunn

Unit 1: Identity

I Come From by Dean Atta

This poem is written by Dean Atta, a British poet of Greek Cypriot and Caribbean descent. I Come From was written during his time at university in the early 2010s. It explores many ideas including some about inspiration, culture, race, and sexuality. It is a celebration of all the many things that can make us who we are.

I Come From

I come from shepherd's pie and Sunday roast
Jerk chicken and stuffed vine leaves
I come from travelling through my taste buds but loving where I live

I come from a home that some would call broken
I come from D.I.Y. that never got done
I come from waiting by the phone for him to call

I come from waving the white flag to loneliness
I come from the rainbow flag and the union jack
I come from a British passport and an ever-ready suitcase

I come from jet fuel and fresh coconut water
I come from crossing oceans to find myself
I come from deep issues and shallow solutions

I come from a limited vocabulary but an unrestricted imagination
I come from a decent education and a marvellous mother
I come from being given permission to dream but choosing to wake up instead

I come from wherever I lay my head
I come from unanswered questions and unread books
Unnoticed effort and undelivered apologies and thanks

I come from who I trust and who I have left
I come from last year and last year and I don't notice how I've changed
I come from looking in the mirror and looking online to find myself

I come from stories, myths, legends and folk tales
I come from lullabies and pop songs, Hip Hop and poetry
I come from griots, grandmothers and her-story tellers

I come from published words and strangers' smiles
I come from my own pen but I see people torn apart like paper
Each a story or poem that never made it into a book.

Dean Atta

Miz Rosa Rides the Bus by Angela Jackson

This poem about a black woman's journey from slavery to freedom, inspired by the Montgomery bus boycott and written by Angela Jackson, was published in 1998. The story in the poem is fictional but relates to typical events at the time relating to racism and the Jim Crow laws that were in place in the southern states of the U.S.A.

Miz Rosa Rides the Bus

That day in December I sat down

by Miss Muffet of Montgomery.

I was myriad-weary. Feets swole

from sewing seams on a filthy fabric;

tired-sore a pedalin' the rusty Singer;

dingy cotton thread jammed in the eye.

All lifelong I'd slide through century-reams

loathsome with tears. Dreaming my own

silk-self.

It was not like they all say. Miss Liberty Muffet

she didn't

jump at the sight of me.

Not exactly.

They hauled me

away—a thousand kicking legs pinned down.

The rest of me I tell you—a cloud.

Beautiful trouble on the dead December

horizon. Come to sit in judgment.

How many miles as the Jim Crow flies?

Over oceans and some. I rumbled.

They couldn't hold me down. Long.

No.

My feets were tired. My eyes were

sore. My heart was raw from hemming

dirty edges of Miss L. Muffet's garment.

I rode again.

A thousand bloody miles after the Crow flies
that day in December long remembered when I sat down
beside Miss Muffet of Montgomery.
I said—like the joke say—What's in the bowl, Thief?
I said—That's your curse.
I said—This my way.
She slipped her frock, disembarked,
settled in the suburbs, deaf, mute, lewd, and blind.
The bowl she left behind. The empty bowl mine.
The spoiled dress.

Jim Crow dies and ravens come with crumbs.
They say—Eat and be satisfied.
I fast and pray and ride.

Angela Jackson

Unit 1: Conflict

The End and the Beginning by Wislawa Szymborska

This poem was published in 1993 and is by Wislawa Szymborska, who was a female poet from Poland. This poem reflects what is left behind after war and what happens next with rebuilding and the fading of memory over time. It is a war poem that focuses on ordinary people rather than just soldiers or generals.

The End and the Beginning

After every war
someone has to clean up.
Things won't
straighten themselves up, after all.

Someone has to push the rubble
to the side of the road,
so the corpse-filled wagons
can pass.

Someone has to get mired
in scum and ashes,
sofa springs,
splintered glass,
and bloody rags.

Someone has to drag in a girder
to prop up a wall.
Someone has to glaze a window,
rehang a door.

Photogenic it's not,
and takes years.
All the cameras have left
for another war.

We'll need the bridges back,
and new railway stations.
Sleeves will go ragged
from rolling them up.

Someone, broom in hand,
still recalls the way it was.
Someone else listens
and nods with unsevered head.
But already there are those nearby
starting to mill about
who will find it dull.

From out of the bushes
sometimes someone still unearths
rusted-out arguments
and carries them to the garbage pile.

Those who knew
what was going on here
must make way for
those who know little.
And less than little.
And finally as little as nothing.

In the grass that has overgrown
causes and effects,
someone must be stretched out
blade of grass in his mouth
gazing at the clouds.

Wislawa Szymborska (translated by Joanna Trzeciak)

A Century Later by Imtiaz Dharker

This poem is from a 2014 collection by female Imtiaz Dharker. Born in Pakistan, she grew up in Glasgow. The title refers back to 1914 and the start of the First World War. It can also be seen to refer to the story of Malala Yousafzai and her fight to support the right for education for women. It suggests that violence cannot destroy the mind as easily as it does the body.

A Century Later

The school-bell is a call to battle,
every step to class, a step into the firing-line.
Here is the target, fine skin at the temple,
cheek still rounded from being fifteen.

Surrendered, surrounded, she
takes the bullet in the head

and walks on. The missile cuts
a pathway in her mind, to an orchard
in full bloom, a field humming under the sun,
its lap open and full of poppies.

This girl has won

the right to be ordinary,

wear bangles to a wedding, paint her fingernails,
go to school. Bullet, she says, you are stupid.
You have failed. You cannot kill a book
or the buzzing in it.

A murmur, a swarm. Behind her, one by one,
the schoolgirls are standing up
to take their places on the front line.

Imtiaz Dharker

Unit 1: The Natural World

Ark by Simon Armitage

Simon Armitage wrote this poem about environmental concerns and change for the naming ceremony of the British Antarctic Survey's new ship RRS Sir David Attenborough in 2019. Armitage found his trip to the Arctic Circle to be life changing. The title refers to the biblical story of Noah and the poem refers to sending out the animals to see if the flood has ended.

Ark

They sent out a dove: it wobbled home,
wings slicked in a rainbow of oil,
a sprig of tinsel snagged in its beak,
a yard of fishing-line binding its feet.

Bring back, bring back the leaf.

They sent out an arctic fox:
it plodded the bays
of the northern fringe
in muddy socks
and a nylon cape.

Bring back, bring back the leaf.
Bring back the reed and the reef,
set the ice sheet back on its frozen plinth,
tuck the restless watercourse into its bed,
sit the glacier down on its highland throne,
put the snow cap back on the mountain peak.

Let the northern lights be the northern lights
not the alien glow over Glasgow or Leeds.

A camel capsized in a tropical flood.
Caimans dozed in Antarctic lakes.
Polymers rolled in the sturgeon's blood.
Hippos wandered the housing estates.

Bring back, bring back the leaf.
Bring back the tusk and the horn
unshorn.
Bring back the fern, the fish, the frond and the fowl,
the golden toad and the pygmy owl,
revisit the scene
where swallowtails fly
through acres of unexhausted sky.

They sent out a boat.
Go little breaker,
splinter the pack-ice and floes, nose
through the rafts and pads
of wrappers and bottles and nurdles and cans,
the bergs and atolls and islands and states
of plastic bags and micro-beads
and the forests of smoke.

*Bring back, bring back the leaf,
bring back the river and sea.*

Simon Armitage

Like an Heiress by Grace Nichols

This poem has some features of the sonnet form and was written in 2020 by Grace Nichols. It is about the natural world and the title suggests that we have inherited its beauty. There is a contrast between the damage created outside and the luxury of the hotel in which the speaker of the poem is staying.

Like an Heiress

Like an heiress, drawn to the light of her
eye-catching jewels, Atlantic draws me
to the mirror of my oceanic small-days.
But the beach is deserted except for a lone
wave of rubbish against the seawall -
used car tyres, plastic bottles, styrofoam cups
rightly tossed back by an ocean's moodswings.
Undisturbed, not even by a sea bird,
I stand under the sun's burning treasury
gazing out at the far-out gleam of Atlantic
before heading back like a tourist
to the sanctuary of my hotel room
to dwell in the air-conditioned coolness
on the quickening years and fate of our planet.

Grace Nichols

Unit 1: Children and Parents

Catrin by Gillian Clarke

This poem by the National Poet of Wales, Gillian Clarke, was part of her second collection, published in 1978. The poem is about a relationship, most likely between mother and daughter. The focus is on a loving struggle and connection between the two, firstly at the child's birth and then ending with a stand-off between mother and grown daughter.

Catrin

I can remember you, child,
As I stood in a hot, white
Room at the window watching
The people and cars taking
Turn at the traffic lights.
I can remember you, our first
Fierce confrontation, the tight
Red rope of love which we both
Fought over. It was a square
Environmental blank, disinfected
Of paintings or toys. I wrote
All over the walls with my
Words, coloured the clean squares
With the wild, tender circles
Of our struggle to become
Separate. We want, we shouted,
To be two, to be ourselves.

Neither won nor lost the struggle
In the glass tank clouded with feelings
Which changed us both. Still I am fighting
You off, as you stand there
With your straight, strong, long
Brown hair and your rosy,
Defiant glare, bringing up
From the heart's pool that old rope,
Tightening about my life,
Trailing love and conflict,
As you ask may you skate
In the dark, for one more hour.

Gillian Clarke

Coming Home by Owen Sheers

This poem was written by Owen Sheers in 2015. It is about the relationship between a son and his family and explores how this has changed over time. It is written from the perspective of the son in first person. The poem does not have a rhyme scheme but includes memorable imagery that emphasises the intimate nature of family relationships.

Coming Home

My mother's hug is awkward,
As if the space between her open arms
is reserved for a child, not this body of a man.
In the kitchen she kneads the dough,
flipping it and patting before laying in again.
The flour makes her over, dusting
The hairs on her cheek, smoothing out wrinkles.

Dad still goes and soaks himself in the rain.
Up to his elbows in hedge, he works
on a hole that reappears every Winter,
its edges laced with wet wool –
frozen breaths snagged on the blackthorn.
When he comes in again his hair is wild,
and his pockets are filled with filings of hay.

All seated, my grandfather pours the wine.
His unsteady hand makes the neck of the bottle
shiver on the lip of each glass;
it is a tune he plays faster each year.

Owen Sheers

Unit 5: Relationships

La Belle Dame sans Merci by John Keats

This poem is a story told in the simple ballad form, written by John Keats in 1820. It is a fairy tale gone wrong, about love and death, told by more than one voice. Keats was one of the Romantic poets. There are Gothic elements in the poem, and this was another movement in literature at the time.

La Belle Dame sans Merci

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the lake,
And no birds sing.

O what can ail thee, knight-at-arms,
So haggard and so woe-begone?
The squirrel's granary is full,
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever-dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too.

I met a lady in the meads,
Full beautiful—a faery's child,
Her hair was long, her foot was light,
And her eyes were wild.

I made a garland for her head,
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;
She looked at me as she did love,
And made sweet moan

I set her on my pacing steed,
And nothing else saw all day long,
For sidelong would she bend, and sing
A faery's song.

She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna-dew,
And sure in language strange she said—
'I love thee true'.

She took me to her Elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

And there she lullèd me asleep,
 And there I dreamed—Ah! woe betide!—
The latest dream I ever dreamt
 On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and princes too,
 Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;
They cried—‘La Belle Dame sans Merci
 Thee hath in thrall!’

I saw their starved lips in the gloam,
 With horrid warning gapèd wide,
And I awoke and found me here,
 On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here,
 Alone and palely loitering,
Though the sedge is withered from the lake,
 And no birds sing.

John Keats

Unit 5: Identity

I Am! By John Clare

Written in 1845 by John Clare this poem is melancholy and reflective, with the poet considering his own identity and lack of happiness. John Clare was the son of a farm labourer who is known for writing thoughtful works often based on nature. He is sometimes known as The Peasants' Poet.

I Am!

I am—yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:
I am the self-consumer of my woes—
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteem;
Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below—above the vaulted sky.

John Clare

Unit 5: Conflict

The Charge of the Light Brigade by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

This poem by Alfred, Lord Tennyson and is about a brave but doomed cavalry charge made during the Crimean War. It was written in 1854. Tennyson did not see these events himself but was impressed when he read about the bravery of the horsemen who had to charge at Russian artillery.

The Charge of the Light Brigade

I

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.
“Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said.
Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

II

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
 Someone had blundered.
 Theirs not to make reply,
 Theirs not to reason why,
 Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

III

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
 Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of hell
 Rode the six hundred.

IV

Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
 All the world wondered.
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian

Reeled from the sabre stroke
Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

V

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
 Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell.
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left of them,
 Left of six hundred.

VI

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
 All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade,
 Noble six hundred!

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Unit 5: The Natural World

God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins

This poem was written in 1887 by Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is a sonnet that explores the relationship between God and the natural world. The poet is outraged at the way we treat the world that God has created. This can be seen as a reaction to the second wave of the Industrial Revolution in the late Nineteenth Century.

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Gerard Manley Hopkins

Unit 5: Children and Parents

On my First Son by Ben Jonson

This poem was written in 1603 by Ben Jonson and tells of a father whose young son has died. It is written in rhyming couplets and the metre form known as iambic pentameter. The poet is grieving for his son and ends by suggesting that he will not develop such feelings again to avoid being hurt so much.

On my First Son (1603)

Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
Seven years tho' wert lent to me, and I thee pay,
Exacted by thy fate, on the just day.
O, could I lose all father now! For why
Will man lament the state he should envy?
To have so soon 'scap'd world's and flesh's rage,
And if no other misery, yet age?
Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, "Here doth lie
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry."
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,
As what he loves may never like too much.

Ben Jonson

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Unit 5: Identity

I Am!	John Clare	In the public domain
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Unit 5: Conflict

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