



AQA GCSE English Literature



Power & Conflict

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Your notes

Power & Conflict: Overview

Power and Conflict

Power & Conflict Poetry Anthology Overview

For Paper 2, Section B, you will study a cluster of 15 poems which are thematically linked. This page will provide an overview of the **Power and Conflict** anthology. This cluster of poems is dealt with in Question 26 of Paper 2, Section B.

This page includes:

- A complete list of the poems in the cluster
- A brief overview of what is required in the exam
- A brief explanation of key themes
- A thematic comparison table of all 15 poems
- Top tips for the highest grade

This should help you identify which poem you should compare a given poem to in your exam question, and help you create an effective **thesis statement** to answer the poetry question.

Power and Conflict poems

Here is a list of all the poems in the Power and Conflict cluster:

[Ozymandias](#)

[London](#)

[The Prelude](#)

[My Last Duchess](#)

[The Charge of the Light Brigade](#)

[Exposure](#)

[Storm on the Island](#)

Bayonet Charge

Remains

Poppies

War Photographer

Tissue

The Emigree

Kamikaze

Checking Out Me History



Your notes

Power and Conflict overview

In Paper 2, Section B, you will be given one of the 15 poems on the exam paper itself, and be expected to compare it thematically to one other poem from the anthology. You will have to choose this second poem, and you should be prepared to write about any of the 15 poems in the exam. This means you need to have a thorough understanding of each poem.

Exam tips

To achieve high marks, you need to evidence your knowledge of the whole of the two poems in your answer, rather than just memorising and using a bank of quotations. This is because you are required to be focused on answering the question, rather than just reproducing lots of pre-learned quotes. The quality of the quotes, linked to the themes in the poems, is more important than quantity.

It is important to note that, in this question, if you only write about the poem given on the exam paper, or you will be marked down. You must write about the given poem and link it to one other of the poems in the anthology. Think of comparison as what connects the two poems. It is therefore better to start your response with an opening statement that thematically connects the two poems you are going to use to answer the question.

This question in the exam is worth 30 marks, and you should aim to spend between 40–45 minutes on it in the exam. In order to write a top-grade response, you should aim to write an introduction, at least 2–3 comparative paragraphs and a conclusion. It is up to you whether you write about the poem given on the exam paper first, and then your second choice of poem, linking themes back to the given poem, or if you

prefer a more **integrated** response (writing about both in each paragraph of your essay). Neither gets you more marks than the other.

For a more detailed guide on how to achieve top marks for your essay, please see our easy-to-follow [How to answer the poetry anthology question](#) pages.



Your notes

Power and Conflict: Key themes

Human power and corruption

The theme of power and **corruption** is evident in many of the poems in the anthology, both on an individual and a **state** level. It can explore:

- How an individual's power, pride and arrogance can lead someone to abuse their power or lead to their downfall
- The idea that human power does not last
- How an individual's desire for power can lead them to control and oppress others
- How power, in the wrong hands, can be destructive
- The **inheritance** of status and power does not necessarily mean you are a good leader
- The failings of institutions of power, such as the monarchy, the church and the government, in doing their jobs properly and protecting the people they are meant to serve

The power of nature

The theme of the power of nature (and how human power interacts with the power of nature) is explored in some of the poems in the anthology. It can explore:

- How the power of nature ultimately always outlasts human power, whether individual or via an institution
- The idea that nature outlives all other forms of power, making them insignificant by comparison
- How humanity's attempts to control nature are often **futile** and unsuccessful
- How nature itself can be powerful and destructive - especially the weather. This emphasises the conflict between man and nature

War and conflict

The theme of war and conflict is explored both directly in some of the poems, and indirectly via its effects and emotions. It can explore:

- Conflict and war in their **literal** sense, but also as a **metaphor** for the conflict between what is expected and what one desires



Your notes

- The **futility** of war
- The effects of war on those it leaves behind, and the after-effects of conflict
- The effect of war and conflict on the individual
- The effects of nature on war, and the conflict between war and nature
- How those in power can determine the fate of those who are not
- The violence and destruction conflict can cause
- How war can also mean a battle against power or authority

Oppression and inequality

The theme of **oppression** is linked to the idea of control. It has strong links to the idea of **inequality**, because those being oppressed often belong to marginalised groups who are treated unequally. It can explore:

- How power can be used by organisations to control and oppress society, or parts of society
- How power can be used by individuals to control and oppress other individuals
- How people can be controlled and oppressed by their own thoughts and emotions
- The fact that holding on too tight to power and control can lead to undoing
- Inequality between rich and poor, and social class and status
- Inequality between men and women, and how women are treated and viewed
- Inequality between those in power and those who are not
- Inequality between what we are taught and what we are not, and the interpretation of history

Memory and loss

The power of memory is linked to several of the other key themes, as is the related idea of loss. It can explore:

- How easily those in power can be forgotten
- The conflict between childhood memories and adult understanding
- The relationship between emotion, memory and loss
- How memories can stay with us and affect our mental health
- The loss of freedom, a home, or a homeland
- The loss of life, and, as such, the loss of possible future relationships, or relationships developing

Identity

The theme of identity can be explored via both individual and cultural identity. It can explore:



Your notes

- How an individual's identity is formed, and the conflict between personal identity and identity imposed on people
- How an individual's and a group's identity can be oppressed and controlled

Thematic comparison table

Use the table below to revise which poems connect to the others in the anthology, based on the themes the poets explore.

	Human Power and Corruption	Power of Nature	War and Conflict	Oppression and inequality	Memory and loss	Identity
Ozymandias	☰	☰		☰	☰	
London	☰	☰	☰	☰		
My Last Duchess	☰			☰	☰	☰
Checking Out Me History		☰		☰		☰
Tissue	☰	☰			☰	
The Emigree	☰				☰	☰
The Prelude	☰	☰				
The Charge of the Light Brigade			☰	☰		☰
Exposure		☰	☰			
Storm on the Island		☰	☰	☰		

Bayonet Charge		≡	≡	≡		
Remains			≡		≡	≡
Poppies			≡		≡	≡
War			≡		≡	≡
Photographer						
Kamikaze			≡	≡		≡



Power and Conflict: Tips for achieving the highest grade

- Referring to writer's methods, or linguistic terminology, without linking it to a theme will not get you marks
 - Writer's methods and the analysis of language, form and structure should always be based on the theme
- For example, writing "Browning writes the poem in the form of a dramatic monologue" will not get you a mark. However, writing "Browning uses the form of a dramatic monologue to show the level of control the Duke has over his late duchess, even in death, as no one else has the opportunity to speak" will
- Including historical facts or biographical information about the poet adds no value to your answers
 - If you are addressing the focus of the question, then you are addressing context
- If you know the poems well, you will be able to demonstrate this knowledge and understanding in the exam. Learn the poems rather than learning lists of quotes
- Make sure you read the question and highlight the focus. Then, decide on which poem you can make most links with the poem given to you on the paper
- You don't get extra marks for more quotations, but you do get more marks for making plenty of interesting comments about the quotes you have selected
- Using the poet's name can help you think about the text as a conscious construct, and will keep reminding you that the poet deliberately put the poem together
- Avoid making sweeping **generalisations**, such as "all women were treated badly in the 18th century". Make it relevant to the text. For example, "In this poem the woman is subject to control and oppression by her husband"

- Use **comparative connectives** in your answer, such as “similarly”, “likewise”, “on the other hand” and “contrastingly”



Your notes



Your notes

Ozymandias

Each poetry anthology at GCSE contains 15 poems, and in your exam question you will be given one poem – printed in full – and asked to compare this printed poem to another. As this is a closed-book exam, you will not have access to the second poem, so you will have to know it from memory. Fifteen poems are a lot to revise. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-grade response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages of the poet
- How the poet conveys these ideas through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas of other poets in the anthology

Below is a guide to Percy Shelley's poem Ozymandias, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's Methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to Compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is vital that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Shelley's intention and message

Ozymandias in a nutshell

Ozymandias was written by the **Romantic** poet Percy Bysshe Shelley in 1817. It explores the idea that all power is temporary, no matter how powerful or tyrannical the ruler is, and that ultimately nature is more powerful than any human power.

Ozymandias breakdown

Lines 1–2

"I met a traveller from an antique land,

Who said -"



Your notes

Translation

- The poem begins in the first person, but then instantly passes any responsibility for the opinions within the poem on to a stranger
- The narrator meets an unnamed traveller, and the poem is then recounted from the perspective of this stranger

Shelley's intention

- Shelley was anti-monarchy and felt that the king at the time of writing, King George III, had outstayed his welcome
- Shelley probably wanted to distance himself from the political messages of the poem, so he opened his poem with the detached narrative of a traveller
- Shelley also used Ozymandias as an **allegory** for King George III. The detached narrator meant that Shelley was free to comment on the monarchy as he wished because the views were being presented as the views of someone else

Lines 2–5

"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone

Stand in the desert...Near them, on the sand,

Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,"

Translation

- The traveller then tells of a ruined statue standing in the middle of the desert
- The statue is of a king, Ramesses II, also known as Ozymandias, who ruled over a once-great Egyptian civilisation
- Only the legs and the enormous face (the "**visage**") remain
- The traveller only describes the mouth, with a "frown", "wrinkled lip" and "sneer of cold command"

Shelley's intention

- Shelley is commenting that all that remains of this great and powerful ruler are legs and a "shattered" visage, which creates a sense of irony:
 - This is ironic because Ozymandias's power and pride were based on his image of being a great and powerful ruler, and yet now all that remains are broken parts of a statue



Your notes

- The poem portrays a king who believed strongly in his own power and superiority, and who tried to **immortalise** his power through his statue
- The “frown”, “wrinkled lip” and “sneer” of cold command suggest the cruelty and heartlessness of the ruler, who was arrogant and had nothing but contempt for his subjects:
 - This is reflective of Shelley’s own **anti-military** and **anti-monarchy** stance
 - Yet this statue has now been destroyed by time, and the king has largely forgotten

Lines 6–8

“Tell that its sculptor well those passions read

Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,

The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;”

Translation

- The reader then learns of the sculptor, who “well those passions read”, meaning that he could see beneath Ozymandias’s cold, commanding exterior to his passionate rage to “stamp” himself on the world
- When the poet refers to “The hand that mocked them”, he is implying that the sculptor knew Ozymandias’s true and ultimately **futile** nature
- The sculptor created the statue in a way that portrayed the cruelty of the king

Shelley’s intention

- The poem presents negative views about the power used to impose will
- It also comments on the arrogance and pride that can come from the type of tyrannical power in which the ruler wishes only to be known for his perceived greatness

Lines 9–11

“And on the pedestal, these words appear:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;

Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Translation

- There is an inscription on the base of the statue, with the arrogant claim that he is “King of Kings”
- The inscription invites everyone, especially his “Mighty” enemies, to look at what he has achieved as a ruler, and to know that he believes that he is all-powerful and cannot be defeated

Shelley’s intention

- The irony here is that the statue is falling apart and decaying so that only the ruins remain
- The poet is showing how power deteriorates and does not last forever:
 - Even great empires which seem to be eternal can fade to nothingness



Lines 12–14

"Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Translation

- The ruins of the enormous statue lie alone in an endless, featureless desert

Shelley's intention

- The power of the natural world is also evident in this poem
- Sand and the desert are used as a **metaphor** for the passing of time:
 - They also suggest the impermanence of human constructions against the ultimate power of nature

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is always best to move from **what** the poet is presenting (the techniques they use; the overall form of the poem; what comes at the beginning, middle and end of a poem) to **how** and **why** they have made the choices they have.

Focusing on the poet's overarching ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. Crucially, in the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Shelley's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The poem is written in the form of a 14-line sonnet, which blends both **Petrarchan** and Shakespearean forms, in order to comment on **human power** and **pride**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
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Your notes

Established power structures	The poem takes the traditional 14-line form of a Petrarchan sonnet but uses an irregular rhyme scheme and consistent iambic pentameter, which is more typical of Shakespearean sonnets	The irregular rhyme scheme breaks away from the sonnet form, which enables Shelley to imply how poetry and literature can defy tradition and give way to new power
		He is demonstrating that established power structures can be changed
	A sonnet is typically a love poem from a man to his lover	It could also be argued that this 'love poem' is reflective of the pride and love Ozymandias has for himself, and not his subjects

Structure

Shelley uses the structure of Ozymandias to comment on the **temporary nature of all human power** when compared to the power of God or nature

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Futility and impermanence of human power	In line 3 of the poem, Shelley uses a technique called caesura ; a pause that occurs in a line of poetry, marked by the use of ellipsis	With this technique, the sonnet comes to a halt in the middle of the line
		Shelley uses the caesura to represent the breaking up of the statue
	Shelley also uses enjambment in the poem alongside the caesura	This creates an uneven pattern reflecting the broken nature of the statue, as well as the fact that nothing can last forever
	All of the lines have 10 syllables, except line 10, "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings", which has 11	This suggests that the ruler believes himself to be more important than God



Your notes

The poet uses a short sentence:
“Nothing beside remains”

Shelley does this perhaps to symbolise the finality of death and decay

Language

Shelley uses his choice of techniques and language to compare the ultimately **futile nature of human power** on the one hand with the overwhelming and **everlasting power of nature** on the other

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Futility and imperfection of human power	The statue can be seen as a representation of human power	It is a king's attempt to evade death and cement himself in history, yet it lies broken as a “colossal wreck”
	The “cold command” of the statue’s sneer reflects Ozymandias’s cold and cruel nature	This is also reflective of Shelley’s own anti-military stance, as he was against the “cold commands” of military action
	The inscription orders others to “look on my works”	This is ironic, as they no longer exist
	The setting of the desert is symbolic, as the land that surrounds the ruined statue is a vast, featureless wasteland, without any life or culture	The emptiness of the desert is symbolic of how his reign was ultimately pointless and insignificant, as he has been forgotten by history
Power of Nature	The desert is described as “boundless and bare” and “lone and level”	This communicates the vast, powerful extent of nature and its ability to outlive all other forms of power
	Shelley uses alliteration such as “lone and level”	This demonstrates the vast, unending power of the desert, and contrasts the limited power of man
	Shelley uses the “sands stretch far away” as a metaphor	This shows the passing of time, and how time can erase the power of man

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, it is not random biographical information about Percy Shelley or historical facts about the 19th Century that are unrelated to the ideas in Ozymandias. The best way to understand context is to the ideas and perspectives explored by Shelley in Ozymandias which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Shelley explores:



Your notes

- [The Nature of Human Power](#)

- [The Power of Nature](#)

The Nature of Human Power

- Shelley was a radical **romantic** poet, who was strongly **anti-monarchy**, and a **pacifist** and he supported **social justice**
- He rejected institutions of power, and his poetry was used to spread messages and political ideas which needed to be accessible to all
 - Shelley wrote Ozymandias to comment on the temporary and ultimately futile nature of human power
 - He was also against the monarchy and institutions that represented power and authority
- There are several historical references in the poem
- The first is to the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II, who used the throne name Ozymandias
 - Ramesses II thought himself to be a very powerful ruler and is remembered for his tyranny and military exploits, as well as having a large empire over Egypt
- King George III was also an influence in this poem, as he was king at the time of the writing
 - This is reflected in the “sneer of cold command” that initiates military actions
 - He engaged in military conflicts and was remembered for oppression and tyranny. Many believed he had outstayed his welcome
 - Shelley was a pacifist and positioned himself against George's military exploits
- The poem also touches on how human power, by its nature, can corrupt and ultimately doesn't last
 - The decay of the statue reflects how exploits which are impressive, but not morally good, will be criticised and forgotten about after they end
- Overall, the poet is criticising power, arrogance and pride, as represented by Ozymandias
 - It mocks rulers' past, present and future for thinking they will be any different from the previous one



Your notes

- Shelley was also perhaps criticising systems in which any one individual is given so much power that, despite their abuse of it, the population is unable to remove them
- He is also criticising all power being centered on a person who obtains their importance from an image and perceived **divine right** to power
- The poem also explores the conflict between humans and memory, as Ozymandias was largely forgotten, even though he thought his memory would last forever
- The poem also touches on the lasting power of art and words
 - Many people may not have remembered Ozymandias, but part of the statue remained, as well as the words placed on the inscription

The Power of Nature

- Certain key themes dominated the poetry of the **Romantic** era, such as the concept of the sublime
 - This term conveys the feelings people experience when they see awesome landscapes, or find themselves in extreme situations which create feelings of both fear and admiration
- By describing the desert as “boundless and bare” and “lone and level”, Shelley communicates the vast, powerful extent of nature
 - He also comments on nature’s ability to outlive all other forms of power (and deem them insignificant by comparison)
 - The “boundless” desert easily outlives the now-forgotten king Ozymandias

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology.

Given that Ozymandias explores the ideas of the **nature of human power**, the **corruption of power**, and the **power of nature**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:

- [Ozymandias and My Last Duchess](#)
- [Ozymandias and London](#)
- [Ozymandias and The Prelude](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem

- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Ozymandias and My Last Duchess



Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Ozymandias and My Last Duchess criticise the corruption of power by excessively prideful individuals and explore how, ultimately, this pride and power is undermined by forces more powerful than themselves

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show the effects of power and how it corrupts, as well as how power can be undermined	
Evidence and analysis	Ozymandias	My Last Duchess
	In Ozymandias, the poet shows a loss of power over time and in competition with nature, as the character is surrounded by desert which is a symbol of nature and time	Similarly, My Last Duchess shows the duke's power constantly undermined by the enjambment, caesura and single stanza
	Shelley describes Ozymandias's "sneer of cold command" as if to suggest that he is a cruel and heartless leader, only concerned with his own power and the immortality it will bring	The Duke in "My Last Duchess" is similarly concerned with his own power and status. Although the monologue is meant to replicate a conversation, there is no opportunity for anyone else to speak
	Ozymandias might have had "cold command" of his "lands", just like the Duke "gave commands"	Browning writes the monologue to show the Duke's self-obsession and that he is not interested in anyone's views other than his own
	The temporary nature of power is contrasted in both poems with the permanence of sculpture and art, as shown by the sculptor in Ozymandias and the painter in My Last Duchess	

Topic sentence	Both poets are concerned with how, in the wrong hands, power corrupts and how rulers are excessively prideful	
Evidence and analysis	Ozymandias	My Last Duchess


Your notes

This is expressed in Ozymandias through the form of a sonnet, as it is a love poem to show the king's love for himself	In My Last Duchess, the duke loves his "nine hundred-year-old name" and feels entitled to authority and control because of it
It could be argued that both figures of power are ultimately left with nothing	
In Ozymandias, the "lone and level sands stretch far away"	The Duke is left with a statue of "Neptune" which is made of cold bronze

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poets suggest that pride and power lead to oppression, the subjects of the oppression are different in each poem.	
Evidence and analysis	Ozymandias	My Last Duchess
	In Ozymandias, the statue is used as a symbol for all institutions or figures of power	In My Last Duchess, the Duchess is shown as the symbol of oppression – "then all smiles stopped"

Ozymandias and London

Comparison in a nutshell:

This is an effective comparative choice to explore the nature of political power. Both Shelley's Ozymandias and Blake's London show how nature will always be more powerful than humankind, and use setting to convey the nature of power and the power of nature

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show that, despite human achievement and progress, nature will always be more powerful than humankind	
Evidence and analysis	Ozymandias	London
	The statue in Ozymandias is a physical symbol of the power of mankind, and the poem shows it being consumed by nature	Blake's London shows the attempts of humans to control nature, and the futility of this attempt



Your notes

Shelley emphasises the exceptional power of the natural world, which links to the Romantic idea of the sublime	Blake writes "near where the chartered Thames does flow". He juxtaposes "chartered" and "flow" emphasising how impossible it is for humans to ultimately dominate nature
Despite being rigidly dominated ("chartered"), the Thames continues to "flow" naturally. It cannot be controlled	
Both poets reflect on power as something that creates a sense of entitlement or arrogance, as a way to make those lacking in power suffer	
They also show that, ultimately, power and status are meaningless in the long term, as all power is equalized by death	Both poets appear to want to show, via their depictions of people, how power in the wrong hands can be used for evil <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Therefore, both create a social commentary relating to hierarchical power structures and their inherent unfairness

Differences:

Topic sentence	Whereas Shelley is warning against individual arrogance and pride, Blake is commenting on the state of all people who live in London, and the systems that create oppression						
Evidence and analysis	<table border="1"><tr><td data-bbox="213 1360 747 1431">Ozymandias</td><td data-bbox="747 1360 1238 1431">London</td></tr><tr><td data-bbox="213 1431 747 1622">Via the inscription on the pedestal, Ozymandias orders his people to "look on my work...and despair."</td><td data-bbox="747 1431 1238 1622">Blake is commenting on the corrupt nature of politicians and organised societal structures in London, as he believes they cause great suffering to all</td></tr><tr><td data-bbox="213 1622 747 1854">The imperative "look on" shows the king's arrogance and the verb "despair" suggests that once someone has seen what he has achieved, there is no option for them but to feel lost and defeated</td><td data-bbox="747 1622 1238 1854">However, Blake describes the people of London as living in "mind-forg'd manacles . ." This suggests that the people who are suffering have created their own prisons in the minds</td></tr></table>	Ozymandias	London	Via the inscription on the pedestal, Ozymandias orders his people to "look on my work...and despair."	Blake is commenting on the corrupt nature of politicians and organised societal structures in London, as he believes they cause great suffering to all	The imperative "look on" shows the king's arrogance and the verb "despair" suggests that once someone has seen what he has achieved, there is no option for them but to feel lost and defeated	However, Blake describes the people of London as living in "mind-forg'd manacles . ." This suggests that the people who are suffering have created their own prisons in the minds
Ozymandias	London						
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The imperative "look on" shows the king's arrogance and the verb "despair" suggests that once someone has seen what he has achieved, there is no option for them but to feel lost and defeated	However, Blake describes the people of London as living in "mind-forg'd manacles . ." This suggests that the people who are suffering have created their own prisons in the minds						



Your notes

	"Manacles" has connotations of slavery and oppression, suggesting that Blake feels that London is oppressing its residents
Blake uses repetition to reinforce the great suffering of all mankind in "In every cry of every man...". "Man" is used as a collective noun to encompass all humanity	

Ozymandias and The Prelude

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Shelley's Ozymandias and Wordsworth's The Prelude highlight the sublime and overwhelming power of nature, and humankind's inability to impact forces beyond its control

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems display nature as more powerful than mankind	
Evidence and analysis	Ozymandias	The Prelude
	In Ozymandias, human power is shown as intrinsically weak and transient, lost to time and nature	Meanwhile, in The Prelude, failed attempts of mankind to overpower and manipulate a force beyond its control are displayed
Similarly, both poems express this power of nature through the use of personification		
The theme of pride is key in both, it being the cause of the subjects' eventual fall		

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poets explore how pride is unfounded because human power is inferior to the power of nature, they present this in different ways	
Evidence and analysis	Ozymandias	The Prelude

In Ozymandias, this power is conveyed through the symbolism of the desert and time

On the other hand, in The Prelude, the overwhelming power of nature leads to the speaker's loss of eloquence and how he becomes unable to define his world

There are also significant differences in form and structure, with Ozymandias being a sonnet and The Prelude an **epic poem**



Your notes



Your notes

London

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam, you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a "closed book" exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to William Blake's poem London, from the Power and Conflict anthology.

It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Blake's intention and message

London in a nutshell

London was written by the **Romantic** poet William Blake in the 1790s. It comments on the negative aspects of London at the time, including child labour, prostitution and the **corruption** of power and authority. It is a short but obvious criticism of the authorities of the time, including the church, the army and the monarchy, that have allowed the city to fall into such a downtrodden and dangerous state. The choice of title and topic, London (the financial and political centre of Britain), also instantly sets up the theme of power in the poem.

London breakdown

Lines 1–2

“I wander thro each charter’d street,
Near where the charter’d Thames does flow,”



Translation

- The **first-person narrator** is strolling through the streets of London, near the River Thames
- He does not seem to have a set destination, as he tells us “I **wander**”

Blake’s intention

- The word “**charter’d**” (**chartered**) is referring to the fact that the streets and the Thames are mapped out and legally defined
- Maps are an attempt to impose order on nature
- In this poem, the order is being placed on society
- Chartered also means to impose legal restrictions and ownership upon something
- This is ironic because the Thames is a natural body of water
- The fact that the narrator is wandering suggests he has no sense of purpose, which sets the tone of **melancholy** and pointlessness in the poem

Lines 3–4

“And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.”

Translation

- As he walks, he sees (“marks”) something about the faces of people walking by
- Each face has signs of misery and despair

Blake’s intention

- To “mark” means to notice, but the **repetition** of the word suggests that everybody is marked and affected by the city’s problems
- Blake may also be suggesting that there is no escape from the **bleakness**
- The impact of this place’s power is both permanent and wide-reaching
- The people have been “marked” by London, just like the **branding** of cattle

Lines 5–8



Your notes

**“In every cry of every man,
In every infant’s cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg’d manacles I hear:”**

Translation

- As the speaker continues his travels, he hears people's voices everywhere
- He hears the same pain and suffering in an infant as in a grown man
- “In every ban” suggests the political and religious restrictions placed upon people; the things people are not allowed to do
- The “mind-forg’d” (forged) **manacles** means that people are not physically **restrained**, but are restrained socially and emotionally

Blake’s intention

- The repetition of the word “every” suggests that all of humanity is affected
- Blake elicits sympathy from the reader as children are supposedly born innocent and shouldn’t have to suffer
- The phrase also indicates a negative view that every life is destined for this misery
- The “mind-forg’d manacles” indicates the **metaphorical shackles** made by the mind
- On paper people are free, but in reality they are not

Lines 9–10

“How the chimney-sweeper’s cry

Every black’ning church appalls,

Translation

- Chimney sweeps were the poorest of society
- They were usually children, employed to climb up chimneys to sweep out the soot
- This could be a dangerous job, as it was not only bad for their health, but they could also suffocate and die
- The soot from the chimneys would blacken the walls of the church, which was horrified by them (“appalls”)



Your notes

- The “black’ning church” also references the pollution in London at the time, due to the **Industrial Revolution**
- But it could also mean a **tarnished** or corrupted reputation

Blake’s intention

- Here, Blake is digging deeper into the effects of the “mind-forg’d manacles” on humanity
- The children who worked as chimney sweepers were often orphans, whom the church was meant to be responsible for
- However, the church is “appalled” by them and does not look after them as it should
- During Blake’s time, a lot of money went into the church while children were dying from poverty
- This emphasises what Blake considers to be the church’s **hypocrisy**
- Blake is criticising the church and its “blackened” or tarnished reputation
- He is reflecting on how the wealthy or **elite** take advantage of the poor

Lines 11–12

**“And the hapless soldier’s sigh
Runs in blood down palace walls.”**

Translation

- The “**hapless**” or unfortunate soldier is dying
- His blood runs down the walls of the homes of the elite
- At the time of writing, the elite and the monarchy were considered responsible for the wars that broke out, resulting in the deaths of many soldiers and innocent people
- Because of this, many women were widowed without support

Blake’s intention

- Here, Blake is criticising the government and the monarchy
- He is suggesting that soldiers and those who are left behind are the victims of war
- The use of the word “palace” is significant, as this is where royalty would have lived.
- Blake is accusing the monarchy and the elite of spilling the blood of soldiers in order to keep the comfort of living in a palace
- Blake supported the **French Revolution**, in which ordinary people overthrew the monarchy of France

Lines 13–16



Your notes

**“But most through midnight streets I hear
How the youthful harlot’s curse
Blasts the new-born infant’s tear,
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.”**

Translation

- “Midnight streets” is a direct reference to prostitution
- “Youthful **harlots**” suggests just how young many of these women were, who were likely forced into prostitution because they had no other choice
- The speaker hears them cursing their new-born babies and the death of marriage via a “**hearse**”

Blake’s intention

- Blake contrasts the innocence of youth with the unpleasantness of prostitution
- The speaker hears the harlots swearing, but this could also suggest a curse on the city
- The fact that she curses a new-born baby is the ultimate attack upon innocence, as instead of comforting the baby, she curses it
- This reveals the hardened heart of the harlot, representing the hardened heart of society at large
- Blake **juxtaposes** “marriage” which means “to join” with “hearse”, which means “to depart” to suggest the destruction of marriage
- Blake could be suggesting that men use prostitutes, get them pregnant and abandon them
- They may also spread diseases, therefore killing them
- This final stanza emphasises the theme of society’s moral decay

Writer’s Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an integrated approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Blake’s choices of language, structure and form contribute to these ideas. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet’s overarching ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. Crucially, in the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Blake’s intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**

- [Structure](#)
- [Language](#)

Form



The poem is written in the form of a simple, four **stanza dramatic monologue** to contrast with the complicated or difficult ideas in the poem.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Social criticism	The poem takes a simple, four stanza form	Blake wanted his poetry to feel accessible to all members of society
		He felt everyone should consider and discuss his messages and views
	The poem is written in the first person	The first-person speaker is passionate about what he sees and experiences, but the language is almost conversational in tone
		The poem is also written in the first person to demonstrate that this is the speaker's own experience of London

Structure

Blake uses the structure of London to reflect the **order and control imposed upon the city**, and the **never-ending cycle of misery and suffering caused by the abuse of power**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Never-ending suffering and misery	Cyclical structure – the first and second stanzas focus on the impact on people. The third explores the source of suffering, and the fourth goes back to the impact again	Blake is suggesting that suffering is never-ending
		It implies to the reader that people will keep suffering until they rebel against the authority oppressing them like the French did during the revolution
Control and power	Fairly consistent use of iambic tetrameter	Shows order and control, as the regularity of the rhythm implies a sense of relentless oppression


Your notes

<p>Quatrains use a regular ABAB rhyme scheme</p>	<p>The fixed structure emphasises the sense of complete control and oppression</p> <p>The rhythm could also represent the sound of the speaker walking, and the unbroken rhyme scheme reflects the relentlessness and repetitiveness of the situation</p>
<p>Some small inconsistencies in the tight structure of the poem. For example, “marks of weakness, marks of woe” is only seven syllables, which breaks the iambic tetrameter</p>	<p>This may reflect Blake’s frustration that the general public won’t stand up to the institutions of power that control them. He is pointing out the missed opportunities the poorer members of Victorian society have to break free</p>
<p>The first letters of each line in the third stanza spell out HEAR, which is interesting considering Blake has focused on auditory sounds of suffering in the poem</p>	<p>Maybe Blake wants the reader to start listening to the suffering all around them, as well as his message</p>

Language

Blake uses his choice of techniques and language to **emphasise the oppression and suffering of the people at the hands of those in power and control**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Power and oppression	Blake uses juxtaposing phrases such as “marriage hearse” which contrasts the joy of weddings with the end-of-life sadness of a hearse	Blake was making a social criticism of how, for women, marriage could be like death, as they would lose all of their rights and property to their husband
		Blake was in favour of liberating women, and felt that marriage itself was an abuse of power by men


Your notes

	<p>Blake also juxtaposes “charter’d” and “flow”. “Flow” implies freedom, whereas “charter’d” is describing something as owned or controlled by someone</p>	<p>Here, Blake is commenting on the oppression of nature by humans, which should be free for all to access and enjoy, but humanity’s greed is so great it tries to control nature</p>	
	<p>Blake could also be commenting on oppression as a result of privatisation, through the repetition of “charter’d”</p>	<p>In the 1700s, legislation was passed giving common land to the wealthy for exclusive use and ownership. Therefore, land in the city suddenly became owned and controlled by the wealthy</p>	
Suffering at the hands of power	<p>Blake uses negative language and imagery throughout. For example, the soldier’s sigh metaphorically “runs in blood down palace walls”</p>	<p>This reminds the reader of the French Revolution, when ordinary people rose up against an oppressive state and overthrew the monarchy. Blake could be suggesting that a similar event could happen in London</p>	
	<p>Blake uses anaphora in the phrase “in every”, with “every” also repeated seven times in total throughout the poem</p>	<p>Blake is emphasising the extreme extent of the suffering, showing that it impacts everyone with no discrimination</p>	<p>The device gets very repetitive, to demonstrate how repetitive the cycles of suffering are in London</p>
	<p>Blake uses physical features and places as symbols for the different forms of power that cause the suffering</p>	<p>According to Blake, the causes of the suffering and misery in London are the institutions of power, such as the church, the monarchy and the government</p>	
	<p>The “black’ning church” has negative connotations as something that is morally tarnished</p>	<p>Although Blake respected the Bible, he had contempt for organised religion which he saw as betraying the Christian faith</p>	<p>Therefore, this is a criticism of the church and its failure to provide for the disadvantaged members of society. The</p>



Your notes

	suffering is a symptom of the church's failure to deliver on its duty
The poet also presents the suffering of various people within society, such as children and babies. When the harlot's curse violently "blasts" the newborn baby's cry, this conflicts with the innocence and fragility of the infant	Blake is criticising child poverty and child labour (by also referencing the "chimney sweeper's cry"), as well as the suffering of the young women condemned to immorality and prostitution just to make a living
Blake uses the metaphor of "mind-forg'd manacles" to suggest the suffering of the citizens of London has become internalised	Maybe their oppression has resulted in them forging their own restrictions. People are enslaved by the authorities, but also by their own fear, preventing them from rising up
Use of the verb "mark" to show that the speaker has noticed suffering everywhere and recorded it	Blake recognises its importance and the need for things to change

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be written about separately. Therefore, you should not include random biographical information about William Blake, or unrelated historical facts about 18th Century London. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Blake in London which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Blake explores:

- **Social injustice**
- **Power and nature**

Social injustice

- William Blake wrote during the **Romantic** era
- He worked to bring about change both in the **social order** and in the minds of people
- Blake lived in London for most of his life
 - He thought the city was dirty and corrupt, both literally and metaphorically
 - He believed institutions of power, such as the government, the church and the monarchy, to be to blame for this



Your notes

- Blake wrote using mostly straightforward language so that his message was accessible to all
- Blake's poem centres on London, arguably the capital of the world at that time
 - This is ironic as such a powerful and influential place, in Blake's opinion, inflicts suffering and misery on many of its citizens
 - There was a huge gap between rich and poor at the time, so a huge **disparity** between those who had power, and those who did not
- Blake was a Christian, but he rejected organised religion and the established church
 - He viewed it as corrupt and hypocritical
 - They put money into new buildings while the poor starved
- Blake was also concerned with the oppression of the poor, child poverty and child labour
 - He felt strongly that the church, which was meant to be responsible for orphans and the poor, was not upholding their moral duty
- London was part of a collection of poetry, called Songs of Experience, which exposed the corruption and suffering of the new, changed world following the Industrial Revolution
 - Including the social issues that were attached to it, such as poverty, child labour and prostitution
- Blake **empathises** most with those who have been the most badly affected by the authoritarian structures which caused the inequalities in his society, focusing on their misery
- London at the time was full of poverty and disease, and full of lower-class citizens, prostitutes and former soldiers
 - He stood against the oppression of women and supported equality
 - This was considered a **radical** view at the time
 - He highlights how these people feel trapped in their situations through the abuse of power by authority

Power and nature

- Romantics were interested in the power of nature, humanity and emotion
- They were generally opposed to the **industrialisation** and scientific progress sweeping through Europe at the time
- He uses the irony of the Thames, a natural body of water, which has been made official and subject to laws ("charter'd")
- He considered nature to be powerful and that it should not be **tamed**
- Despite being "charter'd", the Thames continues to "flow" (and always will)

- Romantic poets disliked attempts to impose power on people or things against their will, such as humanity's pride in attempting to impose order on to nature



Your notes

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that London explores ideas of the **corruption of power and authority**, its **effect on people** and the **power of nature**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [London and My Last Duchess](#)
- [London and Ozymandias](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

London and My Last Duchess

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to insightfully compare power, control and the corruption of power at a state and an individual level. Blake is concerned with how human power can be used to dominate and oppress others, whereas Browning in My Last Duchess presents power through the individual character of the Duke

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both Blake and Browning use the structure of their poems to comment on the idea that human power can be used to dominate, oppress and cause suffering	
Evidence and analysis	London	My Last Duchess
	Blake uses regular four line stanzas to highlight the relentlessness of the dominance the institutions of power have over London and its people	Browning uses the form of dramatic monologue from a single perspective, showing only one person's point of view (the Duke's)


Your notes

The alternate ABAB rhyme scheme and use of iambic tetrameter demonstrate the control exerted over the city	The dramatic monologue is written in a single stanza, highlighting the Duke's power as he is the only person who speaks in the poem
The odd break in the structure, as well as the reference to "mind-forg'd manacles" suggest Blake's possible frustration at the people's reluctance to rise and break free from the tyranny	In addition, Browning uses rhyming couplets to reflect control. However, the use of enjambment and caesura suggests the possible undermining of that power

Topic sentence	Both Blake and Browning are also concerned with the inequalities between women and men, and how men can exert power over women	
Evidence and analysis	London	My Last Duchess
	Blake is concerned with the oppression and victimisation of women, referencing the "youthful harlot's curse" to imply that some women have their futures and choices taken away from them as a circumstance of their birth	In My Last Duchess, the Duke betrays his misogyny through his biased depiction of his "last duchess"
	The oxymoronic "marriage hearse" suggests that women lose any power they may possess ultimately to men	The Duke uses the pronoun "my" to imply ownership, and "that" to imply that he views her as an object. The adjective "last" suggests that she is one of a number
	Both the harlot and the Duchess are victims of the inequality between men and women in terms of circumstance and society	
	The fact that both are nameless further dehumanises them	

Topic sentence	Both poems show how power that is inherited, but not necessarily deserved, can be abused and used to oppress	
Evidence and analysis	London	My Last Duchess


Your notes

Blake criticises the monarchy behind their “palace walls”	Browning is commenting on the Duke in his castle mounting his “last Duchess” on the wall as a trophy - a symbol of the power he holds over his wife
Blake holds the monarchy responsible for the soldier’s blood that runs “down palace walls”, suggesting that they are responsible for inflicting suffering	The Duke’s “nine-hundred-years-old name” reflects the fact that the Duke’s power and status are inherited , rather than earned
	However, being born into power does not equate with being a good leader, and this lack of goodness results in oppression and victimisation
The walls of the buildings in both poems are symbols of their power. Therefore, anything represented on them becomes a symbol of the abuses of their power	

Differences:

Topic sentence	While the focus of Browning’s criticism of power centres on one individual, the Duke, and the effect on his “last Duchess”, Blake comments on how the abuse of power by institutions hits the poorest members of society the hardest	
Evidence and analysis	London	My Last Duchess
	Blake is critical of the monarchy, the government and the church, as they represent to him the abuse of their authority in order to cause misery and suffering to all of the people in London	Through the fact that the Duke exerts his power over aristocratic women, Browning is suggesting that even wealthy and well-born women are not exempt from being victimised and oppressed
	The focus for Blake is on the institutions of the city of London, and the effects of the corruption of power by those institutions on the lowest sections of that society	Browning focuses his attention on the abuse of power by an individual in order to own, control and oppress

London and Ozymandias

Comparison in a nutshell:

This is an effective comparative choice to explore the nature of political power and its effects on humanity. Both Blake's London and Shelley's Ozymandias use settings and physical objects or locations to represent power and comment on humanity's pride in attempting to control nature

**Similarities:**

Topic sentence	Both poems show the power of nature over humanity's achievements and progress, and attempts to control nature are ultimately unsuccessful	
Evidence and analysis	London	Ozymandias
	Blake's London criticises attempts by authorities to control and own nature	Shelley uses the statue in Ozymandias as a physical symbol of the power of mankind, and the poem shows it being destroyed by nature
	Blake writes juxtaposes "chartered" and "flow" in the line "Near where the charter'd Thames does flow", emphasising how impossible it is for humans to ultimately have power over nature	Shelley emphasises the ultimate power of the natural world, which links to the Romantic idea of the sublime
	Despite being mapped and owned ("chartered"), the Thames continues to "flow" naturally. It cannot be controlled	
	Both poets explore the idea of the imbalance of power, and power as something that creates a sense of entitlement or arrogance, as a way to make those lacking in power suffer	
	Both poets appear to want to show, via their use of people in their poems, how power in the wrong hands can be used for evil or to inflict suffering <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Therefore, both create a social commentary relating to hierarchical power structures and their inherent unfairness	

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	Whereas Blake is commenting on the state of all people who live in London, and the systems that create suffering and oppression for most of the people, Shelley warns against individual arrogance and pride	
Evidence and analysis	London	Ozymandias
	Blake is commenting on the corrupt nature of politicians, the church and the monarchy, as he believes they are the cause of suffering and misery	Ozymandias orders his people, via the inscription on the statue's base, to "look on my work...and despair."
	However, Blake also describes the people of London as living in "mind-forg'd manacles." This suggests that the people are not physically restrained, but are restrained by the prisons in their own minds	The imperative "look on" shows the king's arrogance and the verb "despair" suggests that, once someone has seen his power and influence, there is no other option for them other than to feel defeated
	"Manacles" and restraints have connotations of slavery and oppression, suggesting that Blake feels that London is oppressing its residents, but they have also given up and are not taking the opportunity to rise up against the authorities	
	Blake uses repetition to reinforce the great suffering of all mankind in "In every cry of every man... ". "Man" is used as a collective noun to encompass all humanity	



Your notes

The Prelude: Stealing The Boat

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a "closed book" exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things about each poem will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to William Wordsworth's Extract from The Prelude (also known as "Boat Stealing"), from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Wordsworth's intention and message

The Prelude in a nutshell

The Prelude is different to the other poems in the anthology as it is actually an extract taken from a much longer, **autobiographical epic** poem by William Wordsworth. The speaker in the poem remembers a night when he, as a young boy, steals a boat and rows out to the middle of a lake. At first this was exciting, but then the boy becomes scared of a huge mountain and rows back to shore. The image of the mountain troubles him for days. The overall idea is that Wordsworth is confident when he takes the boat out to the lake, but he changes when faced with the vast and imposing mountain, as it reminds him of the **fragility** of human life when compared to the lasting and absolute power of nature. The central theme in the poem,

therefore, is the power of nature and self-realisation of the speaker's own insignificance compared to nature

The Prelude breakdown

Lines 1–16

"One summer evening (led by her) I found

A little boat tied to a willow tree

Within a rocky cove, its usual home.

Straight I unloosed her chain, and stepping in

Pushed from the shore. It was an act of stealth

And troubled pleasure, nor without the voice

Of mountain-echoes did my boat move on;

Leaving behind her still, on either side,

Small circles glittering idly in the moon,

Until they melted all into one track

Of sparkling light. But now, like one who rows,

Proud of his skill, to reach a chosen point

With an unswerving line, I fixed my view

Upon the summit of a craggy ridge,

The horizon's utmost boundary; far above

Was nothing but the stars and the grey sky."

Translation

- The speaker is guided by nature one summer's night to a rocky bay in which there is a boat tied to a willow tree
- The speaker unties the boat and gets in, stealing it
- He knows that he shouldn't steal the boat, but it also brings him pleasure
- Mountain echoes, like voices, accompany the movement of the boat
- The oars leave circular ripples in the water that glitter in the moonlight, and merge into one in the **wake** of the boat



Your notes



Your notes

- The speaker feels proud of his rowing skills as he fixes his gaze on a jagged mountain peak in order to row in a straight line
- It is the farthest point on the horizon; above it there are only stars and sky

Wordsworth's intention

- The poet refers to "her" which can be interpreted as Mother Nature
- Nature can be seen as female in that it is responsible for the feminine task of creating, sustaining and **nurturing** life
- By **personifying** nature, Wordsworth is contrasting the role of nature to the role of a human
- Nature nurtures an entire planet, thus demonstrating its superior power
- It is clear that, at the beginning of the poem, the speaker has a peaceful view of, and relationship with, nature
- The poet paints a **tranquil** and beautiful picture of nature and a boy's ability to engage with it

Lines 17–20

"She was an elfin pinnace; lustily

I dipped my oars into the silent lake,

And, as I rose upon the stroke, my boat

Went heaving through the water like a swan;"

Translation

- The speaker describes his small boat as an "elfin **pinnace**", like an elf's boat
- Even though the boat is small, the boy enthusiastically rows and controls his boat to cut through the water "like a swan"

Wordsworth's intention

- These lines reveal that the boy believes in his ability to control nature
- However, this is deception:
 - Nature is guiding him, so ultimately has control of the boy's direction

Lines 21–31

"When from behind that craggy steep till then

The horizon's bound, a huge peak, black and huge,

As if with voluntary power instinct,

Upreared its head. I struck and struck again,

And growing still in stature the grim shape

Towered up between me and the stars, and still,

For so it seemed, with purpose of its own

And measured motion like a living thing,

Strode after me. With trembling oars I turned,

And through the silent water stole my way

Back to the covert of the willow tree;"

Translation

- From behind the jagged peak on the horizon, an even bigger mountain appears, black and giant
- This mountain seems to lift its head as though it were a living being
- As the speaker rows, the mountain gets bigger and bigger, blocking out the stars
- It seems to be alive and **pursuing** the speaker, who is trembling so much with fright his oars shake as well
- The speaker turns the boat round and rows back to the safety of the willow tree

Wordsworth's intention

- The poet hides the mountain like a beast hiding and waiting to pounce
- The true power of nature is now revealed
- Nature was working with the speaker at first, but now has turned against him
- Wordsworth personifies the mountain as a beast with a "purpose of its own"
- This changes the encounter with nature from peaceful to suddenly something to be feared
- The poet is revealing that nature is not always humankind's friend
- It can be mysterious and dangerous
- Nature is powerful:
 - It can be beautiful and can be enjoyed, but we should treat it with respect as it can also be something to fear

Lines 32–44

There in her mooring-place I left my bark, -



Your notes

And through the meadows homeward went, in grave

And serious mood; but after I had seen



That spectacle, for many days, my brain

Worked with a dim and undetermined sense

Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts

There hung a darkness, call it solitude

Or blank desolation. No familiar shapes

Remained, no pleasant images of trees,

Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields;

But huge and mighty forms, that do not live

Like living men, moved slowly through the mind

By day, and were a trouble to my dreams."

Translation

- The speaker ties the boat back up, and walks home in a serious mood
- After this experience, the speaker is troubled by thoughts of what "unknown modes of being" there are in the world; things he knows nothing about
- His thoughts are clouded by a kind of darkness, like being alone or abandoned
- He can no longer picture the beauty of nature
- Now he can only picture giant, powerful shapes which move slowly through his mind during the day, and give him nightmares when he sleeps

Wordsworth's intention

- These lines reveal the effect the experience has on the speaker
- He becomes aware that he is not in control of nature
- Indeed, there are natural things in the world that he has little knowledge of
- This reinforces the message that nature is something to be feared as well as enjoyed
- This also **symbolises** a turning point for the boy, as he passes from the innocent days of childhood to the reality of adulthood
- He no longer feels safe, as he is now aware that he could encounter danger at every turn

- This can be interpreted to symbolise the transition from childhood to adulthood, as the speaker is never able to see the world through a child's eyes again



Your notes

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an integrated approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Wordsworth's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these themes. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main themes, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Wordsworth's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- Form**
- Structure**
- Language**

Form

It is important to remember that this is a narrative poem that forms part of a much longer poem, but it has no traditional form. It has no stanzas, which reminds the reader that this is **a single, contained incident within a much longer, autobiographical work**. However, there are some comments you can make on why Wordsworth may have used blank verse and iambic pentameter in the **context of the development of his own imagination and spiritual growth in response to his experience with the power of nature**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Experience of the power of nature	Wordsworth uses blank verse written in iambic pentameter	This means the lines do not follow a specific rhyme scheme, but they are structured with iambic pentameter
		The poet wanted to describe the development of his own imagination and spiritual growth through his experience of the power of nature
		Iambic pentameter reflects the form of natural speech, further reinforcing the idea of self-reflection and the poet's inner monologue

Structure

Although Wordsworth has structured the poem as a single stanza, to emphasise the **overwhelming power of nature**, the mood of the poem changes as it progresses to **reflect the change that the speaker experiences in himself**



Your notes

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Power of nature	The poem is written as a single stanza with no breaks or pauses	<p>The poet may have intended the reader to feel breathless and overwhelmed by the intensity of the poem</p>
		<p>This reflects how Wordsworth was overwhelmed by the immensity of the mountain and the power of nature</p>
		<p>Wordsworth was also heavily influenced by Milton's Paradise Lost, which is an epic poem written with lengthy stanzas. It is about the biblical fall of man</p>
		<p>Wordsworth's epic poem contemplates the fall of man in comparison to nature, and the important transition from childhood into adulthood</p>
Inner conflict and change	Wordsworth uses a cyclical structure, as it begins and ends with the mooring of the boat	<p>This emphasises the change that takes place during the journey</p>
		<p>However, because the poem starts and finishes at the same place, the change is internal and psychological, rather than external and physical</p>
	The poet also employs enjambment in the poem, for example in the lines "my boat/Went heaving through the water like a swan"	<p>This makes the poem feel like a stream of consciousness, as the speaker tries to convey the importance of his experience</p>
		<p>The poem follows its speaker's wandering thoughts and experiences</p>

Language

Wordsworth further explores his spiritual journey when **confronted with the power of nature and its supremacy** through his use of language devices, and the **conflict between childhood and adulthood**



Your notes

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Power and supremacy of nature	Wordsworth uses the motif of rowing to demonstrate the transformation the speaker goes through	<p>At the start, the narrator is at one with nature, as his oar strokes “melted all into one track”, showing just how easily he is able to move through the water</p> <p>His rowing becomes more difficult after seeing the mountain, as he starts “heaving through the water” – the speaker’s feeling of control is broken as nature’s supremacy becomes apparent</p> <p>The initial calm and relaxed rowing is contrasted with the frantic rowing back to shore, demonstrated through the repetition of “struck”</p> <p>The use of this motif contrasts how the speaker was before and after his encounter with the power of nature</p>
	Wordsworth also uses personification to describe nature, such as when he opens the poem with reference to being “led by her”	<p>This alludes to the idea of Mother Nature and nature being seen as female, as it is responsible for the feminine task of creating, sustaining and nurturing life</p> <p>The poet is able to contrast the role of a human mother, nurturing just her own children, with Mother Nature who nurtures an entire planet, thus demonstrating its superior power</p> <p>The fact that the speaker is “led” by nature also reinforces its power, as the speaker is not in control of his actions</p>



Your notes

		Nature can also be seen to be teaching Wordsworth new lessons
	Female personification continues when referring to the boat as "she" and "her"	This implies a connection between nature and the boat, hinting that it adds to nature's beauty creating "one track/Of sparkling light"
	The poet uses the imagery of the mountain as a living thing, as it "Upreared its head" and "strode after me"	It is as though nature is pursuing the speaker with strength and determination, again demonstrating the power of the mountain
	The poet employs the use of similes , for example through the phrases "like a swan", "like a living thing" and "like one who rows", to try to help his readers understand his experience	The poet wants to share his knowledge of nature's power, and the universality of his experience. It can happen to anyone This is reinforced by the fact that, as the poem progresses, the language used becomes less sophisticated as the speaker becomes overwhelmed by the mountain and the power of nature
Conflict between childhood and adulthood	The poet uses magical and mythical references and imagery to demonstrate the magic and mysticism of childhood	He calls the small boat " elfin " and describes the small circles "glittering idly in the moon," and as one track "Of sparkling light" These magical and mythical references fade as the poem progresses, with the language becoming more blunt, such as the huge peak being described as "black and huge" This symbolises the transition from the magic and innocence of childhood to the reality and dangers of adulthood

Context



Your notes

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, context is not random historical facts about William Wordsworth or the time in which the poem was written that are unrelated to the ideas in the poem. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Wordsworth in this section of The Prelude which relate to power. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Wordsworth explores:

- **The Power of Nature**
- **Personal transformation**

The Power of Nature

- As the poem as a whole is autobiographical, the speaker can be assumed to be a **fictionalised** version of Wordsworth himself
 - This means the poem reveals personal details of his life
 - This is emphasised by the use of first person narration and the past tense, suggesting the speaker is recalling events which are very clear to him
- Wordsworth grew up in the **Lake District**, where he spent much time outside in order to escape his difficult childhood
- Wordsworth was also a **Romantic** poet, meaning that he was in favour of resisting the growth in industry by remembering a simpler, more natural past
 - Romantic poets were interested in the power of nature, humanity and emotion
 - They were generally opposed to the **industrialisation** and scientific progress sweeping through Europe at the time
- Romantic poets tended to use everyday language to make their poems accessible to all, and to present themes that challenged people's **preconceptions**
 - This can be seen in Wordsworth's use of similes and repetition, such as the repetition of "huge" to emphasise the ultimate power of nature over humanity
 - He is suggesting that mankind's belief that it can control nature, or be at one with it, is false
- Romantic poets generally disliked attempts to impose power on people or things against their will, such as humanity's pride in attempting to impose order or control on to nature

Personal transformation

- By setting the poem in his childhood home of the Lake District, Wordsworth injects a tone of **realism** to the poem
- The fact that the speaker goes on an adventure in the poem relates **metaphorically** to the inner journey the speaker experiences

- Wordsworth viewed The Prelude as an adaptation of the techniques Milton developed in Paradise Lost
 - But whereas Paradise Lost tells the story of the fall of Satan and Adam and Eve, Wordsworth chose his own life as a subject, turning the story inwards to capture his thoughts and impressions
 - The poem therefore recounts his spiritual development from a youth to an adult
- The poem explores the importance of childhood and what a magical experience it can be
 - This is something Wordsworth feels is lost, to an extent, as one ages



Your notes

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that The Prelude's main themes are that of **the power and supremacy of nature**, and **humankind's efforts to control it are futile**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:

- [The Prelude and Storm on the Island](#)
- [The Prelude and Ozymandias](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

The Prelude and Storm on the Island

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Heaney's Storm on the Island and the extract from The Prelude explore the power of nature and the conflict between humanity and the natural world we inhabit

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems explore mankind's real and symbolic conflict when faced with the vast power of nature, which ultimately always wins	
Evidence and analysis	The Prelude	Storm on the Island
	Wordsworth uses violent language, such as "struck and struck again" to	Heaney also uses military metaphors of "bombarded", "blast", " salvo " and " strafe " which


Your notes

reflect the speaker's darkening mood when confronted with the reality of nature	all relate to human air attacks, reminding the reader of the limited power of man-made machines when compared with all-powerful nature
The mountain is used by Wordsworth as a metaphor for the full might of nature. The repetition of "huge" emphasises its overwhelming quality	The power of nature is expressed as a storm, which in the end is a "huge nothing that we fear"
Both poems show that nature is something to be feared	
The Prelude shows that nature is something to be feared because we offend nature by attempting to manipulate it	Heaney suggests we fear nature because we underestimate the violence of nature and its effect on us
In The Prelude, the speaker realises their own insignificance via their spiritual development	In Storm on the Island, the islanders realise their ultimate inability to control the storm, and it will always come again
Both poems illustrate how powerful nature is and that humans mean very little in comparison	

Differences:

Topic sentence	The conflict with nature is shown differently in each poem, as in Storm on the Island it is physical, whereas in The Prelude it is psychological	
Evidence and analysis	The Prelude	Storm on the Island
	In Wordsworth's poem, nature is inciting fear and redefining the speaker's view of the world	In Heaney's poem, the islanders are being physically attacked by the storm
	The Prelude is written as a past-tense memoir giving the impression of a seemingly idyllic "summer evening"	Heaney writes in the present tense, giving the impression that the storm is happening right now and the islanders are prepared to deal with the urgency of events



Your notes

The Prelude shows the power of nature in a more subtle and slower way	Storm on the Island illustrates the power of nature in an obviously harsh way
Although there is violent and harsh language in both poems, The Prelude is more romantic and magical, whereas Storm on the Island uses more explosive language	

The Prelude and Ozymandias

Both Shelley's Ozymandias and Wordsworth's The Prelude highlight the overwhelming power of nature, and humankind's inability to impact forces beyond its control

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems, written by Romantic poets, display nature as ultimately more powerful than mankind	
Evidence and analysis	The Prelude	Ozymandias
	In The Prelude, humankind's inability to overpower and control a force beyond its control is displayed	In Ozymandias, human power is shown as intrinsically weak and transient , lost to time and nature
	In this poem, nature is shown to be a separate entity , which is more powerful than man	Similarly, nature's destructive force is demonstrated through the broken nature of the statue
	The theme of pride is key in both, it being the cause of the subjects' eventual fall	
	In The Prelude, the speaker believes he is at one with nature, and part of it, until the overwhelming power of nature is revealed	In Ozymandias, the king believes his power and legacy will outlive nature, when in fact the opposite is true

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poets explore how pride is unfounded because human power is inferior to the power of nature, they present this in different ways
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Evidence and analysis	The Prelude	Ozymandias
	In The Prelude, the overwhelming power of nature leads to the speaker's loss of eloquence and how he becomes unable to define his world	In Ozymandias, the power of nature is conveyed through the symbolism of the desert and time
	The Prelude is written as a first person narrative, and focuses on a personal revelation of the inferiority of humankind when faced with nature, as symbolised by the mountain	In Ozymandias, we learn of the ruler's pride and fall via a recounted story, and via the imagery of the broken statue surrounded by the desert
	So Wordsworth's loss of power is in the way he interprets nature and how he has to re-think his own place on earth	Shelley finds the futility of human power in comparison to the superior power of nature via a once-powerful symbol that has become a faded memory
	The Prelude is written in blank verse, reflecting the natural, free-flowing exploration of Wordsworth's relationship with nature	Ozymandias is in the form of a sonnet , written as an ironic love poem to the king
	Although both poems share similarities in the way power is presented to the reader, they contrast in the way that each of its subjects experience a decline in power	


Your notes



Your notes

My Last Duchess

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a “closed book” exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to My Last Duchess by Robert Browning, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A ‘translation’ of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Browning’s intention and message

My Last Duchess in a Nutshell

My Last Duchess is a **dramatic monologue** written by Victorian poet Robert Browning in 1842. The Duke of Ferrara is the speaker of the poem, who tells us that he is entertaining an **emissary** who has come to negotiate the Duke’s marriage to the daughter of another powerful family. The Duke uses a painting of his former wife as a conversation piece, and suggests that she did something that he didn’t approve of. The rest of the poem is a **subtle** warning about what happens to those women who disappoint him, as his last wife (his last duchess) is now deceased.

The poem deals mainly with themes of power (and its abuse), ownership and male attitudes toward women. Conflict is also represented in terms of how the Duke presents himself to the outside world versus his true nature.



My Last Duchess breakdown

Lines 1–4

**“That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That a piece of wonder, now; Fra Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.”**

Translation

- The poem opens with the **first person narrator**, the Duke, showing the emissary painting of his former wife on the wall
- “Looking as if she were alive” implies that she is no longer alive
- The Duke is proud of the painting, and name-drops the artist, “Fra Pandolf”, who “worked busily” on it, implying the painting is of value

Browning’s intention

- The speaker takes on the **persona** of the Duke of Ferrara
- This means that Browning can use the character to convey his message about the abuse of power and control
- The speaker establishes control from the start by using the **possessive pronoun** “my”
- The reader’s interest is engaged by wondering why this is his “last” Duchess. What happened to her?
- “I call that a piece of wonder” is **ominous** as it suggests that the Duke is viewing his dead wife as a piece of art and a possession to be owned

Lines 5–8

**“Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said
“Fra Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,”**

Translation

- The Duke invites his visitor to sit down and look at the painting
- He repeats, in case there is any doubt, that the painter was “Fra Pandolf” – a painter and a monk
- He says this because people have commented on the passion and depiction of her facial expression (her “**countenance**”), and wonder which artist could capture it in such a fine way
- The Duke is boasting about how famous the artist is, demonstrating his influence and wealth



Browning’s intention

- The **rhetorical question** inviting the guest to sit and look does not require a reply, implying it is more of a command than an optional invitation
- This adds to the sense of the Duke’s controlling nature
- The fact that “Fra” stands for “Brother”, meaning the artist is a monk, is suggesting that there was no **impropriety** in the process of completing the painting itself

Lines 9–13

“But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. –”

Translation

- The reader learns that the Duke is the only person allowed to pull back the curtain to reveal the painting
- Others have asked, if they dared (“if they **durst**”), about how the expression on the Duchess’s face came to be
- The Duke appears to be frustrated at all the attention his former wife is receiving
- The curtain is designed to hide her and the Duke controls who can see her

Browning’s intention

- This section of the poem reveals more about the Duke’s controlling nature
- By covering the painting with the curtain, the Duke is able to control who sees her in death in a way he could not in life (more about this is revealed later)



Your notes

- This behaviour is **sinister** and the reader begins to wonder if he was involved in her death, perhaps covering the painting as a symptom of his guilt
- His comment “if they durst” shows he has power over others and people are scared of him, as they wouldn’t dare ask him about the painting

Lines 13–15

“–Sir, ‘twas not”

**Her husband’s presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek; –**

Translation

- The Duke describes that he was not the only man who could lead the Duchess to have a “spot of joy”, meaning a blush, on her cheek

Browning’s intention

- Blushing is associated with **flirtation**, and so the Duke is suggesting that many men may have flirted with the Duchess
- This was unacceptable to the Duke at a time when, upon marriage, a woman lost many of her rights and essentially became the property of her husband
- The Duke is suggesting that it should only be him that causes such a flush on her face
- There is also the implication here that the Duke is a bit paranoid and overly possessive of his wife
- Now she is his possession, a physical painting on a wall, he could be the only one to see that look of joy on her face – he would not allow anyone else to see it without his permission

Lines 15–21

“–perhaps

**Fra Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps
Over my lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint
Half-flush that dies along her throat.” Such stuff
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had”**

Translation

- The Duke saw Fra Pandolf asking the Duchess to move her shawl (her "**mantle**") so that it would uncover more of her wrist
- At this moment, the Duchess was blushing at Fra Pandolf's suggestion
- She thought Fra Pandolf was complimenting her
- The Duke believes that she is too easily impressed or aroused



Browning's intention

- The Duke is criticising the Duchess as someone who was too easy to flirt with and too friendly with other men
- The reader cannot be sure if this is true, as pride and jealousy may have caused the Duke to believe his wife would flirt with a monk
- The reference to the "half-flush that dies along her throat" **foreshadows** her eventual fate

Lines 22–31

"A heart – how shall I say? – too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the while mule
She rode with round the terrace – all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. – "

Translation

- The Duke is again implying that the Duchess was too friendly with men
- He describes the Duchess as liking whomever she saw
- The fact that "her looks went everywhere" is the Duke attempting to convey that she was unfaithful
- He also suggests that the Duchess was not fussy, and saw all affection as equal



Your notes

- The “favour at her breast” is a piece of jewellery given to her by the Duke
- The fact that it is worn at her breast adds a sexual undertone
- The Duke then lists the sunset, as well as the “bough of cherries”
- This is a gift she received from “some **officious** fool” whom the Duke believed to be of lower status
- The white mule is the offspring of a donkey and a horse. A mule is typically **sterile**
- All of these things would give the Duchess equal pleasure
- This angers the Duke, as he feels outraged that she should get the same pleasure from a bunch of cherries given to her by someone of lower rank, as from a gift of jewellery from her husband, the Duke

Browning's intention

- The fact that the Duchess seemed to have a mind of her own conflicts with the Duke's perception of how she should act as a wife
- His attempts to convey her unfaithfulness and her flaws may act as the justification for what happened to her
- The imagery of the sunset can be seen as a **pathetic fallacy** and foreshadowing of her life coming to an end, like the end of the day
- The **connotation** of infertility with the mule may imply that the marriage was childless - another justification for the Duke's actions
- The Duke believes that his wealth and status should be more important even than beauty and nature
- The fact that the Duchess also likes other things is viewed as a criticism of himself, presenting him as insecure and jealous
- His pride is hurt as all of her affections are not reserved just for him
- He is reliant on the complete control and dominance of women to make himself feel powerful and desirable

Lines 31–43

“– She thanked men – good! but thanked

Somehow – I know not how – as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech – which I have not – to make your will

Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this

Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark” – and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse –

E'en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. –”



Your notes

Translation

- The Duke implies that the Duchess “thanked” men. The use of “good!” is ironic, as he doesn’t think her behaviour is “good” at all
- The Duke believes he paid for the Duchess with the gift of his “nine-hundred-year-old name” and that she should be grateful
- This implies she was of a lower social status than him
- He then imagines a **hypothetical** situation in which he would confront his former Duchess, if he was better with words, in which he was able to clearly tell her that her behaviour disgusted him or is not what is expected of her (she is “missing the mark”)
- He says he could lower himself to teach her how to behave, but then he would be “stooping” and he chooses “never to **stoop**”

Browning’s intention

- Repetition of “stoop” implies the Duchess’ lower status and the Duke’s unwillingness to go down to her level. It is beneath him to teach her how to behave
- She was not sophisticated enough to see the greater worth of the Duke’s ancient name – she liked everything the same
- He is irritated that she does not seem to appreciate his importance and status
- By marrying her, he had given her his “nine-hundred-years-old name”, revealing his family had been around for a long time
- However, he seems comfortable enough discussing what he disliked about the Duchess with a stranger
- Perhaps he thought he shouldn’t have to stoop to talk to a woman, even if she was his wife

Lines 43–47

“ – Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
When’er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. – ”



Translation

- The Duke complains that, while she did smile at him whenever he passed, she gave him the same smile as everyone else
- His frustration grew as her continued to break the “rules” of marriage
- He therefore “gave commands”, which implies that he instructed someone else to murder her
- The Duke points out that she looks “as if alive” in the painting, **juxtaposing** with the revelation of her death

Browning’s intention

- Browning describes her death as her “smiles stopping” signifying not only the end of her happiness but also the end of her life
- This conveys the Duke’s absolute power over his wife and the overall power that he has – that he can just kill someone without consequence
- It also demonstrates a loss of control (he “snapped”)

Lines 47–56

“ – Will’t please you rise? We’ll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your master’s known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go



Your notes

Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!"

Translation

- Here it is revealed that the Duke is discussing his last Duchess with an emissary for a Count who is looking to marry his daughter to the Duke
- "The company below" are further guests of the Duke downstairs
- The Duke knows of the Count's "**munificence**", meaning his generosity
- Because of this, the Duke believes he can demand any **dowry**
- But he insists that his "fair daughter's self" is his primary focus, meaning the Count's beautiful daughter
- He states that, when married, his wife will become "my object"
- The final two images of Neptune "taming a sea-horse" suggests the powerful ruler of the seas controlling a delicate, innocent creature like a sea-horse
- The metaphor of Neptune implies the Duke sees himself as god-like
- The Duke again boasts of a piece of art he has had created by a famous artist
- By ending the poem with "for me", the Duke leaves the impression that everything must be done only for him and he desires exclusive ownership

Browning's intention

- It is possible that the Duke is explaining, in a **menacing** tone, the actions he would take if his next wife does not live up to his expectations
- By suggesting that the Count will give him a substantial amount of money for his daughter's dowry, he is possibly giving a veiled threat about what may happen to the Count's daughter if he is not paid what he believes his power and status are worth
- Ultimately, the Duke **objectifies** women, and as the only voice in the poem is the Duke's, he has robbed his Duchess of her voice and her power

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections - form, structure and language - it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes and ideas of the poem and then evaluating how Browning's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these ideas. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and

message. Remember, in this poem, Browning has deliberately crafted the character of the Duke via his choices of form, structure and language.

Focusing on the poet's main ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Browning's intentions behind his choices in terms of:



- **Form**

- **Structure**

- **Language**

Form

The poem is written in the form of a dramatic monologue, not from Browning's point of view, but from a fictional character's (the Duke's). This demonstrates the character's **dominance and control** in the poem

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Power and Control	The poem is written in the first person and in the present tense	This enables the speaker to control what he tells the reader, including whether what he is saying is true, biased or exaggerated
		This could reflect the power the Duke holds, both politically and over his wives
	The perspective in the poem is entirely the Duke's	Shows the controlling presence of the Duke. He doesn't let anyone else speak
		We are given a one-sided account, and it is up to the reader to read between the lines to find the truth
		The Duchess's side of the story is not told, which implies the lack of feminine narrative in Victorian society
		Women had no right to vote or hold power outside of the home, so were politically silenced
		Browning is criticising the Duke's abuse of power over his wife, so is therefore criticising the inequality between men and women in his society

Structure

Browning structures the poem in one single **stanza**, reflecting the **Duke's mastery**, but his use of **punctuation fractures the poem as it progresses**, mirroring the **fracturing of the Duke's calm exterior manner to reveal the emotions, frustration and violence within**



Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Power and mastery	Single verse/no stanzas	This shows the poem is set in one single place and moment in time
		Makes the Duke's dominance overwhelming, as the single stanza structure also seems overwhelming at first
		Poet gives a sense of the poem being the Duke's stream of consciousness – his unfiltered thoughts and feelings
		This suggests he lacks control over himself, even though he tries to exert control over others
Traditional views about women	Poem uses traditional iambic pentameter	Reflects how the Duke holds traditional views about women
		The regular rhyme scheme also gives a natural, conversational tone
Rhyme and speech patterns	Browning uses rhyming couplets, such as: “That's my last Duchess painted on the wall, Looking as if she were alive. I call...”	This suggests the Duke's desire for control, by using carefully considered and refined speech
	Browning adds to the sense of natural speech through the use of enjambment	The Duke again dominates the conversation, but the enjambment shows he is rambling (linking again to the sense of this being a stream of consciousness)


Your notes

<p>For example,</p> <p>"The bough of cherries some officious fool Broke in the orchard for her..."</p>	<p>When he loses control of the structure of his speech, he reveals glimpses of his inner nature</p>
<p>Browning continues to interrupt the Duke's speech through the use of punctuation, such as parenthesis and dashes</p>	<p>The deliberate use of punctuation demonstrates the Duke getting side-tracked</p>
<p>For example:</p> <p>"But to myself they turned (since none puts by The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)"</p> <p>And:</p> <p>"A heart - how shall I say? - too soon made glad,"</p>	<p>This suggests his smooth exterior is starting to crack, and his inner emotions and violence are starting to show, as he cannot keep up the controlled conversational meter</p>
<p>Browning also employs caesura to show that the Duke keeps interrupting himself</p>	<p>This further breaks up the rhythm of the poem and makes it tiring to listen to</p>
	<p>This does not concern the Duke, however, which can be seen as a sign of too much pride and self-obsession</p>
	<p>Even when he does imply his last Duchess's fate, he then returns to his smooth rhythm and polite façade</p>

Language

Browning further brings the character of the Duke to life through his choice of language but does not employ many **literary devices**, so that when he does, they stand out. The language is quite simple in order for the character of the Duke to give a clear message about not challenging his power. Here, language is explored via the key themes of **social structure and class**, and **sexism and oppression**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention



Your notes

Social Structure and Class	When speaking to the envoy , the Duke uses the terms "Sir" and "you"	These formal terms of address establish the Duke's social superiority over the envoy
	The Duke "invites" the envoy to "sit" and "rise" through rhetorical questions	These rhetorical questions are actually commands. The Duke expects the envoy to obey
	The Duke is proud of his "nine-hundred-years-old-name"	He believes that the superior social status and "gift" of his family name should have been respected above everything else by his wife
		Here, Browning is commenting on the arrogance, pride and abuse of power by those who have inherited it
	The Duke chooses "never to stoop"	He refuses to lower himself to what he believes is his wife's inferior level
	The Duke uses an obvious euphemism for his last Duchess's murder: "-I gave commands; Then all smiles stopped together."	The Duke is clear that people obey him. He gave the command to have his wife murdered
		He believes that he is superior and his family name gives him power enough to be able to do this without consequence
Sexism and oppression	Browning uses possessive pronouns when the Duke refers to his wife as "my" last Duchess	The Duke views his wife as a possession, rather than as an individual
	He also refers to her as "it" in the line, "The depth and passion of its earnest glance."	It suggests that he can buy a wife like a piece of art
	In addition, he calls her his "Duchess" rather than his wife	This implies a lack of affection and his wife as an accessory, rather than a partner



Your notes

	Again, the use of the pronoun "his" demonstrates his feelings of ownership and absolute power over his spouse
	Browning is commenting on the loss of name, rights and power of women upon marriage, and the objectification of women as something to be owned by men
Browning uses symbolism in the form of the Duchess as a painting, the viewing of which no one but the Duke can control	This suggests he is threatened by other men enjoying looking upon her beauty
	It highlights the absolute control he had over her, not just in life, but also in death
The Duke moves fluidly from discussing his last wife to his new wife	This indicates that the women are not special to him and are disposable. This is reinforced when the Duke moves seamlessly from talking about her painting to his new statue of Neptune
The statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse is symbolic	This parallels the Duke who has attempted to use his domestic power to "tame" a wife that was "too easily impressed" by other things
	He transformed her into a painting which he could control
	By showing the statue to the envoy, he is also issuing a warning that his new wife needs to be more easily tamed
Browning uses the metaphor of the Duchess having a heart "too soon made glad"	By reading between the lines, the Duchess is presented as innocent and delighted by all of nature's things
	She is embarrassed by compliments, easily pleased and pleasant to everyone



Your notes

	The Duke misinterprets this as unfaithfulness
	He is driven possibly mad by jealousy and pride
	He values wealth, status and possessions over natural beauty and the beauty of the earth
Browning employs dramatic irony to imply the Duke's sinister real character	The reader is able to read between the lines and detect the sinister undertone of the Duke's comments
For example, when he says: "Twas, not her husband's presence only, called that spot Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: And: "Her looks went everywhere"	The Duke was paranoid and suspicious of the Duchess and believed (or claimed) that she was unfaithful

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be written about separately. Therefore, you should not include random biographical information about Robert Browning, or unrelated historical facts about the Italian Renaissance. The best way to understand context is through the ideas and perspectives explored by Browning in My Last Duchess which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Browning explores:

- **Social criticism**
- **Sexism and oppression**

Social criticism

- My Last Duchess is set in Italy during the **Italian Renaissance**
- At this time in Italy, art was heavily valued
 - The artists and the artwork mentioned in the poem, as well as the Duke himself, are fictional
 - However, it is likely that the character of the Duke was based on Alfonso II, the fifth Duke of Ferrara
 - His wife died in suspicious circumstances

- Browning was born in London but spent most of his life in Italy
 - Changing the setting of the poem allowed him to better disguise his criticism of society

Sexism and oppression



- The poem was written at the start of the Victorian era, during the **Industrial Revolution**
- This was a period when society was starting to change
- Women were starting to demand equality and it saw the beginning of the **suffrage** movement
 - In the 1800s, when a woman married, she became the legal property of her husband
 - The only way for a woman to gain status or influence was via her husband
 - This is shown in the poem through the Duke's "gift of a nine-hundred-years-old-name"
 - It was also believed that women were incapable of **rational** thought
 - This is reflected in the line "I choose never to stoop"
 - This suggests there is no point in arguing with a woman as she cannot understand
 - The poem can therefore be considered a criticism of Victorian attitudes towards women and their effort to suppress female sexuality
- Browning was a liberal, who married for love
 - His wife was also a well-respected poet in her own right
- Victorian Britain was also very **modest** and traditional
 - It could be argued that the Duke's obsession with controlling and ultimately "fixing" his wife's behaviour reflects Victorian society's obsession with the reputation of women remaining perfect
- Furthermore, the conflict in the poem displays itself not only in the power the Duke has over the Duchess's life, but also between how the Duke presents himself to the outside world versus his true character
 - Conflict arose when the Duke realised that he ultimately couldn't control the Duchess's behaviour in line with his expectations of a wife
 - He retaliated by killing her, which is an abuse of his power and control
 - This also demonstrates how easily those in power can lose control

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology.

Given that My Last Duchess explores the ideas of **power, control and oppression**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:



Your notes

- [My Last Duchess and Ozymandias](#)

- [My Last Duchess and London](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

My Last Duchess and Ozymandias

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both My Last Duchess and Ozymandias comment on the corruption of power by excessively proud individuals, and power and control are depicted as unstable and easily lost. The subjects of both poems are inanimate objects (a statue and a painting), and both the Duke and the King speak of themselves in a **narcissistic** way.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show the effects of power and how it can be abused, as well as how power can be undermined	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess	Ozymandias
	Browning shows the Duke's power being undermined and his loss of control via enjambment, caesura and use of punctuation	In Ozymandias, the poet shows a loss of power over time and competing with nature, as the statue is surrounded by desert which is a symbol of nature and time
	The Duke in My Last Duchess is only concerned with his own power and social status. Although the dramatic monologue and iambic pentameter are meant to replicate a conversation, there is no opportunity for anyone else to speak	Shelley describes Ozymandias's "sneer of cold command" as if to suggest that he is a cruel and heartless leader, only concerned with his own power and the lasting legacy it will bring


Your notes

The Duke is an unreliable narrator, speaking about his Duchess who is not able to speak for herself. We know the story is unreliable as we learn the Duke was jealous and paranoid	The legacy of Ozymandias is told through the voice of another person, mocking the power of the subject
Browning wrote the poem as a monologue to show the Duke's self-obsession and that he is not interested in anyone's views other than his own	Ozymandias might have had "cold command" of his "lands", just like the Duke "gave commands"
The temporary nature of power is contrasted in both poems with the permanence of sculpture and art. The Duke exerted complete control and dominance over his Duchess, and yet she lives on as if alive in her painting. The statue of Ozymandias is broken, demonstrating that all power is temporary	

Topic sentence	Both poets are concerned with how pride and vanity can corrupt	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess	Ozymandias
	In My Last Duchess, the Duke loves his "nine-hundred-years-old-name" and feels entitled to authority, control and respect because of it	Ozymandias is written in the form of a sonnet , as though the king has written a love poem to himself
It could be argued that both figures of power are ultimately left with nothing		
	The Duke is left with a statue of "Neptune" which is made of cold bronze. He prizes possessions and wealth over everything else	In Ozymandias, the "lone and level sands stretch far away" and outlive any reminder of the king's power
	However, it doesn't matter how many pieces of art or wealth the Duke possesses, ultimately his "nine-hundred-years-old-name" will be forgotten, and he with it, unless a poet or painter brings him to life	In Ozymandias, the statue in ruins shows that power and tyranny are useless beyond the grave

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	While both poets suggest that pride and power lead to oppression, the subjects of the oppression are different in each poem.	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess	Ozymandias
	In My Last Duchess, the Duchess is shown as the symbol of oppression – the Duke is a jealous and paranoid individual who eventually gives the command to murder her: “then all smiles stopped”	In Ozymandias, the statue is used as a symbol for all institutions or figures of power

My Last Duchess and London

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to insightfully compare power, control and the corruption of power at a political and individual level. In London, Blake is concerned with how human power can be used to dominate and oppress others, whereas, in My Last Duchess, Browning presents power through the individual character of the Duke.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both Browning and Blake use the structure of their poems to comment on the idea that human power can be used to dominate, oppress and cause suffering	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess	London
	Browning wrote My Last Duchess as a dramatic monologue from the Duke's perspective, only showing his point of view. This demonstrates his power and dominance	Blake uses regular four-line stanzas to highlight the relentlessness of the dominance the institutions of power have over London and its people
	The poem is written in a single stanza, emphasising the Duke's power as he is the only person who speaks	The alternative ABAB rhyme scheme and use of iambic tetrameter demonstrate the control exerted over the city



Your notes

Topic sentence	Both Browning and Blake are also concerned with the inequalities between women and men, and how men can exert power over women	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess In My Last Duchess, the Duke betrays his view of his Duchess as a possession through the use of possessive pronouns and the objectification of his wife	London Blake is concerned with the oppression and victimisation of women, referencing the “youthful harlot’s curse” to imply that some women have their futures and choices taken away from them as a circumstance of their birth
	The Duke repeatedly uses the pronoun “my” to imply ownership, and “it” to imply he views her as an object. The adjective “last” suggests she is but one of a number of wives	The oxymoronic “marriage hearse” suggests that women lose any power they may possess ultimately to men in that society
	Both the harlot and the Duchess are victims of the inequality between men and women in terms of circumstance and society	
	The fact that both are nameless further dehumanises them	

Topic sentence	Both poems show how power that is inherited, but not necessarily deserved, can be abused and used to oppress	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess Browning comments on the Duke mounting his “last Duchess” on the wall as a trophy – a symbol of the power he holds over his wife. He also controls who can see her	London Blake criticises the monarchy behind their “palace walls” as responsible for abuses of power
	The Duke’s “nine-hundred-years-old-name” reflects the fact that the Duke’s power and status are inherited, rather than earned	Blake holds the monarchy responsible for the soldier’s blood that runs “down palace walls”, suggesting that they are responsible for inflicting suffering



Your notes

However, a name alone does not equal responsible use of power, resulting in oppression and victimisation

The walls of the buildings in both poems are symbols of their power. Therefore, anything represented on them becomes a symbol of the abuses of their power

Differences:

Topic sentence	While the focus of Browning's criticism of power centres on one individual, the Duke, and the effect on his "last Duchess", Blake comments on how the abuse of power by institutions hits the poorest members of society the hardest	
Evidence and analysis	My Last Duchess	London
	Through the fact that the Duke oppresses his Duchess, who has inherited his status via marriage, Browning is suggesting that even wealthy women of high social standing are not exempt from being victimised and oppressed	Blake is critical of the monarchy, the government and the church, as they represent to him the abuse of their authority in order to cause misery and suffering to all of the people in London
	Browning focuses his attention on the abuse of power by an individual in order to own, control and dominate	The focus for Blake is on the institutions of the city of London, and the effects of the corruption of power by those institutions on the lowest sections of that society



Your notes

The Charge of the Light Brigade

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper – printed in full – and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a “closed book” exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things about each poem will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to Alfred Lord Tennyson’s The Charge of the Light Brigade, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer’s methods:** an exploration of the poet’s techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A ‘translation’ of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Tennyson’s intention and message

The Charge of the Light Brigade in a nutshell

The Charge of the Light Brigade was first published in 1855 and tells the story of a battle during the **Crimean War** (1853–1855), in which a British **cavalry** unit, the “Light Brigade”, was ordered to charge against a Russian **artillery** unit. This order essentially sent approximately six hundred men to their possible deaths. The poet, Tennyson, read a newspaper report about the battle, and he wrote the poem to celebrate the heroism and sacrifice of the soldiers, but also to criticise those in power who gave the order, as it caused so many deaths. The poem deals most obviously with the theme of conflict via war, but also explores the inner conflict of doing one’s duty, even when it leads to almost certain death.

The Charge of the Light Brigade breakdown

Lines 1–8



“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.”

Translation

- The speaker reveals the subject of the poem in this first stanza
- Six hundred soldiers on horses (the “**Light Brigade**”) rode for a mile and a half (“half a league”) into the valley of Death
- Their commander ordered them to charge forward towards the artillery

Tennyson’s intention

- Tennyson uses repetition of distance at the start of the poem to emphasise how far they have to go and how exposed and vulnerable the soldiers are
- The number of men is also repeated throughout the poem to reinforce the number of lives lost
- Marching into the valley of Death is a biblical reference to Psalm 23: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil;”
- The poet here suggests that the men knew that they were riding to their deaths
- But the biblical reference implies that the men may have taken comfort in knowing their God was with them

Lines 9–17

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”

Was there a man dismay’d?

Not tho’ the soldier knew

Some one had blunder'd:

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."



Your notes

Translation

- The commander repeats the order to advance
- Was any soldier discouraged or afraid? No, even though they knew that someone had made a mistake and that this was a suicide mission
- It wasn't up to them to question their orders; their job was to follow those orders and die
- So the six hundred men rode to their deaths

Tennyson's intention

- In this stanza, Tennyson reveals the thoughts of the soldiers and their awareness that someone had made a mistake ("blunder'd") that would cost them their lives
- However, they were bound by a sense of duty, so they did not think to question it or to challenge their orders
- Although the use of the rhetorical question could suggest an element of doubt in the soldiers' minds
- Their sense of duty reflects the power those in charge had over whether the regular soldiers lived or died

Lines 18–26

"Cannon to right of them,

Cannon to left of them,

Cannon in front of them

Volley'd and thunder'd;

Storm'd at with shot and shell,

Boldly they rode and well,

Into the jaws of Death,

Into the mouth of Hell

Rode the six hundred."



Your notes

Translation

- The men were surrounded by cannons and loud blasts
- They were showered with gunshots and artillery **shells**
- But even so, they continued to ride bravely into the mouth of Death and Hell itself

Tennyson's intention

- The speaker of the poem tells the tale as someone who was there and saw it all happen
- This lends a level of **authenticity** to the tale
- Via the repetition of "cannon", the men knew that they were surrounded by military machinery, but still they rode on bravely
- Tennyson is again commenting on the sense of duty the soldiers possessed, as well as their courage
- Death and Hell are **personified** as creatures that will eat the soldiers

Lines 27–38

"Flash'd all their sabres bare,

Flash'd as they turn'd in air

Sabring the gunners there,

Charging an army, while

All the world wonder'd:

Plunged in the battery-smoke

Right thro' the line they broke;

Cossack and Russian

Reel'd from the sabre-stroke

Shatter'd and sunder'd.

Then they rode back, but not

Not the six hundred."

Translation



Your notes

- The soldiers raised their swords ("sabres") into the air, which flashed in the light
- They charged into the army and stabbed the enemy soldiers who were manning the guns
- The whole world watched in amazement and confusion
- The soldiers plunged into the smoke from the guns and broke through the enemy lines
- The **Cossack** and Russian soldiers reeled from the sword strikes, shattered and broken
- The Light Brigade rode back, but not all of them made it

Tennyson's intention

- In this stanza, Tennyson reveals that while the army charged to their deaths, the world wondered why they were ordered to do so
- Ironically, the only people not wondering were the soldiers themselves
- "Cossack and Russian" is a reference to the enemy soldiers who were fighting against British soldiers during the Crimean War
- At the end of this stanza, the speaker reveals that some did make it out alive
- History tells us that 247 of the men returned home from that battle

Lines 39–49

"Cannon to the right of them,

Cannon to the left of them,

Cannon behind them

Volley'd and thunder'd;

Storm'd at with shot and shell,

While horse and hero fell,

They that had fought so well

Came thro' the jaws of Death

Back from the mouth of Hell,

All that was left of them,

Left of the six hundred."

Translation

- Again, the speaker repeats the fact that the soldiers were surrounded by firing cannons

- Whilst many soldiers and horses died, those that fought well survived
- That was all that was left of the six hundred who set out

Tennyson's intention

- The repetition of the image of the cannons emphasises the soldiers' bravery and courage
- The speaker clearly finds it miraculous that some came back at all

**Lines 50–55**

“When can their glory fade?

O the wild charge they made!

All the world wonder'd.

Honour the charge they made!

Honour the Light Brigade,

Noble six hundred!”

Translation

- The speaker queries when their bravery would ever be forgotten, as the whole world admired what they did
- The speaker then urges the reader to respect the soldiers and what they did, those brave men

Tennyson's intention

- In this stanza, the speaker calls to honour and respect the six hundred men who rode at the **Battle of Balaclava**
- The rhetorical question, “When can their glory fade?” suggests both the fallen and the survivors would be forever remembered and honoured
- This rhetorical device also **alludes** to the poem being a piece of **propaganda**
- This is reinforced by the **imperative** verb “honour”, demanding that the public honour the soldiers

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an integrated approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Tennyson's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these ideas. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's overarching ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. Crucially, in the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme and includes Tennyson's intentions

behind his choices in terms of:

- [Form](#)
- [Structure](#)
- [Language](#)



Form

The poem is written in the form of a **ballad**, a type of historic poetry form used to **commemorate** a story for future generations to hear. The poem, therefore, acts to **memorialize** the **people who were killed in the conflict, and their heroism and bravery**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Conflict, war and heroism	There are six stanzas, with each one progressing the story of the attack	Each stanza could therefore be considered a memorial stone to 100 of the six hundred cavalrymen
	The first three stanzas tell of the charge, the fourth on the battle itself and the fifth describes the aftermath	The final stanza allows Tennyson to reflect and comment on the bravery of the men
	The poem uses short, energetic lines	This gives the poem a swiftness of movement, much like the soldiers going into battle

Structure

Tennyson uses rhythm and rhyme to establish the atmosphere of the poem and to emphasise the **themes of war and patriotism**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
War and patriotism	The poet uses dactylic dimeter , which is a long syllable followed by two short syllables, to represent the rhythm of horses running into battle	The relentlessness of the rhythm implies that the soldiers had no choice but to obey their orders and continue forward
		This sense of inevitability is reinforced by the use of rhyming couplets , although the chaos of it is also represented by the irregular overall rhyme scheme


Your notes

Tennyson also repeatedly employs repetition , such as in "Half a league" and "cannons"	The repetition of "cannons" makes them seem as though they are overwhelming
The poet makes use of end-stopped lines, such as in "Theirs not to make reply, Theirs not to reason why, Theirs but to do and die."	This technique conveys the resolve and the bravery of the light brigade as they face death The lines are strong, confident and determined, just like the soldiers themselves
Tennyson also uses anaphora , such as in the above lines	This reiterates the soldiers' obedience and lack of individualism

Language

The language Tennyson employs **reinforces the main themes of war, patriotism and heroism in the face of certain death.**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
War, patriotism and heroism	Tennyson uses euphemisms , such as "horse and hero fell", rather than explicitly referring to death	This softens the impact and the reality of brutal battle Tennyson's job in this poem was to present a heroic and patriotic version of events, rather than the reality of war
	The poet uses the "valley of Death" as a metaphor for the battlefield	This demonstrates that both the poet and the soldiers knew that this was a suicide mission, and they were likely to die
	Death is personified as having "jaws" and Hell as having a "mouth"	This implies that the soldiers will be eaten up by death, and that there is no escape
	Tennyson uses language associated with storms, such as "thundered", "stormed" and "flashed"	This reflects the unpredictable and chaotic nature of war, and the terrible force and brutality it can contain



Your notes

	There is also some ambiguity in the line, "all the world wonder'd"	This causes the listener to question if this denotes admiration or doubt
	The poet also employs further repetition in the word "charge"	This could reference the bravery and heroism of the soldiers boldly charging into battle
		However, it could also imply a "charge" against those who made the mistake by sending the soldiers to their deaths

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be written about separately. Therefore, you should not include lots of historical information about the Crimean War or the Battle of Balaclava. The best way to understand context is the ideas and perspectives explored by Tennyson in the poem which relate to power or conflict. As this is one of the more straightforward poems in the anthology in terms of analysis, this section has been bullet-pointed under the main umbrella theme of war and heroism:

- **War and heroism**

War and heroism

- The poem is about an advance made by approximately 600 British soldiers on horseback in 1854 during the Battle of Balaclava, part of the Crimean War
- Tennyson read a newspaper report about the battle and wrote the poem to celebrate the sacrifice the soldiers made for their country
- The order was to attack a very strongly defended Russian position:
 - As they charged into the valley, the soldiers of the Light Brigade were fired at from all sides
 - Although they were surrounded, some of the soldiers made it through to the Russian line, and ended up engaged in a violent battle with swords and hand-to-hand combat
- Tennyson also indirectly criticises the orders given by Lord Raglan, the man in charge, as his order caused so many deaths:
 - Tennyson was **poet laureate** at the time, so he could not be openly critical of British systems and institutions
 - He was duty bound to **glorify** war to the British public, to defend the positions of the **aristocracy**
 - Tennyson led a rather privileged life, leading some to question the extent of his knowledge about the reality of war

- The Crimean War was extremely well documented, and was largely unpopular with the British public:
 - They saw it as unnecessary and were aware of the mistakes made because of how it was being reported
 - This battle triggered much debate about the war and its leadership
- It was also one of the first conflicts to use modern military techniques, like exploding artillery shells, resulting in death and destruction on a much wider scale
- **Allusions** to Christianity would have offered comfort to Victorian readers
- The poem suggests that heroism isn't just about bravery, but also about duty:
 - Being willing to obey orders no matter the cost
- The theme of **nationalism** is present in the final stanza of the poem, as the poet instructs the reader, as in the collective general public, to "honour" the light brigade for their actions



What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is, therefore, essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that The Charge of the Light Brigade focuses mainly on **war and patriotism**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [The Charge of the Light Brigade and Exposure](#)
- [The Charge of the Light Brigade and Bayonet Charge](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

[The Charge of the Light Brigade and Exposure](#)

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to compare how different poets present the experience of war. Although the experiences of war are presented differently, both ultimately underline the needlessness of war and that the experiences of the soldiers are to be taken seriously.

Similarities:



Your notes

Topic sentence	Both poems serve as a mouthpiece to expose the reality of war and the resulting death that inevitably occurs	
Evidence and analysis	The Charge of the Light Brigade	Exposure
	Tennyson indirectly criticises military leaders' decisions by stating that "Someone had blunder'd"	In Exposure, Owen depicts the soldiers as isolated in "Worried by silence"
	Tennyson also puts the emphasis on the soldiers themselves, as he instructs the reader to "Honour the Light Brigade" rather than those in charge	This, plus the use of rhetorical questions , imply that they feel abandoned by the authority that put them there
	Tennyson uses repetition to emphasise the vast number of lives lost in war and the harsh brutality of conflict	Similarly, Owen repeats "But nothing happens" to suggest that the men are being forced to wait in freezing trenches for no reason
	Tennyson uses the semantic field of a storm to emphasise the violence and power of charging into conflict	Owen uses the personification of the "iced east winds knife us" to suggest that the wind is violently attacking the men
		This is ironic as they wait for the enemy to attack
	In this poem, the men followed their orders without question, even though they knew it would lead to death	The poet Wilfred Owen ultimately returned to war, despite having lost hope in the cause he was meant to be fighting for

Differences:

Topic sentence	In Exposure, war is presented as ultimately futile, whereas in The Charge of the Light Brigade, war is presented, at least on the surface, as honourable and brave	
Evidence and analysis	The Charge of the Light Brigade	Exposure



Your notes

As Tennyson was poet laureate at the time, he would not have been able to be outwardly critical of authority	Owen was a soldier on the front line at the time of writing, so could be more openly critical of a situation of which he had first-hand experience
The poem, therefore, reads as patriotic and contains lexis from the semantic field of propaganda, such as "glory", "honour" and "noble"	Therefore, this poem presents a much more negative presentation of the realities of war and conflict
In Tennyson's poem, there is noise, and the men do not seem to have the opportunity to feel frightened. They are charging straight into action	Owen's poem is characterised by silence and inaction. It is in the silence that the men feel frightened
The sound in this poem is loud and explosive	This contrasts with waiting in the silence and cold in Exposure
Tennyson's use of euphemism and gentler language is kinder to the reader, shielding them from the true horrors of war	Owen's language is much more reflective of the soldier's lived experiences and is, therefore, more brutal, such as "merciless", "twitching agonies" and "misery"

The Charge of the Light Brigade and Bayonet Charge

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to compare how those involved in war are treated. In The Charge of the Light Brigade, Tennyson focuses on the collective, whereas in Bayonet Charge, the focus is on the individual and his sense of isolation. However, in both poems, the soldiers' actions are ultimately out of their own control.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems are written from an outsider's perspective, inspired by the experiences of those who ultimately did not have a choice	
Evidence and analysis	The Charge of the Light Brigade	Bayonet Charge



Your notes

	Neither Tennyson nor Hughes ever experienced the actual brutality of war, but were both inspired to write their poems through other people's experiences	
	The "charge" in Tennyson's poem relates to 600 men who do not have a choice but to obey their orders	The "charge" in Hughes' poem focuses on a frightened individual soldier who also does not have a choice in the situation in which he finds himself
	"Theirs not to reason why" shows that the soldiers obey their orders without question	"In what cold clockwork of the stars and nations//Was he the hand pointing that second?" shows that this soldier feels stuck in that time and that there is no escape
	In this way, the soldiers' actions can be viewed as out of their control and as their fate	In a similar way, the situation he finds himself in is out of his control and is also his fate
	The Light Brigade are motivated by a sense of duty	A sense of duty must have prompted this soldier to sign up to go to war
	In The Charge of the Light Brigade, the soldiers are armed only with swords against the artillery fire of the Russians	The soldier is armed with a bayonet , and yet is "dazzled with rifle fire"
	Both poems seem to suggest that soldiers are trained with a reflex action that enables them to obey orders instinctively, becoming killing machines without individual thought	
	The soldiers in both poems could be considered to be expendable , and exploited by those in charge who give the orders	

Differences:

Topic sentence	Although both poems imply criticism of the leaders of war, the idea of patriotism is celebrated in Tennyson's poem, whereas it is challenged in Bayonet Charge	
Evidence and analysis	The Charge of the Light Brigade	Bayonet Charge
	The story in the poem is told chronologically , in a ballad form to	This poem is narrated right in the middle of the action, emphasising the sense of disorientation



Your notes

memorialise the soldiers and their actions	and chaos the soldier experiences
Tennyson seems to praise the blind obedience of the soldiers in the rhetorical question “When can their glory fade?”	Hughes challenges the perception of honour in the line “In bewilderment then he almost stopped.”
Any criticism of authority is subtle in this poem, due to Tennyson’s position as poet laureate	Hughes was a relative unknown when Bayonet Charge was published, allowing him more freedom to openly criticise the mechanisms of conflict
The soldiers do not question their role or their orders in this poem	The idea of patriotism is undermined via the lines “The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye”
Their patriotic duty is to “do and die”, and they are celebrated in the poem for doing so	This contrasts the idealism of patriotism with the reality of fighting and killing
This celebration of their sacrifice is reinforced by the “glory”, “honour” and “noble” of the final stanza	The soldier in this poem questions his role in the conflict The Dismissive “etcetera” in the line “King, honour, human dignity etcetera” undermines the usual rhetoric of war, as all of these things ultimately do not matter in the fear of the moment



Your notes

Exposure

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper – printed in full – and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a “closed book” exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things about each poem will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to Wilfred Owen’s Exposure, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer’s methods:** an exploration of the poet’s techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A ‘translation’ of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Owen’s intention and message

Exposure in a nutshell

Exposure is written from an **authentic** first person perspective, as Wilfred Owen wrote it in 1917 whilst he was fighting in the trenches of World War I. He was killed just before the **armistice** in 1918, and the poem was published after his death. The topic of the poem is war, but it specifically focuses on the sheer **monotony** of daily life for many soldiers, as well as the harsh conditions they were exposed to, even when not actually engaged in fighting. The suffering is made worse, in the speaker’s mind, given the fact that the war seems to accomplish nothing ultimately. Owen used simple language in this poem because he wanted people to understand the awful realities of war. Therefore, the main themes in the poem are the conflict between the **propaganda** and the harsh reality of war, and human versus nature as the soldiers are engaged in their own struggle to survive the **bleak** conditions, as well as the war itself.

Exposure breakdown

Lines 1–5



Your notes

“Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east winds that knife us...

Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...

Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient...

Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,

But nothing happens.”

Translation

- The first stanza describes the physical conditions the soldiers were experiencing, as well as their mental state
- The soldiers are physically and mentally exhausted
- Their “brains ache” with the strain of being constantly **vigilant** in case of attack
- Ironically, it is the wind, rather than the enemy, which attacks them
- The silence is the thing that concerns them the most, as the soldiers have no way of knowing when or where the next attack will come from
- Attempts to light up the landscape with “low, **drooping flares**” only serves to make the situation more confusing
- But despite all of the tension and watchfulness, “nothing happens”

Owen’s intention

- Owen **personifies** the east winds as **metaphorically** stabbing the soldiers with its chill
- Here, the poet indicates that nature might be as dangerous to the soldiers as the enemy
- This is reflected in the poem’s title, '**Exposure**', which indicates the risk the soldiers face by being stuck out in the cold for extended periods of time
- By opening the poem with reference to the soldiers’ “brains”, Owen is also commenting on the **psychological** impact of war
- The line “Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,” indicates the conflicting emotions the soldiers experience, constantly on edge and watchful
- The poet here begins to use the **refrain** “But nothing happens” which is repeated throughout the poem
- The implication here is that this refrain extends beyond just this specific moment; it could just as well be referring to war itself

- In other words, war is **futile**, meaningless and changes nothing

Lines 6–10

“Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,

Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.

Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,

Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.

What are we doing here?”



Your notes

Translation

- While the soldiers keep a look-out, the wind rattles the **barbed wire** set up as a defence around the **trenches**
- It sounds like the twitching of dying men caught on the wire
- They can hear the constant gunfire from the north, but it sounds so far as if it is in a different war
- The narrator questions why they are even there, if there is no actual fighting

Owen’s intention

- Owen again personifies nature as angrily “tugging” on the barbed wire
- He follows this up with a brutal **simile**, comparing the wind’s actions to the dying twitches of men caught in the wire
- Again, Owen suggests that the battle to survive against nature is just as dangerous as the battle against enemy soldiers
- In this stanza, Owen also introduces the idea that war is always present, even when it is not immediately visible
- The use of the **rhetorical question** at the end of the stanza reinforces the confusion of the soldiers at the situation in which they find themselves

Lines 11–15

“The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...

We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag stormy.

Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army

Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,

But nothing happens.”

Translation

- The narrator observes the sun once again beginning to rise, and the only certainty in their lives is that the war drags on
- There seems to be no end to this living hell
- The narrator likens the dawn to a military leader gathering its army of freezing storm clouds
- This army of nature then “attacks once more”, but once again there is no actual physical action



Your notes

Owen's intention

- The poet here is commenting that the war is an awful, miserable, continuous cycle
- This **monotony** is reinforced by the repetition of the refrain “But nothing happens.”
- The irony is that dawn is normally **symbolic** of a fresh start and happiness, but here it represents nothing but continued misery
- Again, Owen uses the personification of dawn as a military leader to emphasise once more that the battle the soldiers are engaged in is more than just the physical war they are involved in
- War is everything

Lines 16–20

“Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.

Less deadly than the air that shudders black with snow,

With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and renew,

We watch them wandering up and down the wind’s nonchalance,

But nothing happens.”

Translation

- Suddenly, the silence is broken by a **barrage** of gunfire
- However, the speaker believes that even these bullets are not as dangerous as the snow that is falling and the freezing temperatures
- The speaker gives the impression that the snowflakes are whirling around them
- The soldiers watch the snowstorm, and still nothing happens in terms of the war itself

Owen's intention

- Owen's use of **sibilance** at the start of this stanza reflects the sudden break in the monotonous silence



Your notes

- And yet, the poet is suggesting that the weather conditions still pose a greater threat to the soldiers than bullets themselves
- He positions nature as the greatest enemy of men
- Even the snowflakes seem to be consciously deciding who to attack and where they will fall
- The poet suggests that the wind is **apathetic** ("nonchalance") in the face of untold suffering and hardship
- But even this short break in the silence does little to **alleviate** the continuous misery
- The soldiers feel as though nothing new has happened

Lines 21–25

"Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces –

We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed,

Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,

Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird fusses.

– Is it that we are dying?"

Translation

- The narrator describes the snowflakes as though they are **assassins** that are stalking the soldiers
- Terrified, the soldiers huddle in the trenches for protection, while imagining they are lying in the warm sun, surrounded by flowers and blackbirds
- They are trying to hold onto what little hope is left in their hearts
- The narrator questions whether they are actually dying, perhaps of exposure

Owen's intention

- The poet deliberately describes the snowflakes as having "fingering **stealth**", personifying them as **malicious** and cunning
- The use of the word "**cringe**" suggests the men are now **cowering** from the weather
- The happy images the soldiers imagine is designed to **juxtapose** with the reality they are suffering through
- In the final line, the poet attempts to answer the rhetorical question at the end of stanza two

Lines 26–30

"Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires, glozed

With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;

For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;

Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are closed, –

We turn back to our dying.”



Your notes

Translation

- After a while, the soldiers begin to imagine that their spirits have gone home
- The narrator speaks of their longing for home, but the image is one of the fire having burned out, with only glowing **embers** remaining
- The house is so empty that only the crickets and mice are left to enjoy it
- Going home is something that is now closed to them and there is no hope of going back there
- So the soldiers close their hearts and turn back to their depressing reality

Owen's intention

- The poet suggests that the soldiers are so exhausted it is even a effort for them to think of anywhere other than their **ghastly** present environment
- The reference to the soldier's "ghosts" could imply that the men are already dead
- The fact that "on us the doors are closed" implies that peace is now out of their reach
- What they are dreaming of is now inaccessible to them

Lines 31–35

“Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;

Now ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.

For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;

Therefore, not loath, we like out here; therefore were born,

For love of God seems dying.”

Translation

- The speaker suggests that the soldiers no longer believe that there are any warm fires left for them, even though the sun still shines brightly on children and nature
- They have lost faith in God's promise of happier, warmer times to come
- The soldiers are not resentful; they are **resigned** to their fate, as God seems to have abandoned them

Owen's intention

- The feeling of hopelessness and inevitability continues in this stanza
- The bleakness is such that even the fact that a warm spring will follow a winter still makes them afraid, as they will probably not be alive to see it
- Owen suggests that the soldiers may believe they were born to die in this situation, in order to allow those at home to live
- There is the suggestion of the speaker questioning his faith, as a result of what he has witnessed and is experiencing
- As his faith dies, so his heart or "love" grows more afraid



Lines 36–40

"Tonight, His frost will fasten on this mud and us,

Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.

The burying-party, picks and shovels in their shaking grasp,

Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,

But nothing happens."

Translation

- The despair of the poem reaches a climax in this final stanza, as the speaker reveals that the temperature that night will be so cold that it will freeze the ground and the soldiers
- Other soldiers have to bury those who freeze to death, their hands shaking from fear and cold
- They look briefly at the faces of soldiers they vaguely recognise
- Their eyes have frozen solid
- The final "But nothing happens" tells us the speaker feels that this is the way life is, and it cannot be changed. The only way out is death

Owen's intention

- This final stanza is where action, should it happen, must happen. However, nothing does
- The soldiers **succumb** to nature, freezing to death alone
- The frost is personified as fastening the soldiers to the ground
- Owen also uses the **metaphor** of "All their eyes are ice", meaning that they are physically frozen, but also numb to the horrors

- The last line shows ultimate futility of war, and that the war will go on and on
- The terrible irony of this is that something did happen eventually, with the armistice, but it was too late for Owen, who died just a week beforehand



Your notes

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Owen's choice of language, structure and form contribute to these themes. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices he has, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main themes, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the sections below, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Owen's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

This poem does not fit into any traditional form. It has eight stanzas of five lines. The first four lines of each stanza share similar rhyme sounds and describe the horrors the men are enduring. The fifth line in each stanza then either repeats the poem's refrain or makes some reference to death. Because each stanza is structured in the same way, it emphasises the theme of the **monotony and futility of war**. The fifth line in each stanza adding on a little more than what would normally be expected could be seen as representative of the **war dragging on and on**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The monotony and futility of war	The first four lines of each stanza follow the rhyming pattern "abba"	This serves to emphasise the repetitiveness of trench life
	The poet uses a technique called "half rhyme", where the lines do not quite rhyme. For example, "knife us/nervous" and "silent/salient"	This serves to create an underlying atmosphere of unease
		The reader is left anticipating a rhyme in the same way as the soldiers are on edge anticipating a battle
	The final line of each stanza is short and indented	These final lines hang suspended, tacked on at the end of each stanza



Your notes

	The refrain "But nothing happens" binds the poem together, and the repetition of the idea emphasises the sense of paralysis and not moving forward
	It also gives a sense of dread, as in it doesn't seem right and, therefore, adds to the tension
The poet uses collective pronouns, such as "our" and "we"	This gives a common voice to the soldiers and shows that the misery applies to everyone

Structure

Exposure is structured into a single day, from dawn to night, encompassing a whole day in which nothing happens, except the men daydreaming and trying to come to terms with the **futility of the situation** they find themselves in, and the **pointlessness of their own existence**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Futility of war	The poem employs a cyclical structure, with the line "But nothing happens" connecting the beginning and end of the poem	The fact that the poem encompasses a day emphasises the fact that nothing has actually happened in that time
	The refrain "But nothing happens" is also an example of anaphora	This shows that the situation remains the same despite their suffering; the soldiers don't achieve anything, implying the futility of war
	The use of caesura in the lines speaking of home, such as "For hours the innocent mice rejoice:" separates home from the trenches	The use of punctuation mid-line also suggests a barrier between the two places, implying that they cannot return
	The first three lines of the first stanza end with ellipses	This creates a slower pace and indicates the waiting and the boredom of the soldiers

Language

Wilfred Owen uses several language techniques to position nature as the main enemy of the soldiers, demonstrating the key theme of **the power of nature to be just as dangerous as any human enemy**.



Your notes

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Man versus nature	Owen personifies the weather and nature throughout the poem	This technique depicts nature as the antagonist in the poem and an even bigger threat than the actual army the soldiers are meant to be fighting
	The weather "knives" the men and uses "stealth" to attack them. The air "shudders black with snow"	This implies that the real fight is against nature, which is shown to be deadly through the use of the colour black. Nature is literally trying to kill them
	In the line "Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army", the normally nurturing Mother Nature is depicted as a military leader	Owen juxtaposes the normally mothering and comforting role traditionally associated with a female figure with the aggressive connotations of an army
		Dawn is also usually symbolic of hope and new life
		This indicates that, despite human conflict, the natural world keeps moving. War has no effect on the dawn or the natural cycle of nature
		This again implies the futility and pointlessness of war
	Sibilance is used in "sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence"	This represents the whooshing sound of bullets whizzing through the air
		In the poem, the snowflakes slice through the air in the same way as bullets
	The poet uses unusual verbs when describing the men in the final stanza, such as "shrivelling", "puckering" and "shaking"	This is ironic, as these are young men, but the effects of prolonged exposure is to make them as if they are old and infirm

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, context is not random historical facts about Wilfred Owen or World War I that are unrelated to the ideas in the poem. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Owen in Exposure which relate to power and conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Owen explores:



- **The Reality of War**

- **The Power of Nature**

The Reality of War

- The poem was written in 1917 whilst Owen was fighting in the trenches in World War I
- In Britain at the time, war was **romanticised** and seen as glorious and noble
 - This was reflected in much of the war poetry at the time, which focused on the honour of fighting
- Owen **dispelled** this myth by exposing the horrific reality of war
- His graphic scenes combined with description of honest emotions
- In addition, World War I is known not only for its immense number of casualties, but also for its psychological effects on those who survived
- The term "**shell-shock**" emerged from this war, referring to soldiers suffering from what would now be termed **PTSD**
 - Owen himself was hospitalised for this
- Owen wrote many of his poems to convey the horrors of war to civilians who had no way of visualising what war was really like
- He suggests that war can kill a man in a psychological, if not in a physical way
 - The line, "Slowly our ghosts drag home" demonstrates this

The Power of Nature

- The majority of the fighting during WWI took place in Europe, where the soldiers faced extremities in temperature and weather over the years (1914–1918)
- The use of trench warfare in WWI significantly influenced the high death toll
- Life in the trenches was awful, with diseases rife
- Rain would quickly accumulate in the trenches, whilst in the winter soldiers would be battered by snow, hail and sub-zero temperatures
- The winter of 1916–1917 was so cold that many soldiers lost fingers and toes to **frostbite**



Your notes

- The trenches offered little to no protection
 - The soldiers were left exposed to the elements
- During his time fighting in France, Owen experienced record-breaking cold and snow, as well as the constant fear and trauma of the war itself
- In one incident, in April 1917, Owen and his men remained in an open field in the snow for 4 days and nights, with no support forces arriving to relieve them
 - They had no chance to change wet, frozen clothes or to sleep
 - This was just one incident of Owen and his men having to endure many days and nights out in the open, sheltering in **shell holes**
- Owen makes references to God having abandoned them and nature turning against them
 - He thinks the cosmos seems either cruelly **indifferent** or else malignant
 - It seems that a loving, Christian God is non-existent
- The narrator in the poem is overwhelmed by nature's hostility and unpredictability
 - The soldiers even lose hope that spring will arrive
- The poet suggests that war can lead to a loss of faith in God
 - In the poem, God is responsible for the suffering caused by nature. For example, in the line, "Tonight, His frost will fasten on this mud and us"

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is, therefore, essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that Exposure focuses mainly on **the reality of war, and the power of nature**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [Exposure and The Charge of the Light Brigade](#)
- [Exposure and Storm on the Island](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Exposure and The Charge of the Light Brigade

Comparison in a nutshell:



Your notes

This comparison provides the opportunity to compare how different poets present the experience of war. Although the experiences of war are presented differently, both ultimately underline the needlessness of war and that the experiences of the soldiers are to be taken seriously.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems serve as a mouthpiece to expose the reality of war and the resulting death that inevitably occurs	
Evidence and analysis	Exposure	The Charge of the Light Brigade
	In Exposure, Owen depicts the soldiers as isolated in "Worried by silence"	Tennyson indirectly criticises military leaders' decisions by stating that "Someone had blunder'd "
	This, plus the use of rhetorical questions, imply that the soldiers feel abandoned by the authority that put them there	He also puts the emphasis on the soldiers themselves, as he instructs the reader to "Honour the Light Brigade" rather than those in charge
	Owen repeats "But nothing happens" to suggest that the men are being forced to wait in freezing trenches for no reason	Similarly, Tennyson uses repetition to emphasise the vast number of lives lost in war and the harsh brutality of conflict
	Owen uses the personification of the "iced east winds knife us" to suggest that the wind is violently attacking the men	Tennyson uses the semantic field of a storm to emphasise the violence and power of charging into conflict
	This is ironic as they wait for the enemy to attack	
	The poet Wilfred Owen ultimately returned to war, despite having lost hope in the cause he was meant to be fighting for	In this poem, the men followed their orders without question, even though they knew it would lead to death

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	In Exposure, war is presented as ultimately futile, whereas in The Charge of the Light Brigade, war is presented, at least on the surface, as honourable and brave	
Evidence and analysis	Exposure	The Charge of the Light Brigade
	Owen was a soldier on the front line at the time of writing, so could be more openly critical of a situation he had first-hand experience of	As Tennyson was poet laureate at the time, he would not have been able to be outwardly critical of authority
	Therefore, this poem presents a much more negative picture of the realities of war and conflict	The poem therefore reads as patriotic and contains lexis from the semantic field of propaganda, such as "glory", "honour" and "noble"
	Owen's poem is characterised by silence and inaction. It is in the silence that the men feel frightened	In Tennyson's poem, there is noise, and the men do not seem to have the opportunity to feel frightened. They are charging straight into action
	The soldiers are waiting in the silence and cold in Exposure	This contrasts with the sound in this poem, which is loud and explosive
	Owen's language is much more reflective of the soldier's lived experiences and is, therefore, more brutal, such as "merciless", "twitching agonies" and "misery"	Tennyson's use of euphemism and gentler language is kinder to the reader, shielding them from the true horrors of war

Exposure and Storm on the Island

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to discuss how different poets present the **overwhelming power of nature as something to be feared**, in order to convey their underlying messages.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems deal with the conflict man has not only with nature, but also with imposed regimes
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	Exposure	Storm on the Island
	In Exposure, the wind is malicious and manifests itself as evil, like the evil nature of war	In Heaney's depiction, the wind is dealt first with practicalities, as the islanders are "prepared" and they build their "houses squat" in order to withstand the oncoming storm
	The line "the iced east winds that knife us" creates the impression that the wind has come to life and is purposefully trying to cause the soldiers pain	The wind is also personified in that it " pummels " their houses and the island offers no natural shelter
	References to actual warfare are explicit in this poem, but suggests that nature is also on the attack, as dawn amasses "her melancholy army"	Heaney uses a semantic field linked to warfare with " strafes " and "bombarded", creating the image of bullets hitting the houses
	Although the speaker is trapped in World War I, in the poem the real and more imminent danger comes from nature	The real and imminent danger for the islanders is also nature which is attacking them
	The poet highlights the power that nature has over one's emotions and psychology	The psychological impact is also suggested in the final line of this poem, in "Strange, it is a huge nothing we fear", as the people fear most the thing they cannot see
	For Owen, the pain is raw, traumatic and seems never ending	For Heaney, the suffering is embedded into the culture, as something the people must endure over and over again
	The refrain "But nothing happens" is Owen's comment on the ultimate futility of war, and the pointlessness of the soldiers being there	With Heaney, the storm and nature acts as a metaphor for The Troubles and conflict in Northern Ireland, which innocent people had to " weather "

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	Although both poems comment on the danger of nature and its power over man, the tone of Exposure is melancholy and helpless, whereas in Storm on the Island the islanders take action to protect themselves from the oncoming storm	
Evidence and analysis	Exposure	Storm on the Island
	The poet, Owen, was actually a soldier in World War I, so his poem is written from first hand experience	Although Heaney's poem can be read as an extended metaphor for The Troubles in Northern Ireland, Heaney himself grew up in the countryside
	The poem is written from a personal perspective and is, therefore, very authentic	The links in this poem to actual conflict are much more subtle and implied
	This poem is more structured, with eight stanzas, each ending with an indented refrain or rhetorical question	This poem is written in blank verse and in one stanza, suggesting that weather and nature is unpredictable and difficult to stop
	This emphasises the repetitiveness and monotony of war, where the fact that nothing happens for long periods is another side of the battle for the soldiers	The use of enjambment and caesura represent the constant barrage of the storm, which gives a sense of action



Your notes

Storm on the Island

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- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to 'Storm on the Island' by Seamus Heaney, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
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- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Heaney's intention and message

Storm on the Island in a nutshell

Storm on the Island was written by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney and it was published in 1966. It describes a **desolate** island landscape lived on by a group of **resourceful** individuals who must protect themselves from a storm. It can also be interpreted as an **allegory** for political tensions in Northern Ireland, commonly referred to as "**The Troubles**", where the islanders can be understood to represent the Irish people and the storm represents oppressive British rule, and the brutality of war and conflict in general. The main themes of this poem are therefore based on both its literal meaning in the power of nature, and in its allegorical meaning of physical and political conflict.

Storm on the Island breakdown

Lines 1–5



Your notes

"We are prepared: we build our houses squat,
Sink walls in rock and roof them with good slate.

This wizened earth has never troubled us

With hay, so, as you see, there are no stacks
Or stooks that can be lost. – "

Translation

- The poem begins with the **declaration** that the inhabitants are ready for the storm
- Their homes are short and wide, built for withstanding strong weather
- The land does not provide them with many crops, but there is no hay that might blow away

Heaney's intention

- The poet starts by using the **inclusive pronoun** "we", indicating that this poem is about community and togetherness
- The **caesura** in the first line suggests they are prepared to stop the coming storm
- The use of **alliteration**, such as "rock and roof", reinforces how solid the structures are
- The earth is "wizened", meaning shrivelled with old age; it is a **barren**, hostile environment
- The poet uses **irony**, as the island has never troubled the islanders with hay, but hay would be useful to them. It seems that the island doesn't produce anything useful
- The speaker mentions that the earth has never "troubled" them to **foreshadow** the coming dangers
- This can also be interpreted as an allegory for the tensions in Northern Ireland

Lines 5–11

" – Nor are there trees

Which might prove company when it blows full

Blast: you know what I mean – leaves and branches

Can raise a tragic chorus in a gale

So that you can listen to the thing you fear

Forgetting that it pummels your house too.

But there are no trees, no natural shelter.”



Your notes

Translation

- There are no trees on the island, which would announce that the storm has arrived
- Trees themselves might actually feel like company in this **desolate** place
- They would sound like an ancient **Greek chorus**, which they would hear from the safety of their homes, even though the storm would be trying to destroy them
- This would be a welcome distraction
- But there are no natural barriers to stop or **hinder** the storm

Heaney's intention

- The poet shifts our attention to the storm that is about to attack the island
- The speaker uses a conversational tone, as if explaining things to someone sat next to him
- The storm is shown to be destructive and dangerous, but it is not **personified**
- This could indicate that, rather than the storm representing a specific thing or **entity**, it is an **abstract** threat
- It is violence itself that is destructive, regardless of who or what is causing it and why

Lines 12–19

“You might think that the sea is company,

Exploding comfortably down on the cliffs

But no: when it begins, the flung spray hits

The very windows, spits like a tame cat

Turned savage. We just sit tight while wind dives

And strafes invisibly. Space is a salvo,

We are bombarded by the empty air.

Strange, it is a huge nothing we fear.”

Translation

- The narrator tells the reader that if we think living by the sea is dramatic and comforting, then we are wrong
- When the waves hit the cliffs, the sea spray attacks the windows like a wild cat spitting at them



Your notes

- The inhabitants huddle together while the force of the wind blows violently and invisibly around the island
- The space the storm inhabits is like a military attack
- The narrator finishes by commenting that it is strange that we fear something that we cannot see

Heaney's intention

- The poet suggests that the storm has the power to take things that seem comfortable and familiar and turn them into a threat, such as a sea
- The wind is described as an attacking aeroplane, as it "dives and **strafes**"
- The poet begins to use more personification to suggest a more **malicious** nature to this natural force as if the attack is personal
- The space that the islanders inhabit becomes a "**salvo**", meaning a sudden discharge of gunfire
- This means that the people of the island are attacked by the very air around them
- We only know of a storm when it comes up against solid things; only when it comes up against material objects do we know it is there
- The last line seems to be reflecting on the nature of a storm, commenting that it is strange that the islanders' fear is of empty space, which is essentially the same as being afraid of nothing

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections - form, structure and language - it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Heaney's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these themes. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main themes, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Heaney's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The poem takes the form of one long, unbroken stanza made up of 19 lines. It is also written in **blank verse**, mostly in iambic pentameter, to reflect the conversational tone of the speaker, which contrasts with the dramatic events unfolding on the island. This links to one of the main themes of the poem: **the power of**

nature and the lack of control humans have over it. However, the poem can also be seen as an allegory of the political conflict and unrest in Northern Ireland from the late 1960s onwards



Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The power of nature	The poem is one unbroken stanza of 19 lines	This could be interpreted to represent the power of nature and the unrelenting storm
	The poet uses mostly iambic pentameter	Maintains a constant rhythm, as the speaker is acting as a spokesperson for the islanders, maintaining a conversational tone
		However, the regularity of the meter can also make the poem feel tense, as though the speaker cannot fully relax knowing what is coming
	However, there are breaks in iambic pentameter, such as the line which starts with "Blast"	These breaks can convey the strength, violence and wildness of the storm
	The poem does not use a consistent rhyme scheme	This suggests that order cannot be enforced upon nature, and humans have no way to control it
Political conflict	The poem works as an allegory, a type of extended metaphor, for The Troubles in Northern Ireland	The oncoming storm works as a metaphor for the oncoming conflict and violence
	The first 8 letters of the poem's title spells out the word "Stormont" and "island" is a homophone of "Ireland"	Stormont is the name of the building that houses the government of Northern Ireland
		The poem could be interpreted as an expression of the fear that grips a community when tensions run high and potential violence looms

Structure

Heaney uses structure and punctuation in order to emphasise **the power of nature**



Your notes

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The power of nature	The poet uses enjambment , such as in the line “-We just sit tight while wind dives/and strafes invisibly.”	This could imply the constant barrage of the storm The breathlessness from the enjambment could also represent the panicked feeling of the islanders
	There is also caesura in the poem, such as in the line “But no: when it begins,...”	This could indicate how the speaker’s conversational tone is interrupted by the power of the storm
	The poem has a cyclical structure, starting with “houses squat/good slate” and ending with “the empty air/huge nothing that we fear”	This connects the preparation for the storm at the start of the poem to the fear of the storm’s power at the end It also shows the resilience of the islanders, as storms come over and over, and the islands have to learn to live with them
		The cycle then is one of preparation, storm and recovery, which is never-ending, like nature

Language

Heaney’s use of language also reflects the key themes of **the power of nature, and conflict, violence and war**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The power of nature	The poet firstly personifies the earth by calling it “the wizened earth”	This emphasises the earth’s age and wisdom, and the respect it is due
	The storm is also personified when it “ pummels your house too”	This makes the wind sound aggressive like it is deliberately attacking the islanders


Your notes

The speaker starts confidently with the statement “We are prepared.”	The islanders are confident in their ability to withstand nature, but this also shows that they have had to adapt to resist nature; nature always has the upper hand
The poem’s title is blunt. There is no article “the” or “A”	This suggests Heaney is not writing about one storm in particular, but any storm, as we all must weather them
The speaker repeatedly refers to “we”	This further emphasises the theme of community versus isolation in the situation of a natural disaster
Heaney deliberately uses colloquialisms , such as “You might think...,” “But no:” and “You know what I mean”	This emphasises the collective nature of the poem; everyone can experience the impact of nature
The poet also uses the simile of the cat	This implies the mistaken belief that the islanders may have tamed nature, but the cat turns against its owner, suggesting that nature cannot be tamed
Conflict and violence	By using this language, Heaney shows that the islanders are under attack from nature
	It suggests the enormous power of nature, that it can achieve the same as an army in the conflict between nature and humankind
In addition, Heaney uses plosives such as “-blows full//Blast:-”	This gives a sense of violence and aggression, as nature is attacking the island like bullets
The poet uses the metaphor of the wind as an enemy fighter plane which “dives and strafes”	This further reinforces the idea of the storm deliberately attacking and bombarding the island

The major conflict in the poem is between the storm and the islanders

However, there is also the suggestion of the metaphorical conflict between the people of Ireland and the colonial powers in Britain



Your notes

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, it is not random historical facts about Seamus Heaney or the time in which the poem was written that are unrelated to the ideas in the poem. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Heaney in Storm on the Island which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Heaney explores:

- **The Power of Nature**
- **Conflict**

The Power of Nature

- Heaney was born and raised in Northern Ireland
- He knew both the natural landscape and the political one
- He wrote mostly about the landscape and **rural** life of Ireland
- The island in this poem is non-specific
 - The reader does not learn anything about the era the poem is set or the geographical location
 - This gives the poem a **mythical** and universal quality – the islanders' fear is more relatable because it isn't tied to anything specific
- The storm could be happening at any time and in any place
 - The poem can therefore be read literally as an account of humankind's fear of nature, and the power that nature holds to destroy
 - It acts as a reminder that humanity has to be prepared to survive nature
- Fear appears to be the primary force governing the lives of the island's people
- The fear of storms dictates their lives, influencing how they build their homes and their attitudes

Conflict

- Even though it is not explicit, the political situation of Northern Ireland is a key feature of Heaney's poetry
- Northern Ireland was, and to a certain extent still is, a country divided between those who would prefer it to be unified with the rest of Ireland, and those who are loyal to the UK



Your notes

- The Troubles was a conflict over the identity and status of Northern Ireland
 - Storm on the Island was published in 1966, in the early years of **The Troubles**
 - Heaney's poetry often used **folklore** and metaphor to describe the conflict
- But he is also seen as a unifying force, by emphasising the importance of community in weathering the storms
- The poet refers to "we", referencing both a person **pitted** against the elements and a person pitted against political **strife**
- The single stanza form of the poem reflects these fundamental principles of unity and equality
- The message appears to be that, whether these forces are natural or political, people have to work together as a collective otherwise they will not survive

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology.

Given that Storm on the Island explores the ideas of **the power of nature and conflict**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:

- [Storm on the Island and Ozymandias](#)
- [Storm on the Island and The Prelude](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Storm on the Island and Ozymandias

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Heaney's Storm on the Island and Shelley's Ozymandias explore the ultimate power nature has over humanity. It cannot be tamed and will outlast humanity

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show that, despite humanity's efforts, nature will always be more powerful
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	Storm on the Island	Ozymandias
	Heaney uses enjambment and caesura to reflect the speaker being interrupted by the power of the storm	Shelley uses enjambment and caesura to reflect the broken nature of Ozymandias's statue, and the power of the natural world which has both destroyed and outlived it
	There is a type of arrogance in Heaney's opening statement "We are prepared". The islanders are initially presented as mistakenly believing they have power over nature	The desert is described as " boundless and bare" and "lone and level" which communicates the vast, powerful extent of nature and its ability to outlive all other forms of power
	Nature is conveyed as an overwhelming force in which humanity fights a one-sided battle against nature's wrath	Shelley also uses the metaphor "sands stretch far away" which shows the passing of time and how time and nature can erase the power of man
	Nature cannot be tamed, just like the "tame cat" turns on its owners and spits	Ozymandias instructs his people to "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" reinforcing the idea that he believes he can threaten and overpower any other force, including nature
	Heaney connects power with isolation, as the island is isolated during and due to the storm	Shelley connects power with isolation, as the isolation of the statue shows loss of power
	In both poems, nature is presented as unrelenting and endless	
	Both poems also comment on the impermanence of power, as the storm eventually goes away, and the corruption of power ultimately leads to Ozymandias's downfall	

Differences:

Topic sentence	The theme of conflict is explored differently in both poems, with Heaney commenting on political conflict as an ongoing storm, whereas Shelley explores the conflict between an individual's desire for power and legacy and the futility of this endeavour
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	Storm on the Island	Ozymandias
	Heaney's poem can be interpreted as an allegory for The Troubles in Northern Ireland and how this political storm impacts people	Shelley suggests that individuals should not rely on pride and self-made power, as ultimately you can become forgotten and unidentifiable
	In Storm on the Island, nature is symbolised through the sea and the storm, and its power causes fear in the islanders	In Ozymandias, nature is represented by the desert and how it can wear away and destroy any lasting testament to human power over time
	Heaney uses the semantic field of war and connects the power of the storm to aggression	In Ozymandias, the military power of Ramesses II is connected to aggression
	The message related to the power of nature is different in both poems. Even though both poems suggest the ultimate power of nature, Shelley portrays nature as something that destroys humankind, whereas Heaney's storm passes and the islanders are built of strong stuff, able to withstand the storm	

Storm on the Island and The Prelude

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Heaney's Storm on the Island and the extract from The Prelude by Wordsworth explore the power of nature and the conflict between humanity and the natural world we inhabit

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems explore mankind's real and symbolic conflict when faced with the vast power of nature, which ultimately always wins	
Evidence and analysis	Storm on the Island	
	Heaney uses military metaphors of "bombarded", "blast", "salvo" and "strafe" which all relate to human air attacks, reminding the reader of the limited power of man-made machines when compared with all-powerful nature	Wordsworth also uses violent language, such as "struck and struck again" to reflect the darkening mood


Your notes

The power of nature is expressed as a storm, which in the end is a “huge nothing that we fear”	The mountain is used by Wordsworth as a metaphor for the full might of nature. The repetition of “huge” emphasises its overwhelming quality
Both poems show that nature is something to be feared	
Storm on the Island suggests we fear nature because we underestimate the violence of nature and its effect on us	The Prelude shows that nature is something to be feared because we offend nature by attempting to manipulate it
In Storm on the Island, the islanders realise their ultimate inability to control the storm, and it will always come again	In The Prelude, the speaker realises their own insignificance via their spiritual development
Both poems illustrate how powerful nature is and that humans mean very little in comparison	

Differences:

Topic sentence	The conflict with nature is shown differently in each poem, as in <i>Storm on the Island</i> it is physical, whereas in <i>The Prelude</i> it is psychological	
Evidence and analysis	Storm on the Island	The Prelude
	In Heaney's poem, the islanders are being physically attacked by the storm	In Wordsworth's poem, nature is inciting fear and redefining their view of the world
	Heaney writes in the present tense, giving the impression that the storm is happening right now and the islanders are prepared to deal with the urgency of events	The Prelude is written as a past-tense memoir giving the impression of a seemingly idyllic “summer evening”
	This poem illustrates the power of nature in an obviously harsh way	The Prelude shows the power of nature in a more subtle and slower way

Although there is violent and harsh language in both poems, The Prelude is more romantic and **gothic**, whereas Storm on the Island uses more explosive language



Your notes



Your notes

Bayonet Charge

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a "closed book" exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things about each poem will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to Bayonet Charge by Ted Hughes, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Hughes's intention and message

Bayonet Charge in a nutshell

Bayonet Charge was written by British poet Ted Hughes and focuses on the thoughts and behaviour of a nameless soldier in World War I. The soldier is depicted mid-charge, and describes the experience of going "over the top", which meant soldiers climbing out of their trenches to charge an enemy position through **No Man's Land**, with the aim of capturing an enemy trench.

The poem tries to step inside the body and mind of the soldier having to carry out one of the most terrifying acts of war: charging straight into enemy rifle fire. The poem explores the conflict between a sense of **patriotism** and the pointlessness of war, even though Hughes himself wasn't alive during World War I. He

grew up in a **post-war era**, and his poems were a way for him to make sense of the events he never saw but which impacted him and the country.



Your notes

Bayonet Charge breakdown

Lines 1–8

“Suddenly he awoke and was running – raw

In raw-seamed hot khaki, his sweat heavy,

Stumbling across a field of clods towards a green hedge

That dazzled with rifle fire, hearing

Bullets smacking the belly out of the air –

He lugged a rifle numb as a smashed arm;

The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye

Sweating like molten iron from the centre of his chest, –”

Translation

- The poem opens **in media res** – in the middle of the action
- He is described as “suddenly” awake, suggesting that he could have been asleep or daydreaming
- However, it is more likely that this is a **metaphorical** way of saying that the soldier suddenly became aware of the horror and chaos around him
- The figure is clearly a soldier, as he is dressed in his **khaki** uniform, which can rub his skin raw
- “Raw” probably also references the raw emotion of fear he is experiencing
- The soldier stumbles across lumps of earth towards a hedge
- Even though the hedge is lit up with rifle fire, he continues to run towards it anyway, with bullets flying all around him
- He struggles to run with the weight of his rifle
- The final two lines suggest an actual tear in the soldier’s eye, from the pain, fear and **exertion**
- But this could also refer to the loss of his sense of patriotism, painfully leaving his body like **molten** iron

Hughes’s intention

- The fact that Hughes deliberately starts the poem in the middle of the action **foreshadows** the soldier’s realisation that comes later in the poem: that patriotism and fighting for one’s country is actually a hollow concept that means little in reality



Your notes

- It also is a device designed to confuse the reader, reflecting the atmosphere of confusion and disorientation the soldier is experiencing
- The repetition of the word “raw” emphasises the discomfort and pain of the experience, as well as the soldier’s emotions, which are strong and undisguised
- The description of the rifle fire that “dazzled” suggests the soldier’s vision is blurred to begin with
- The fact that the hedge is “green” seems out of place, reflecting the idea that this war happened in fields and out in the countryside, which does not feel natural
- Hughes **personifies** the bullets as violent and terrifying
- The change in the way the soldier feels about his position begins to be **symbolised** by the weight of his rifle
- The fact that the “patriotic tear” was no longer in his eye, but coming “from the centre of his chest” in the form of sweat, reveals that while the soldier was once proud to wear his uniform and carry his weapon held high, with a tear of patriotism in his eye, he was now not feeling any sense of patriotism or pride
- He can only feel the weight of his bayonet and the hot sweat on his chest, as though he were numb

Lines 9–15

“In bewilderment then he almost stopped –

In what cold clockwork of the stars and the nations

Was he the hand pointing that second? He was running

Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs

Listening between his footfalls for the reason

Of his still running, and his foot hung like

Statuary in mid-stride. Then the shot-slashed furrows”

Translation

- In his confusion, the soldier nearly stops
- He wonders what cold and unfeeling forces, be they **fate** or politics, are governing his actions, as if he were nothing more than the hand of a clock
- He runs like a man suspended in the dark, hoping to find the answer in the act of running itself
- Time seems to slow down, and his foot hangs in the middle of his stride as if it were a statue
- The “shot-slashed furrows” are the **trenches** dug into the battlefield

Hughes's intention

- In this stanza, the soldier suddenly comes to his senses
- He stands in “bewilderment” as he begins to wonder why he is there
- Hughes’s reference to “cold” suggests something that is emotionless and unfeeling, and his reference to “clockwork” indicates timing
- This suggests that it is nothing more than bad timing that has brought him to this place
- “The stars” refers to fate or **destiny**, implying that it was simply the way the stars were aligned at the time of his birth that determined his place in this current war
- “The nations” could refer to politics or the countries at war with one another
- Ultimately, the soldier believes he is nothing more than a cog in the machine
- The answer to why he is there does not come to him, so his feet simply stop mid-stride
- Hughes here is commenting on the reality and futility of war, especially to those actually involved in it



Lines 16–23

“Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame

And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide

Open silent, its eyes standing out.

He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,

King, honour, human dignity, etcetera

Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm

To get out of that blue crackling air

His terror’s touchy dynamite.”

Translation

- The previous stanza continues, personifying the furrows as throwing up a “yellow hare” frightened from its hiding place by the gunfire
- The creature is clearly terrified, as it “rolled like a flame” and “crawled in a threshing circle”
- The soldier pushes on, pointing the blade fixed to his rifle towards the green hedge
- All notions of patriotism, fighting for the king or honour, fall away from the soldier, who cannot afford to entertain such luxuries in the chaos of battle



Your notes

- All that matters for him is to get out of the gunfire
- The air explodes with blue light all around him, as he nervously reaches for his dynamite

Hughes's intention

- The hare is the only other living creature that Hughes mentions in this poem
- This innocent animal is caught up in the horror, reminding us that war is the opposite to what is natural and good
- Hughes suggests, with its mouth "open silent" and "its eyes standing out", that the hare's last moments are spent in pain, terror and fear, much like the soldiers themselves
- Therefore, the hare serves as a metaphor for the devastating impact war has on the natural world
- Hughes could have also used the hare as a **euphemism** of the actual horror of death on a battlefield in World War I
- Green as a colour is often used as a symbol of hope, so maybe if the soldier makes it there, he believes he will be safe
- The "crackling" air suggests there is gunfire all around him
- Hughes ends the poem on a cliff-hanger, with the soldier on **adrenaline**-fuelled alertness, feeling for his dynamite
- His dynamite could also mean his bayonet - ultimately a weapon which has the ability to kill
- It could also imply that the soldier himself has been **dehumanised** and turned into nothing more than a killing machine
- We never learn of his fate

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections - form, structure and language - it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Hughes's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these themes. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main themes, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Hughes's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

Bayonet Charge is written in the **third person singular**, allowing the reader to focus on the individual impact of war by showing the way war impacts a single person. Even though war may be seen to be beneficial nationally, and serving in a war has traditionally been seen as honourable, the poem demonstrates that this does not excuse the suffering it inflicts on individual soldiers. This then reflects the key theme of **patriotism and duty versus the harsh reality of war**.



Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The reality of war	The poem is written in free verse , not constrained by a particular rhythm or rhyme	This reflects the unpredictable and chaotic nature of war
	The poet's use of the third person singular emphasises the sense of isolation felt by soldiers in war	As the protagonist is the only human in the poem, his isolation helps to intensify the emotion and sense of suffering
		This shows that, despite fighting in an army, a battle is about self-preservation and, ultimately, the soldiers are on their own
	The soldier appears to be immune to the death of other soldiers. It takes the suffering of a hare to break his trance-like state	The soldier is presented as desensitised and like a machine, reflecting the dehumanising nature of conflict

Structure

Hughes structures the poem into three stanzas, encompassing a short moment in time for the soldier, but uses **enjambment** and **caesura** to mirror the panic and chaos he experiences, and the chaotic nature of war. The poem reads as quite fragmented, serving to confuse the reader. This is representative of the **confusion and struggle experienced by the soldier**, and the **chaos of war**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The chaos of war	The poem opens in media res , with no explanation or warning of what is to come	Hughes is intending to mirror the shock and confusion felt by the soldiers going into battle
	The three stanzas blend into one another	This conveys a sense of movement, the way the soldier moves through the poem, which is fractured and fragmented



Your notes

	This further adds to the sense of disorientation the soldier feels
Hughes's use of enjambment quickens the pace in parts of the poem	This maintains the momentum of the soldier's movement, as well as emphasising the sense of panic the soldier experiences
The use of enjambment in the first line in particular, "-raw/in raw seamed hot khaki," emphasises the repetition of "raw"	By Hughes leaving the word "raw" hanging at the end of the line, he invites the reader to reflect upon that rawness and its multiple meanings
The poet also uses caesura , such as in the line "Was he the hand pointing that second?" to slow the pace of the poem	This draws the reader's attention to the key idea of the contrast between the idealism of patriotism and the reality of fighting and killing
The use of caesura in the second stanza continues to pause the pace of the poem	This has the effect of pausing to consider the philosophical meaning of war, which ultimately seems pointless, suggesting that war cannot be fully understood
The middle stanza differs from the first and the last, in that it slows the pace of the poem	<p>The first and final stanzas are primarily full of action, whereas in the second stanza time seems to stand still</p> <p>This reflects the moment when the soldier comes to the realisation of the actual futility of war</p>

Language

Hughes employs rich but complex imagery which can make the poem difficult to read, and which highlights **the difficult reality of war**, as well as its **conflict with the natural world**. This is further reinforced by the use of pastoral imagery, suggesting that it is not just the soldiers who are victims of war, but also the natural world. The poet also uses language to explore the theme of **the reality of war**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention



Your notes

War versus the natural world	Pastoral imagery, such as the “green hedge” and the “yellow hare”, are juxtaposed with the violent language of war	This shows the conflict between what is happening and the surroundings
	The poem is set in the countryside, as the soldier charges across “a field of clods”	This shows how an area of nature has become a battleground
		Instead of sustaining life, the earth provides dangerous obstacles for the soldiers to trip over
	The hare is used as a symbol of the soldiers’ collective suffering	Hughes projects the violence of war onto an innocent creature
		The soldier has become immune to the death of other humans, but the image of the hare’s suffering shocks him out of his trance and into action
		The infliction of pain on an innocent animal highlights the injustice of war, as the victims are not just the soldiers, but innocents and even nature itself
The reality of war	Hughes personifies the air as being attacked by bullets	Here, the poet is suggesting that nature is also a victim. Which is reinforced by “shot-slash furrows” in stanza two
		This implies the field is literally wounded by the bullets
To explore the theme of the reality of war, Hughes uses mechanical imagery, such as “cold clockwork”		This implies the cold, calculated nature of war, and that the soldiers are treated as parts of a bigger machine



Your notes

Hughes employs language from the semantic field of body parts and violence, as the soldier's rifle is "numb as a smashed arm"	This dehumanises the soldier, and blurs the lines between what is human and what is weapon
	This suggests that humans are used as weapons in war
Hughes also explores the idea of the loss of patriotism via the "patriotic tear" that turns into sweat in the simile "like molten iron from the centre of his chest"	This suggests the patriotism he previously held in his heart painfully leaves his chest, as the soldier is pained by the realisation that he was disillusioned by the idealism of war

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, context is not random historical facts about Ted Hughes or World War I that are unrelated to the ideas in the poem. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Hughes in Bayonet Charge which relate to power and conflict. Hughes's ultimate message in this poem is about the pointless waste and **futility** of war, which gives us the sub-heading for context:

- **The Reality and Futility of War**

The Reality and Futility of War

- Hughes never actually fought in a war
- He was, however, very inspired by the poetry of **Wilfred Owen**, and borrowed many of his ideas as a way of understanding and describing the realities of war
- Hughes's father did fight in World War I, which left him emotionally **traumatised** for life
 - Life in the trenches of World War I was terrifying and extremely tough
 - It is thought that in this poem, Hughes wanted to highlight the brutality of trench warfare as a tribute to his father's suffering, as well as to **memorialise** the war as a warning for future generations
- The setting of the poem is not made explicit
 - This gives the poem more universal appeal
- Hughes also tries to make his soldier come alive in a way that all readers could identify with
 - As his poetry was not drawn from direct combat experience, but rather from the post-war cultural atmosphere, Hughes explores the collective memory of the war



Your notes

- The soldier's realisation in the poem of the pointlessness and **absurdity** of war mirrors the shift in the public mood during the war
 - This went from nervous excitement in the beginning to weariness and depression by the end
- The poem also conveys the feeling of being subject to destiny and the soldier being a pawn in some greater game
- Ultimately, Hughes presents war as horrific, wasteful and **futile**

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is, therefore, essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that Bayonet Charge focuses mainly on **the realities of war and patriotism**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- **Bayonet Charge and The Charge of the Light Brigade**
- **Bayonet Charge and Exposure**

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Bayonet Charge and The Charge of the Light Brigade

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to compare how those involved in war are treated. In The Charge of the Light Brigade, Tennyson focuses on the collective, whereas in Bayonet Charge, the focus is on the individual and his sense of isolation. However, in both poems, the soldiers' actions are ultimately out of their own control.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems are written from an outsider's perspective, inspired by the experiences of those who ultimately did not have a choice in what they had to do	
Evidence and analysis	Bayonet Charge	The Charge of the Light Brigade



Your notes

Neither Hughes nor Tennyson ever experienced the actual brutality of war, but were both inspired to write their poems through other people's experiences

The "charge" in Hughes' poem focuses on a frightened individual soldier who also does not have a choice in the situation in which he finds himself	The "charge" in Tennyson's poem relates to 600 men who do not have a choice but to obey their orders
"In what cold clockwork of the stars and nations//Was he the hand pointing that second?" shows that this soldier feels stuck in that time and that there is no escape	"Theirs not to reason why" shows that the soldiers obey their orders without question
The situation the soldier finds himself in is out of his control and is also his fate	In this way, the soldiers' actions can be viewed as out of their control and also as their fate and destiny
A sense of duty and the propaganda of war must have prompted this soldier to sign up in the first place	
The soldier is armed with a bayonet , and yet is "dazzled with rifle fire"	In The Charge of the Light Brigade, the soldiers are armed only with swords against the artillery fire of the Russians
Both poems seem to suggest that soldiers are trained with a reflex action that enables them to obey orders instinctively, becoming killing machines without individual thought	
The soldiers in both poems could be considered to be expendable , and exploited by those in charge who give the orders	

Differences:

Topic sentence	Although both poems imply criticism of the leaders of war, the idea of patriotism is celebrated in Tennyson's poem, whereas it is challenged in Bayonet Charge	
Evidence and analysis	Bayonet Charge	The Charge of the Light Brigade
	This poem is narrated right in the middle of the action, emphasising the sense of disorientation	The story in the poem is told chronologically , in a ballad form to



and chaos the soldier experiences	memorialise the soldiers and their actions
Hughes challenges the perception of honour in the line "In bewilderment then he almost stopped."	Tennyson seems to praise the blind obedience of the soldiers in the rhetorical question "When can their glory fade?"
Hughes was a relative unknown when Bayonet Charge was published, allowing him more freedom to openly criticise the mechanisms of conflict	Any criticism of authority is subtle in this poem, due to Tennyson's position as poet laureate
The idea of patriotism is undermined via the lines "The patriotic tear that had brimmed in his eye"	The soldiers do not question their role or their orders in this poem
This contrasts the idealism of patriotism with the reality of fighting and killing	Their patriotic duty is to "do and die", and they are celebrated in the poem for doing so
The soldier in this poem questions his role in the conflict	This celebration of their sacrifice is reinforced by the "glory", "honour" and "noble" of the final stanza
The dismissive "etcetera" in the line "King, honour, human dignity etcetera" undermines the usual rhetoric of war, as all of these things ultimately do not matter in the fear of the moment	

Bayonet Charge and Exposure

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to compare how a sense of duty imposed by patriotism disguises the true nature of war, and the harsh reality of actually taking part in a conflict. Both poems also reference the impact war has on nature.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems portray war as terrifying experiences which those involved have no escape from
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	Bayonet Charge	Exposure
	This poem focuses on one person's emotional struggle with their actions	This poem focuses on the mental toll the monotony and relentlessness of war can take on the soldiers involved
	Hughes displays the disorientating and dehumanising qualities of war, likening the soldier to a cog in a bigger machine and implying that soldiers are nothing more than weapons in the hands of greater powers	Owen also dehumanises the subjects through the indifference of the men to their dead and their "half-known faces"
	The poet presents his soldier as powerless, even in the face of the realisation of the pointlessness of the conflict and what he is doing	The narrator questions the point of war and what they are doing there in the first place in the refrain "But nothing happens" and the use of rhetorical questions
	In both poems, the soldier appears to question the point of living when one is living to die without cause or meaning	
	In both poems, the soldiers seem to have lost faith in God and their country	

Differences:

Topic sentence	Whilst both poems reference the impact war has on nature, Owen's first hand experience of war explores the realities of prolonged exposure to the elements in the trenches, whereas for Hughes, nature is seen as a victim of war	
Evidence and analysis	Bayonet Charge	Exposure
	The structure of this poem presents war as chaotic and unpredictable	The pace of this poem presents the actual experience of war as tedious and monotonous



Your notes

Nature still represents hope in this poem, with the “green hedge”	Nature is viewed and personified as the main enemy, attacking the men. Mother nature is likened to a military leader amassing an army against the soldiers
Hughes did not have direct experience of war	Owen directly experienced, and was killed in, World War I, giving the poem an authentic perspective
This is reflected in the use of the third person perspective	Owen’s language is therefore much more reflective of the soldier’s lived experiences, and is therefore more brutal, such as “merciless”, “twitching agonies” and “misery”



Your notes

Remains

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper – printed in full – and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. As this is a “closed book” exam, you will not have access to the other poems, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things about each poem will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to Simon Armitage’s Remains, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer’s methods:** an exploration of the poet’s techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A ‘translation’ of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Armitage’s intention and message

Remains in a nutshell

This poem was written by **poet laureate** Simon Armitage as part of a collection of poems inspired by a Channel 4 documentary called “The Not Dead”, shown in 2007. The documentary was about the impact of war on soldiers returning home and the poem was created in order to raise awareness of **PTSD** and encourage better recognition of the condition in society.

The first person narrator is a soldier fighting during the Iraq war, who is haunted – even after he returns home – by his involvement in the shooting of a bank **looter**. Armitage uses a conversational style and vivid imagery



Your notes

to offer a realistic portrait of a person hugely affected by grief, guilt and trauma. The poem, therefore, explores the effects of trauma both during and after active duty and suggests that the effects of war linger long after the soldiers leave the battlefield, leading to inner conflict and **turmoil**.

Remains breakdown

Lines 1–4

"On another occasion, we get sent out

to tackle looters raiding a bank.

And one of them legs it up the road,

probably armed, possibly not."

Translation

- The poem starts with the speaker in the middle of a conversation, implying that he has been talking about his experiences for quite a long time
- The phrase "we get sent out" indicates that the speaker is working as part of a team or unit, acting under somebody else's orders
- The term "looters" is normally given to thieves raiding buildings during war time
- The speaker uses the slang term "legs it", indicating that they run away quickly
- The speaker is unsure whether the man is carrying a weapon or not

Armitage's intention

- The poet uses a **colloquial** opening to the poem, as if the soldier is speaking to an unknown third party
- This suggests the soldier has to deal with things like this on a regular basis and the speaker's tone implies an element of **weariness**
- Armitage does not believe there is glory or honour in war, so this is a very human poem focusing on the realities of conflict
- The use of slang could imply the speaker is quite young and not emotionally prepared for what will come next
- This may be the poet making a social comment that soldiers are launched into situations that they don't fully understand, but they just have to get on with it
- The final line of the stanza is important, as it becomes clear later in the poem that the speaker is overwhelmed by the guilt of potentially killing an unarmed man

Lines 5–8



Your notes

"Well myself and somebody else and somebody else

are all of the same mind,

so all three of us open fire.

Three of a kind all letting fly, and I swear"

Translation

- The speaker cannot remember who was with him at the time, but there were three of them
- Their training and instinct means that they all think the same thing at the same time – that the looter is a threat
- The simple but brutal statement that "all three of us open fire" demonstrates that the soldiers have stopped being individual, free-thinking beings, but rather a **entity** that reacts on instinct and training
- This is reinforced by the description of them as "three of a kind"
- "All letting fly" tells us that all three soldiers open fire on the looter simultaneously

Armitage's intention

- Hazy recollection as a result of a traumatic event is commonly reported, so it is not unusual for the soldier to not remember the details of who was with him at the time
- It is probably not really significant anyway – the soldiers have all blurred into one
- This is emphasised by the fact they are "all of the same mind", suggesting they are somehow joined together by war
- This strips them of their individuality and suggests they are cogs in the larger mechanism of an army
- The horror of the final two lines in this stanza is deliberately understated, as though it were an everyday occurrence
- The stanza finishes with an **enjambed** line, returning the focus to the speaker, re-humanising him

Lines 9–12

I see every round as it rips through his life –

I see broad daylight on the other side.

So we've hit this looter a dozen times

and he's there on the ground, sort of inside out,"

Translation

- Now the soldier focuses on every individual bullet hitting the man, tearing him to pieces



Your notes

- They hit the looter 12 times
- He falls to the ground, with parts of his internal organs spilling out

Armitage's intention

- The poet suggests that now the soldier alone seems to understand the consequences of their actions
- The continued colloquial tone helps to give more of an impression of the speaker being young and inexperienced at life
- This could be taken as the moment the soldier loses his innocence, as the gruesome imagery transitions from the colloquial to the emotional

Lines 13–16

“pain itself, the image of agony.

One of my mates goes by

and tosses his guts back into his body.

Then he's carted off in the back of a lorry.”

Translation

- The poem continues with the vivid image of the looter in extreme pain
- We are introduced to a second person, the soldier's “mate”, who casually walks by and “tosses” his internal organs back into his body
- The use of the verb “tosses” denotes a lack of care or respect
- The looter is then placed in the back of a lorry and driven away
- It is unclear whether he is still alive or dead at this point

Armitage's intention

- This stanza reflects the way that soldiers often have to disengage with what is happening in order to cope with it
- It also dehumanises the looter, who remains nameless and who gets “carted off” in the back of a lorry as though he were an object
- On a wider scale, Armitage is commenting on how conflict causes the **devaluation** of human life, where gruesome death can be seen as an everyday occurrence

Lines 17–20

“End of story, except not really.

His blood-shadow stays on the street, and out on patrol

I walk right over it week after week.

Then I'm home on leave. But I blink"



Your notes

Translation

- Although that should be the end of that story, it isn't, as the soldier is haunted by the memory of the event
- The looter's blood stain remains on the street where the soldier has to walk
- It is an imprint of his existence which the soldier cannot escape from
- Then the soldier is sent home for a break

Armitage's intention

- Armitage implies that death stains a person's conscience and memory just as blood stains the ground
- The "blood-shadow" is indicating to the soldier that there will be no real way to forget or move on from the event
- The use of **caesura** in the final line suggests that going home should be the end of things, but is followed by "but" which tells us it isn't
- The use of the word "blink" has **connotations** of waking up, as though from a dream or a daydream
- The use of enjambment suggests the merging of reality and memory

Lines 21–24

"and he bursts again through the doors of the bank.

Sleep, and he's probably armed, possibly not.

Dream, and he's torn apart by a dozen rounds.

And the drink and the drugs won't flush him out – "

Translation

- The poem breaks down into a more **stream of consciousness** form, as the speaker recalls what he sees every time he blinks
- He relives the looter bursting through the doors of the bank again
- While sleeping, the speaker wonders if the man was armed or not
- His dreams are filled with the image of the looter's body being ripped apart by bullets
- The speaker has turned to drink and drugs, but even these don't stop the flashbacks

Armitage's intention

- The poet tells us that the speaker cannot find any peace
- He continues to be haunted by what happened and the flashbacks of it
- It is as though the speaker is reliving the event over and over, hence the repetition of previously used lines
- The speaker is clearly suffering from PTSD and does not seem to be receiving any support for it
- He just has to live with the memories
- Armitage uses a military term in “flush him out” to describe the soldier’s efforts in trying to dislodge the memory of the dead looter
- To “flush out” means to try to get the enemy to break cover, suggesting that the memory is an enemy in itself



Lines 25–28

“he’s here in my head when I close my eyes,
dug in behind enemy lines,
not left for dead in some distant, sun-stunned, sand-smothered land
or six-feet under in desert sand,”

Translation

- The use of military terms continues, as the looter is a constant presence in the speaker’s head
- He has “dug in”, meaning the memory of the looter is determined never to leave the speaker
- The looter is not lying half-dead in some far off hot land, or buried in a grave in a desert

Armitage’s intention

- The poet shows us that the memory is **entrenched** in the mind of the speaker, **metaphorically** forever stuck behind enemy lines
- The use of the term “left for dead” also implies doubt as to whether the looter was actually dead when he was thrown into the back of the lorry
- This also seems to haunt the narrator
- The hazy, almost dream-like description of “some distant, sun-stunned, sand-smothered land” implies that if something has happened so far away, it should not still be having an impact
- The fact that Iraq itself is not specifically mentioned means that this could be applied to any conflict

Lines 29–30

“but near to the knuckle, here and now,
his bloody life in my bloody hands.”



Translation

- The narrator then reveals the memory is “near to the knuckle”, meaning that it is not a distant memory, but it is immediate and risky
- The memory is causing him pain and making it impossible for the speaker to move on
- The reference to “bloody” could mean literal blood, or a curse, suggesting that this event has cursed him
- The speaker’s hands are metaphorically stained with the looter’s blood

Armitage’s intention

- Armitage intentionally ends the poem without resolution
- This mirrors the lack of escape, **respite** or resolution the soldiers affected by PTSD experience for years, or even over their entire lifetime, after the event
- The title of the poem, “Remains”, can mean the physical remains of the murdered looter, and also the stubborn determination of the memories that refuse to leave the narrator alone

Writer’s Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes of the poem and then evaluating how Armitage’s choices of language, structure and form contribute to these themes. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet’s main themes, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Armitage’s intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

Remains is written in the form of a **dramatic monologue** in the present tense, made up primarily of regular four-line stanzas. However, despite this regularity, there is nothing normal about the rhythm, rhyme or

content. The use of a very regular, ordinary form makes the content of the poem seem **mundane**, like a normal occurrence. The lack of rhyme, along with structural elements such as enjambment, imply the chaos and turmoil underneath. Herein lies the **conflict in the poem: an extraordinary event which has such lasting implications on the individual, discussed in such a normal, conversational way.**


Your notes

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Complex and imbalanced relationships	The first seven stanzas are made up of unrhymed quatrains	This gives the poem the appearance of order and regularity
	It finishes with an unrhymed couplet	This would normally indicate resolution in a poem, but here nothing is resolved
	The speaker is trying to keep things orderly, but ultimately fails to do so	It is as if the speaker has nothing left to say
	The poem is written in free verse , with lines that vary in length and rhythm	This makes the poem feel casual and conversational, as though it's part of a longer conversation
		Despite the horrific, everyday realities of war, the language does not glorify what is happening
	The poem is narrated in the present tense, despite the speaker re-telling an event that has happened in the past	This creates the idea that the speaker is still living in this moment, and re-living the traumatic event

Structure

Armitage uses enjambment and caesura to add to the conversational style of the poem, but also to fragment it. This sense of confusion is further emphasised by the fact that the poem starts with the **connective** "another", as if the reader is entering part way through a longer story-telling. The speaker is unnamed, meaning this could be about any soldier in any conflict. The narrator's thoughts and feelings unravel further as the poem progresses, reflecting his **inner conflict and turmoil**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention



Your notes

Inner conflict and turmoil	At the start of the poem, the speaker shares the blame of the event with others, such as in the line "all three of us"	The repeated references to there being other people present seems to allude to the speaker wishing to lessen his sense of responsibility
	The focus of the poem shifts to the speaker individually from the phrase "I swear//"	The narrator not only accepts his role and responsibility for the actions, but blames himself entirely
		Armitage here is referencing how PTSD can alter how a person views past events and memories
	The poet uses enjambment to make the speaker's thoughts flow into one another, such as in the line "But I blink//and he bursts in again..."	This merges the past and the present, dreams and reality, meaning there is no escape for the soldier
	The use of caesura in the line "Then I'm home on leave. But I blink//" implies finality	Going home should be the end of this event and its impact on him, but the use of the connective "But" suggests it isn't

Language

Armitage not only contrasts colloquial language with gruesome imagery, but uses language to demonstrate the **loss of individuality and humanity in war**, and the **lasting psychological impact war can have on individuals**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Loss of humanity	The poet uses colloquial language to talk about a horrific event	This suggests that soldiers become desensitised to the horrific reality of war
	The disturbing imagery used to describe the act, such as "sort of inside out" to describe the looter's internal	The speaker's use of everyday language highlights that this is an ordinary person carrying out extraordinary acts



Your notes

	organs, suggests that war normalises extreme violence	
	Soldiers are used as tools of war. The phrases "three of a kind" and "all of the same mind" suggest that all the men are trained to think as one	Soldiers are not supposed to question their orders, or the morality of what they are being asked to do
		It is only afterwards that the soldier begins to consider the full implications of what he did
	The shot man is only ever referred to as the "looter"	This removes the element of humanity from this person, which may be another attempt by the speaker to lessen the sense of responsibility he feels about what he did
Psychological impact of war	Armitage uses anaphora in "probably armed, possibly not" suggesting internal conflict over whether the soldier's action was justified	This technique mirrors the repetition of the image of the bullets ripping through the looter in the soldier's mind
		He turns it over and over in an endless cycle of traumatic memories, which is what can happen with PTSD
	References to blood are repeated in the poem	This suggests that blood symbolises the speaker's guilt, as something that he will never be able to erase

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, context is not random historical facts about Simon Armitage, or the Iraq war that are unrelated to the ideas in the poem. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Armitage in Remains which relate to power and conflict.

Armitage's intention in this poem was to explore the reality of war and its lasting impact on those involved, which gives us the sub-heading for context:

- **The Nature of War and its Impact**

The Nature of War and its Impact



Your notes

- Remains is part of a collection of poems called "The Not Dead":
 - These poems focus on the **testimonies** of ex-soldiers who had served in several conflicts
 - This particular poem was based on the stories of a young soldier who fought in Basra, Iraq
 - Armitage himself has never been to war, so his poetry is based entirely on other people's experiences
- However, the speaker in the poem is not named, nor a gender identified:
 - This helps the speaker feel like an everyman or everywoman
 - In other words, just a regular person thrown into facing horrifying circumstances and situations
 - This idea is further supported by the use of colloquial language and British slang
 - Armitage wanted to highlight what soldiers experience compared to the general population
- Armitage also does not identify a specific war, although the references to the desert suggest the Middle East:
 - The references to machine guns and trucks suggest that this is a tale about modern warfare
 - The soldiers involved in Middle Eastern conflict were subject to heavy casualties
 - Many have suffered severe mental health issues following their return home
 - The poem relates some of the symptoms of PTSD, such as disturbed sleep and flashbacks:
 - Armitage, therefore, explores the idea that, regardless of how much time has passed, it is no healer when it comes to soldiers who have been psychologically scarred by conflict
 - In a more abstract sense, the poem is also set in the speaker's mind
 - Ultimately, the poem focuses on the reality and horror of warfare, and the moral **ambiguity** which so often features in decisions that are made in the heat of battle
 - This is referenced as well in the imagery of blood in the final couplet, symbolising the guilt the characters feel

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is, therefore, essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that Remains focuses mainly on **the lasting impact of war**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [Remains and Bayonet Charge](#)



Your notes

▪ **Remains and War Photographer**

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Remains and Bayonet Charge

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison allows an exploration of how an individual soldier's experience of conflict and war is presented, as well as its psychological impact.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems explore the psychological impact of being an active soldier in war	
Evidence and analysis	Remains	Bayonet Charge
	The poem starts with the speaker in the middle of recounting his personal experience of war	The poem opens in media res , in the middle of the action, with the soldier either literally or metaphorically awakening
	The poet utilises gruesome imagery, such as "tosses his guts back in his body", to convey how horrific the reality of this situation is	The poet uses vivid and violent imagery, such as the bullets "smacking the belly out of the air" to convey the brutality of war
	The psychological impact of war is explored via the symptoms and lasting impact of PTSD	Similarly, in this poem, the psychological impact of war is explored via the soldier realising the futility and pointlessness of war
	In Remains, the soldier acts as one with his comrades on instinct, with their training kicking in. They are not individuals	In this poem, the soldier is merely a cog in a larger mechanism, unsure what he is actually doing there



Your notes

In both poems, the soldier is unknown, and the specific war is not named, serving as a universal soldier in a universal conflict

In both cases, the poets themselves had never personally experienced war

Differences:

Topic sentence	Whilst both poems explore the horrific reality of war, Remains is focused on the lasting impact on the individual, whereas Bayonet Charge also explores the impact on nature	
Evidence and analysis	Remains	Bayonet Charge
	This poem is recounting an event that has happened in the past, although the memories make it seem as though it is still happening	This poem is written in the present tense, in the middle of the action, adding to the sense of confusion and fear
	The speaker's doubts and sense of confusion are focused on his actions and his own feelings of guilt	The speaker's doubts in this poem are focused more on the futility of his actions and how there is no honour or glory in war
	This poem concentrates more on the lasting mental impact of war on the individual	Hughes also comments in this poem on how war upsets the natural world, as represented by the "yellow hare" and "green hedge"

War Photographer and Remains**Comparison in a nutshell:**

Both Duffy's War Photographer and Armitage's Remains highlight the suffering inflicted through haunting memories in the wake of war.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	In both poems, the psychological impact of war has lasting effects
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	Remains	War Photographer
	In Remains, the speaker is haunted by the memory of a horrific event he was partly responsible for	In Duffy's poem, the narrator describes a photographer reliving the horrors of "a hundred agonies" as he develops photographs from " spools of suffering"
	The speaker is unable to escape this memory, as even "the drink and the drugs won't flush him out"	The photographer sees a "half-formed ghost" twisting before his eyes, suggesting he is haunted by the suffering he has witnessed
	Despite the use of a couplet at the end of the poem, there is no resolution for the soldier. The memory stays as fresh as the "here and now"	The speaker in War Photographer acknowledges the futility of his job as he returns to yet another warzone at the end of the poem, aware of the indifferent response the public will have
	In both poems, vivid or gruesome imagery is used to reinforce the harsh reality of conflict and its effects on individuals	
	The poems' protagonists are both caught between the present and past throughout the poem, suggesting the relentless nature of their trauma	

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poets explore the suffering of individuals reliving memories of conflict, the poets present different perspectives	
Evidence and analysis	Remains	War Photographer
	In Remains, the first person perspective conveys how personal his psychological pain is	The third-person perspective of the photographer is more distant and detached
	In Armitage's poem, the speaker slowly unravels as the poem progresses, showing symptoms of PTSD	Although the photographer is haunted by the memories, his tone is one of apathy and resignation
	The war continues to be fought in the speaker's head, via flashbacks	Wars will continue to be fought, as demonstrated by the fact the speaker returns to a warzone at the

and the reliving of the memories	end of the poem
For the soldier, he will never forget what he did or the memories, as the looter is "in my head when I close my eyes"	Duffy also suggests that the public easily forget the images of war they see in the newspapers, as "The reader's eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers"
Although both poets criticise the trauma associated with conflict, Duffy's speaker conveys a tone of detachment and apathy which contrasts with the emotional and poignant tone of Armitage's speaker	
Duffy shows the external world of conflict via a photographer and the public, while Armitage explores the experience of a soldier from the inside of conflict	



Your notes



Your notes

Poppies

Each poetry anthology at GCSE contains 15 poems, and in your exam question you will be given one poem – printed in full – and asked to compare this printed poem to another. As this is a closed-book exam, you will not have access to the second poem, so you will have to know it from memory. Fifteen poems are a lot to revise. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-grade response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages of the poet
- How the poet conveys these ideas through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas of other poets in the anthology

Below is a guide to Jane Weir's poem Poppies, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is vital that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Weir's intention and message

Poppies in a nutshell

Poppies was written by the poet Jane Weir in 2005 when Carol Ann Duffy asked Jane Weir and other poets to compose poems which would raise awareness of the sacrifices made by British soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq. Weir's poem Poppies presents the sacrifice made by families involved in war, to raise awareness of the wide-reaching impact of conflict.

Poppies breakdown

Lines 1–2

“Three days before Armistice Sunday

and poppies had already been placed”



Your notes

Translation

- The poem begins reporting an event
- The mention of **Armistice Sunday** raises themes of conflict and remembrance of peace
- Poppies are used to remember the day peace was declared at the end of **World War I**

Weir’s intention

- Weir chose to write a poem which details the remembrance of soldiers whose lives have been lost in war, in order to raise awareness of their sacrifice
- She begins the poem using reported speech to alert readers to the theme of conflict and remembrance: her poem focuses on remembering those who fell in battle

Lines 3–6

**“on individual war graves. Before you left,
I pinned one onto your lapel, crimped petals,
spasms of paper red, disrupting a blockade
of yellow bias binding around your blazer.”**

Translation

- Weir refers to an event of **commemoration**; here she highlights the image of each soldier’s grave
- The theme of remembrance is continued as the speaker reflects on the day their loved one left for war, describing in vivid detail their memory of pinning a poppy on his collar

Weir’s intention

- Weir’s speaker addresses the son directly: the change in tone moves from the generic to the personal to highlight how war affects individuals
- Weir’s first-person voice conveys the perspective of the loved ones of fallen soldiers:
 - This raises awareness of the consequences of war for those left behind
- Weir brings to life a childhood moment to convey the intimacy of the relationship

Lines 7–9

**“Sellotape bandaged around my hand,
I rounded up as many white cat hairs**

as I could, smoothed down your shirt's"



Your notes

Translation

- The speaker remembers little details which reflect typical behaviour between a parent and child
- The reference to mundane, familiar activities (here, cleaning a jacket of cat hairs) help a reader relate, remembering similar intimate moments of their own

Weir's intention

- Remembering childhood moments before the child grew up and went off to war, evokes a feeling of **sentimentality** and **nostalgia** associated with remembrance
- The poem narrates past, familiar memories in order to show personal loss after a soldier's death:
 - This illustrates the impact of war as individual, yet wide-reaching

Lines 10–14

**"Upturned collar, steeled the softening
of my face. I wanted to graze my nose
across the tip of your nose, play at
being Eskimos like we did when
you were little. I resisted the impulse"**

Translation

- Here, the speaker hides powerful emotion: "steel the softening":
 - To "steel" yourself is to make yourself strong and determined against a challenge
 - "Softening" refers to tender emotion
- The poem refers to a personal and physical moment shared when the son was young:
 - An Eskimo kiss is an endearing term used to describe touching noses
- The speaker refers to the need to contain their emotion, presumably as the son is now grown up: "resisting the impulses"

Weir's intention

- The lines convey a tone of **nostalgia** in an emotional, free-flowing memory
- The speaker indicates the **tension** of the parent containing their emotion with the words "steeled" and "softening":



Your notes

- Here, Weir alludes to the powerlessness of parents after a son's death in conflict
- This suggests the parent's desire to protect their child from the parent's pain, alluding to self-sacrifice made by parents during war
- The speaker remembers physical moments of love and intimacy:
 - This evokes images of childhood, evoking **empathy**

Lines 15–18

**“to run my fingers through the gelled
blackthorns of your hair. All my words
flattened, rolled, turned into felt,
slowly melting. I was brave, as I walked”**

Translation

- The speaker refers to missing physical moments between parent and child
- The speaker refers, symbolically, to their past words as 'folded up', compressed
- The speaker describes the son's childhood as "melting" and disappearing as he leaves

Weir's intention

- These lines present a sense of the parent's powerlessness when their son is gone:
 - Their past words are compared with the material being flattened and rolled up, suggesting they are no longer necessary
- Weir uses the adjective "brave" to show the challenge of letting a son go:
 - This subverts the stereotypical image of a brave soldier by describing a brave parent, thus showing a different perspective

Lines 19–22

**“with you, to the front door, threw
it open, the world overflowing
like a treasure chest. A split second
and you were away, intoxicated”**

Translation

- The speaker describes the emotional and dramatic moment when the son leaves



Your notes

- The speaker uses the image of a treasure chest to indicate the son's hope for adventure
- The word "intoxicated" has a double meaning:
 - Intoxicated by war could suggest **patriotism** is poisonous
 - It could refer, too, to the son's excitement to leave
 - This links with "split second" showing the son's desperation to go

Weir's intention

- These lines depict the exuberance and pace of the moment the son leaves
- Weir shows the innocent excitement of the soldier:
 - Here, Weir may be implying **patriotism** is a naive concept
- Weir compares the way the son sees his future with a treasure chest:
 - This reflects the son's attitude, not the parent's, highlighting the opposing experiences of the parent and the child
 - Here, Weir could be making a veiled critique of war **propaganda** on youth

Lines 23 – 26

**"After you'd gone I went into your bedroom,
released a song bird from its cage.**

**Later a single dove flew from the pear tree,
and this is where it has led me"**

Translation

- The speaker uses a **metaphor** of a dove released to symbolise letting go of the son
- The speaker explains that the "dove", representing the son, led them to the graveyard

Weir's intention

- The poem separates here with a full-stop to divide the 'before' and the 'after' of life with their son:
 - This suggests the parent's life changed definitively after the son's death
- The **metaphor** of a dove alludes to peace, perhaps signifying the parent's hope for peace, and that the son would return
 - The image of a dove released from a cage connotes to the parent's need to let the son go, suggesting the individual agony of a soldier's parent



Your notes

- Weir gives an **implicit** message about war, showing a parent hoping for peace

Lines 27 – 29

**“skirting the church yard walls, my stomach busy
making tucks, darts, pleats, hat-less, without
a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves,”**

Translation

- The poet continues the **semantic field** of clothes-making to compare it with parenthood, perhaps related to the forming of something new
- The speaker describes the unsettling, physical feelings in their stomach, metaphorically comparing it to folding material
- The poet mentions a lack of warm clothing using a military term “reinforcements”: this term refers to back-up personnel sent to increase the strength of an army

Weir’s intention

- The disrupted rhythm creates an unsettled tone, signifying the parent’s emotions:
 - This conveys Weir’s message about the impact of grief on soldier’s parents
- The list relating to clothing suggests a sense of being overwhelmed by the physical discomfort of grief:
 - The words “tucks, darts, pleats” connote to the containment of material
- The speaker’s use of military terminology ironically implies the parent’s lack of strength and support without the son, applying ideas of military strength to a parent

Lines 30–32

**“On reaching the top of the hill I traced
the inscriptions on the war memorial,
leaned against it like a wishbone.”**

Translation

- The poet persona narrates a **sensory** experience at the graveyard
- The speaker compares the way they lean against the memorial to a wishbone, which is known for its connections with good luck

Weir’s intention

- The speaker uses evocative imagery to highlight the commemoration of soldiers:



Your notes

- This evokes **empathy**, in order to raise awareness of parental grief caused by conflict
- The speaker compares the bent body to a curved bone symbolising good luck:
 - Weir shows the parent's physical pain and frustrated wish
 - The ironic use of a symbol connected with luck suggest a **cynical** tone

Lines 33–35

**"The dove pulled freely against the sky,
an ornamental stitch, I listened, hoping to hear
your playground voice catching on the wind."**

Translation

- The speaker uses the image of a stitch coming loose to symbolise how the image of their son is coming apart in their mind
- The speaker listens for his voice, remembering him as a child

Weir's intention

- Weir's metaphorical description of a stitch coming loose continues the **semantic field** of clothes-making used throughout to symbolise parenthood:
 - This conveys the parent's feelings of loss and frustration, perhaps that her son died without reaching his potential
- Weir leaves the parent stuck in the past, unable to resolve the grief:
 - This ends the poem with a lack of **resolution**, and suggests the parent will always mourn their son
 - Weir alludes to the inevitability of war, and of the resulting grief

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is always best to move from **what** the poet is presenting (the techniques they use; the overall form of the poem; what comes at the beginning, middle and end of a poem) to **how** and **why** they have made the choices they have.

Focusing on the poet's overarching ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. Crucially, in the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes 's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**



Your notes

▪ Language

Form

The poem is a free-verse, **first-person dramatic monologue**. The speaker, the parent, uses a **second person** narrative to directly address their son, in order to depict the speaker's personal experience of grief and highlight a different perspective on conflict.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Remembrance	A dramatic monologue typically takes on the emotional speech of a character, sometimes addressing a listener. Here, the listener is the dead son	The emotive monologue conveys the parent's grief remembering their son
	The monologue expresses the parent's sentimental memory of their son's childhood and their grief at his death	This offers a different perspective on conflict, presenting the sacrifice of a parent
		The speaker of the poem directly addresses a soldier, their son, which emphasises strong feelings of loss

Structure

The poem follows a time sequence which depicts the experience of the parent at the graveside of their son. As time progresses the rhythm changes along with the narrator's emotions, which reflect the complex nature of their grief.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Suffering and powerlessness due to conflict	The narrative structure leads the reader through a sequence of events from "three days before" to "before you left" to "after you'd gone" and "this is where it has led me"	Weir takes the reader on a personal and intimate journey alongside a grieving parent at their son's graveside
		The poem clearly separates the life of the parent, the before and the after, to present traumatic loss
	The enjambment throughout the poem reflects the free-flowing rhythm of the	This rhythm is typical of a stream of consciousness which reflects a



Your notes

speaker as they remember their son as a child	personal memory, evoking empathy from the reader
In lines 11, 14, 16, 18 and 21 a caesura breaks the line, disrupting the free-flowing rhythm throughout the poem	The change in tone suggests the emotions of the speaker as fragmented, strained, as the voice and thoughts break due to their grief
At the end of the poem, the speaker and the reader are left at the graveside, caught between the past and the present, listening out for the child's voice on the wind	This lack of resolution suggests the inevitability of grief due to conflict, as well as the parent's endless suffering

Language

Weir weaves imagery connoting the comfort of home and family through the poem to describe the emotional suffering of a parent's grief due to conflict. She contrasts this with brutal imagery related to injury and war to highlight the connections.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Loss of home and family comfort	The extended metaphor of clothes-making ("all my words flattened, rolled, turned into felt / slowly melting") shows the loss the parent feels as they remember their son's childhood	The metaphorical comparison of raising a child with making clothes is used to convey frustrated and painful emotions linked to the ending of a project
	The speaker uses military terms alongside domestic images: "like without a winter coat or reinforcements of scarf, gloves"	Weir contrasts domestic imagery with brutal images related to war to highlight the connection between the two ideas and to show the lack of comfort and support felt by a parent in their grief
	Weir uses imagery related to injury and war: "spasms", "Bandaged", "red"	These images convey the violence of war. These juxtaposed alongside domestic imagery alludes to family loss associated with conflict



Your notes

	Weir describes personal moments: "graze my nose against the tip of your nose"	The sensory and physical imagery evoke empathy in the reader in order to convey the powerlessness of the parent as they grieve
Sacrifice	The metaphor of a dove released and leading to the graveside represents the parent's son and the idea of peace	Weir's use of a symbol of peace in a poem about Armistice Sunday comments on the connection between war destroying peace. The loss connected with letting the bird go alludes to the loss the parent feels when they let their son go
	The speaker refers to the bravery required by a parent whose son goes to war	The reference to the bravery of a parent rather than the soldier subverts ideas related to the glorification of war
	Weir uses sibilance and oxymoron together to highlight the parent's pain: "stealed the softening"	Weir's oxymoron alludes to self-sacrifice of a parent, wishing to hide their pain from their son as he leaves for war. The pain is emphasised with the sibilance

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, it is not random biographical information about Jane Weir or historical facts about World War I that are unrelated to the ideas in Poppies. The best way to understand context is to the ideas and perspectives explored by Weir in Poppies which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Weir explores:

- **Loss due to conflict**
- **Powerlessness due to conflict**

Loss due to conflict

- Weir grew up in Ireland during the conflicts of the 1980s, exposing her to the consequences of war on home and family
 - This could be why she chose to show the perspective of a grieving parent in Poppies
- Carol Ann Duffy, Poet Laureate of the United Kingdom between 2009 and 2019, asked Weir to contribute a poem to an anthology which raised awareness of the deaths and suffering of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan



Your notes

- War broke out in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003, when the United States of America invaded after 9/11
- Both wars led to years of battle which resulted in many deaths, as well as ongoing mental health problems amongst survivors
- Weir chose to highlight the loss a parent feels remembering their son's childhood, highlighting the impact of conflict on individuals left behind, particularly parents
- Weir uses the symbol of poppies, as they represent remembrance of those killed in war
 - Poppies represent remembering military personnel killed serving in war
 - Small artificial poppies are pinned on collars in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand in the lead up to Remembrance/**Armistice Day**
 - The poppy as a symbol of remembrance was inspired by the **World War I** poem, In Flanders Fields, which describes how poppies grew in the fields where soldiers died
 - Weir explicitly titles her poem Poppies to raise awareness of the theme of remembering
 - The experience of remembering, however, is shown as painful and powerfully emotive, raising awareness of suffering due to conflict
- **Armistice Day** is mentioned in the poem to connect ideas of conflict and peace
 - It took place on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918
 - This highlights the individual experience of remembrance
 - Here, Weir connects the idea of peace with the painful memory of a soldier
 - **Armistice Day** is celebrated every year on 11th November
 - It is a day which commemorates peace or Armistice signed by the **Allies of World War I**
 - Weir's poem begins by referring to an event which traditionally commemorates conflict
 - However, Weir's poem goes on to show a parent alone at a graveside

Powerlessness due to conflict

- Weir's poem depicts the powerlessness of a parent to recover from grief associated with conflict
 - The speaker of the poem conveys their frustration and strained emotions
 - The end of the poem shows the parent as powerless to heal from grief
 - The speaker highlights the bravery and sacrifice required by the parent
- Poppies highlights the powerlessness of a soldier in the face of **propaganda**
 - The poem presents the soldier as innocent to the horrors of war

- Weir's monologue shows the soldier as injured and silent, their life stunted

What to Compare it to



The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that Poppies explores the ideas of **loss due to conflict** and **powerlessness due to conflict**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:

- [Poppies and Kamikaze](#)
- [Poppies and War Photographer](#)
- [Poppies and Remains](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Poppies and Kamikaze

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Poppies and Kamikaze convey personal and individual loss due to conflict by presenting the perspectives of family members. The poems explore ideas related to bravery and honour, and how these values can lead to a sense of powerlessness for all involved in conflict.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show the effects of loss on family members due to conflict	
Evidence and analysis	Poppies	Kamikaze
	In Poppies the poet shows the effect of loss on those left behind by presenting the perspective of a parent grieving their son's death in war	Similarly, Kamikaze shows the perspective of a family member after war, in this case a daughter, narrating a story about their father, a Kamikaze pilot
	Weir uses enjambment to present a parent's emotional and evocative stream	In Garland's poem, the perspective alternates between the father's evocative memories as


Your notes

<p>of consciousness: a free-flowing memory about their son's childhood. Although, at points, Weir changes the tone with caesurae to break the flow, signifying the parent's disrupted and emotional break in voice</p>	<p>he leaves for war, and the daughter's recounting of his dishonourable return. The shift from personal and emotional pain of the father as he chooses to live rather than die, contrasts with the pragmatic retelling of the loss the family felt on his return</p>
<p>The speaker in Poppies uses sensory imagery to describe intimate moments of the parent and son's relationship when he was a child: "Graze my nose across the tip of your nose"</p>	<p>The speaker in Kamikaze also uses sensory imagery to describe the intimate moments the father remembers about his past as he flies to war. These images convey the personal loss experienced due to conflict</p>
<p>The pain of loss is presented in both poems by showing personal memories and perspectives of loved ones involved in war, to build empathy in the reader and convey the emotional impact of conflict on family life.</p>	

Topic sentence	<p>Both poets represent powerlessness of those involved in conflict</p>						
Evidence and analysis	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td data-bbox="197 1100 687 1142" style="text-align: center;">Poppies</td> <td data-bbox="687 1100 1241 1142" style="text-align: center;">Kamikaze</td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="197 1142 687 1438"> <p>Powerlessness of a parent in the face of grief is expressed in Poppies through the reflective tone of a dramatic monologue. It is delivered by a parent in a direct address to their dead son: "hoping to hear your playground voice"</p> </td><td data-bbox="687 1142 1241 1438"> <p>Kamikaze's reflective tone shifts perspectives from third-person ("he must have wondered which had been the better way to die") to a first-person plural ("the father we loved"). The reflections shift perspective to convey the different ways the family members respond</p> </td></tr> <tr> <td colspan="2" data-bbox="197 1438 687 1554"> <p>It could be argued that both speakers convey the powerlessness of loved ones during conflict as they reflect on their experience of loss</p> </td></tr> </table>	Poppies	Kamikaze	<p>Powerlessness of a parent in the face of grief is expressed in Poppies through the reflective tone of a dramatic monologue. It is delivered by a parent in a direct address to their dead son: "hoping to hear your playground voice"</p>	<p>Kamikaze's reflective tone shifts perspectives from third-person ("he must have wondered which had been the better way to die") to a first-person plural ("the father we loved"). The reflections shift perspective to convey the different ways the family members respond</p>	<p>It could be argued that both speakers convey the powerlessness of loved ones during conflict as they reflect on their experience of loss</p>	
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	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td data-bbox="197 1554 687 1820"> <p>Weir represents the parent's powerlessness to be with their son again using sensory imagery to end the poem without any resolution, leaving the parent listening for their son's voice on the wind</p> </td> <td data-bbox="687 1554 1241 1820"> <p>Garland presents the daughter's powerlessness through sensory imagery related to sound: "we too learned to be silent", suggesting the daughter's broken relationship with her father was not autonomous and without clear resolution</p> </td></tr> </table>	<p>Weir represents the parent's powerlessness to be with their son again using sensory imagery to end the poem without any resolution, leaving the parent listening for their son's voice on the wind</p>	<p>Garland presents the daughter's powerlessness through sensory imagery related to sound: "we too learned to be silent", suggesting the daughter's broken relationship with her father was not autonomous and without clear resolution</p>				
<p>Weir represents the parent's powerlessness to be with their son again using sensory imagery to end the poem without any resolution, leaving the parent listening for their son's voice on the wind</p>	<p>Garland presents the daughter's powerlessness through sensory imagery related to sound: "we too learned to be silent", suggesting the daughter's broken relationship with her father was not autonomous and without clear resolution</p>						

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	While both poets suggest that conflict leads to powerlessness, the poems present different attitudes to war	
Evidence and analysis	Poppies	Kamikaze
	In Poppies, the parent suggests the son was innocent to the realities of war. The metaphor “the world overflowing like a treasure chest” connotes to childish ideas that war may bring glory and adventure	In Kamikaze, however, the father doubts his role in war. He looks back on his childhood, describing it from the aeroplane in sensory imagery connoting colourful treasure: “pearl-grey pebbles” and “shoals of fishes flashing silver”
	The parent describes their son as “intoxicated” with war, implying he was poisoned with the ideas associated with it	Here, the father is convinced by his memories to return home instead of dying for his country
	The parent experiences grief as a result of the son’s enthusiasm for conflict	Here, the parent experiences grief, however, it is because he is alienated by his family for not being honourable in conflict

Poppies and War Photographer

Comparison in a nutshell:

This is an effective comparative choice to explore the impact of conflict on those other than soldiers themselves. Both Weir’s Poppies and Duffy’s War Photographer present unconventional perspectives and descriptions of the experience of grief due to war.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show that conflict has wide-reaching influence by showing particular individuals who are affected by it	
Evidence and analysis	Poppies	War Photographer


Your notes

An unconventional experience of grief is presented through a narration of a parent visiting their son's grave and remembering his childhood	Duffy shows the experience of grief from the perspective of a war photographer developing photographs and remembering what he has seen
Weir's poem is structured to represent the parent's personal grief as they stand at the grave and remember their son. The poem uses adverbs of time such as "before" and "after" to depict the way the parent's life has been impacted by the loss of their son	Duffy's poem represents the photographer's personal grief through disjointed flashbacks as he remembers those who have suffered in conflict: "running children in a nightmare heat"
The speaker is left remembering their son at the end of the poem, suggesting the continued experience of grief	The poem ends with the line "they do not care" suggesting a lack of resolution for the speaker
Both poets reflect on the impact of conflict by presenting the experience of grief by speakers who are traumatised by their memories and whose lives have been affected negatively	
The poems consider the experience of grief as a solitary one; they convey the isolation of the parent and the photographer in their settings	
Both poets wish to raise awareness of the effect of conflict on individual lives beyond the battlefields, at home or at work: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Therefore, both poems could be considered a social commentary on the wide-reaching negative impact of conflict ▪ The memories of each character are not resolved at the end of the poems, suggesting continued grief for all those involved in war 	

Differences:

Topic sentence	While Weir chooses a nostalgic and emotional first-person reflection in Poppies, Duffy's War Photographer uses a detached, third-person voice to portray the impact of conflict		
Evidence and analysis	<table border="1" data-bbox="204 1748 1238 1860"> <tr> <td data-bbox="204 1748 742 1848"> Poppies </td> <td data-bbox="742 1748 1238 1848"> War Photographer </td> </tr> </table>	Poppies	War Photographer
Poppies	War Photographer		


Your notes

<p>The first-person perspective of a parent addressing their son has an emotive effect, in order to build empathy for the parent's suffering</p>	<p>Duffy distances the reader by telling the story of a photographer in a dark-room in third-person narration. The omniscient voice of the narrator allows reader's insight to the photographer's thoughts while emphasising his solitude</p>
<p>The parent speaks to their son, remembering intimate moments of his childhood: "I pinned one onto your lapel". As the reader listens in on the parent's thoughts, they are aware the son does not reply, creating a sense of solitude and an emotive commentary on personal grief</p>	<p>However, the photographer's emotive memories in Duffy's poem are disjointed, caught between a detached and cynical tone of the omniscient narrator: "stares impassively at where/he earns his living and they do not care"</p> <p>Duffy's poem uses pronouns to convey the photographer's isolation from "they", the public</p>
<p>Though the tone and perspective of each poem is different, they both present grief as a result of war as an isolating and traumatic experience</p>	

Poppies and Remains

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Weir's Poppies and Armitage's Remains highlight the unrelenting nature of grief as a result of loss. The poems present speakers who feel powerless in the wake of war, due to haunting trauma.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	<p>Both poems highlight relentless grief and trauma through the presentation of individual and unrelieved memories related to conflict</p>	
Evidence and analysis	<p>Poppies</p> <p>In Poppies, the speaker narrates a moment-by-moment reliving of their son's childhood as they remember small moments and details: "I rounded up as many white cat hairs as I could". The nostalgic tone and intimacy of the details convey the parent's deep and ongoing grief: "being Eskimos like we did when you were little"</p>	<p>Remains</p> <p>Similarly, in Remains, the speaker has a flashback to a moment during battle: "On another occasion, we get sent out to tackle looters raiding a bank."</p>



Your notes

	<p>His description of vivid memories imply the speaker is unable to forget the images: "I see every round as it rips through his life". He confirms this: "the drink and drugs won't flush him out"</p>
Similarly, both poems show the speakers' powerful and detailed memories to express the haunting effects of conflict	
The poem's speakers are both caught between the present and past throughout the poem, suggesting the relentless nature of their trauma. The speaker in Remains is left in the "here and now" without resolution ("end of story. Except not really"), while the speaker in Poppies is left listening for their son's playground voice on the wind	

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poets explore the negative impact of loss on individuals through memories, the poets choose to present the reflections using different tones of voice to convey varied responses to grief	
Evidence and analysis	Poppies	Remains
	In Poppies, the speaker's tone of voice is nostalgic . Enjambment and positive imagery create a sentimental free-flowing monologue	On the other hand, in Remains, the speaker's tone is cynical . The rhythm is disjointed with caesurae and varied sentence lengths. His register is colloquial and violent: "and tosses his guts back into his body"



Your notes

War Photographer

Each poetry anthology at GCSE contains 15 poems, and in your exam question you will be given one poem – printed in full – and asked to compare this printed poem to another. As this is a closed-book exam, you will not have access to the second poem, so you will have to know it from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to revise. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-grade response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages of the poet
- How the poet conveys these ideas through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas of other poets in the anthology

Below is a guide to Carol Ann Duffy's poem War Photographer, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is vital that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Duffy's intention and message

War Photographer in a nutshell

War Photographer was written by the poet Carol Ann Duffy, **Poet Laureate** from 2009 to 2019. Published in 1985, War Photographer depicts the solitary experience of a photographer at home in England developing photographs taken in conflicts around the world. The poem comments on the personal distress of the photographer at what they have seen in warzones, and how people back home respond.

War Photographer breakdown

Lines 1–2

"In his dark room he is finally alone

with spools of suffering set out in ordered rows.”



Your notes

Translation

- The poem narrates the moment a war photographer begins to develop the photographs taken in warzones:
 - A dark room is a room with low lighting designed for processing film
- The **narrator** describes the spools of film containing images which display the tragedies of those in conflict

Duffy's intention

- Duffy alerts readers to a moment of relief for the photographer when he is alone in his dark room:
 - This implies the photographer's distress in the external world
- Duffy highlights the many painful images the photographer has taken in conflict which he is about to process

Lines 3–5

**“The only light is red and softly glows,
as though this were a church and he
a priest preparing to intone a Mass.”**

Translation

- Duffy sets the scene with soft red light and **religious imagery**
- She compares the photographer's task with a religious ceremony
 - Taking Mass or taking the sacrament is a ritual in **Catholicism** which represents sacrifice

Duffy's intention

- Duffy evokes a **solemn** mood to present the significance of his work
- She compares the processing of photographs of war with a religious ritual of sacrifice
 - The **allusion** to sacrifice highlights the sacrifice of those in the photographs

Line 6

“Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh. All flesh is grass.”

Translation



Your notes

- The poet lists several places of conflict, referring to Ireland's troubles and civil wars in Lebanon and Cambodia
- The line, "All flesh is grass", is a biblical reference which suggests life is temporary

Duffy's intention

- Duffy's list of warzones connects the photographer's "spools of suffering" to particular places, highlighting the reality of the **persona's** job
- Duffy refers to a famous photograph, "**The Terrors of War**", to remind readers of the power photography can have
- The biblical line alludes to the fleeting lives of those in the photographer's photos

Lines 7–8

**"He has a job to do. Solutions slop in trays
beneath his hands, which did not tremble then"**

Translation

- Here, the **narrator** tells us the photographer sees his work as a job which must be completed, a duty
- The photographer, now developing the photographs, feels the impact of his memories where before he had to keep a steady hand

Duffy's intention

- The **narrator** begins to explain the photographer's feelings about his task to convey the perspective of a war photographer
 - The **narrator** explains that he finds it emotionally painful to remember the conflicts he has witnessed
 - Whereas before he had to stay in control, here, the photographer begins to weaken

Lines 9–12

**"though seem to now. Rural England. Home again
to ordinary pain which simple weather can dispel,
to fields which don't explode beneath the feet
of running children in a nightmare heat."**

Translation

- The **narrator** comments on how life in England is ordinary compared to warzones:



Your notes

- Duffy refers to the weather as something that causes people pain but can easily change
- The **narrator** refers to a warzone filled with landmines and bombs:
 - The reference to children running through “nightmare heat” alludes to a famous photograph of a child running from a bomb in Phnom Penh

Duffy's intention

- These lines present a contrast between life in the English countryside and life in warzones to show the photographer's **displacement**:
 - The phrase “ordinary pain” contrasts the violent action of “children running” to show the problems in England as **trivial** compared to those in areas of conflict
 - Duffy's contrast of bad weather and “nightmare heat” shows how different things are in England compared with war-torn areas
 - She highlights the devastation of conflict on vulnerable children

Lines 13–15

**“Something is happening. A stranger’s features
faintly start to twist before his eyes,
a half-formed ghost. He remembers the cries”**

Translation

- The **persona** describes the moment the photograph begins to develop and the image of a man caught up in conflict begins to form in the film
- This reminds him of the moment he took the photograph

Duffy's intention

- These lines depict the slow-forming image reminding the photographer of the horrors of conflict:
 - The “half-formed ghost” implies the person in the photo was killed in conflict
- Duffy depicts the agony of the man and how vividly clear the memory is to the photographer, conveying the suffering experienced by all involved in conflict

Lines 16–18

**“of this man’s wife, how he sought approval
without words to do what someone must
and how the blood stained into foreign dust.”**

Translation

- The **persona** refers back to the moment he asked if he could take the photograph
- He refers to the man's death in vivid description



Duffy's intention

- Duffy depicts the difficult moment the photographer intruded into others' tragedy:
 - The speaker implies a sense of duty to take the photograph
 - The **modal verb** "must" shows his sense of moral obligation to try to change things
 - The vivid description implies the photographer is haunted by the images and highlights again the distance between England and the war zones

Lines 19–22

**"A hundred agonies in black and white
from which his editor will pick out five or six
for Sunday's supplement. The reader's eyeballs prick
with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers."**

Translation

- The **narrator** represents the tragedies in the photographs as numerous and with much suffering
- Referring back to the photographer's job, the **narrator** tells readers that of all the images developed, only a few will make it into the newspaper
- Duffy describes how the readers respond to the photographs: a temporary sadness that is quickly replaced by daily activities

Duffy's intention

- Referring to the many photographs, Duffy emphasises the death toll and the impact of war to evoke sympathy from the reader
- Indirectly taking on the voice of the photographer, the **narrator** suggests the response from the readers, despite the sacrifices of those involved, is brief and temporary
- Duffy implies the English public is **desensitised** to war and the individual suffering of those involved

Lines 23–24

"From the aeroplane he stares impassively at where

he earns his living and they do not care.”



Your notes

Translation

- The poem ends with the photographer back on the aeroplane going to his next job
- The description of the photographer, looking down “impassively” on England, tells us he feels numb towards his homeland
- The **third-person** reference “they” refers to the public below

Duffy’s intention

- Duffy’s poem ends without **resolution** to show the **futility** of the photographer’s job and the continuous and unrelenting nature of war
- Duffy’s **cynical** tone comments on how the public have become numb and **desensitised** to tragedy in war
- She suggests the photographer does not feel similar to his compatriots at home and is therefore left isolated and frustrated

Writer’s Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is always best to move from **what** the poet is presenting (the techniques they use; the overall form of the poem; what comes at the beginning, middle and end of a poem) to **how** and **why** they have made the choices they have.

Focusing on the poet’s overarching ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. Crucially, in the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes the writer’s intentions behind their choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The poem is a rigid, **third-person** narration depicting a war photographer’s complex emotions as he processes the photographs he has taken in warzones.

Theme	Evidence	Poet’s intention



Your notes

The wide-reaching impact of conflict	Duffy shows a third-person perspective of a war photographer haunted by the photographs and memories of conflict	The perspective is detached and distant to present the photographer's isolation, showing how conflict isolates individuals even after war
		This offers a different perspective on conflict, presenting the quiet suffering of those who report on war
	Duffy's poem represents the photographer's personal grief through the photographer's disjointed reflections: Free-flowing reflective enjambment is disrupted by caesurae	The persona 's tone changes from emotional to cynical to convey the complex pain of the photographer

Structure

The poem follows a **cyclical structure** which ends with the photographer going back to warzones, suggesting the **futility** of his work, as well as a sense of continuing conflict.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Suffering and powerlessness due to conflict	The line "they do not care" suggests the public are indifferent to the photographs he takes, and to war	Duffy's use of third-person "they" shows the photographer's sense of isolation
	The poem ends with the photographer returning to warzones, repeating the painful process	The ending suggests the futility of his job as nothing changes. Duffy presents a lack of resolution for the photographer, as well as his powerlessness to bring about change
	As the photographer stares "impassively" back at England he mirrors the detachment commented on in the poem	Duffy's poem criticises the desensitised attitude of the public towards conflict
		The poem's ending suggests the photographer's powerlessness to change his life or heal his own suffering

Language

Duffy's **imagery** describes a variety of settings, from a dark room in rural England to conflict zones around the world. The contrasting **imagery** conveys the very different lives of those involved in conflict to those safe at home.



Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Response to conflict	Duffy's imagery contrasts a "rural England" with a warzone where "running children" try to escape exploding bombs	The contrasting settings (from a dark room in England where the photographer feels safe and alone, to a warzone where he interacts with dying strangers) suggest the photographer is caught between two worlds
	Duffy contrasts the tragedies elsewhere ("blood stained into foreign dust") with the luxurious life in England ("bath and pre-lunch beers")	Duffy's contrasting imagery at the end of the poem comments on the apathy of those at home, and, thus, the continuous nature of conflict elsewhere
	Duffy juxtaposes religious imagery with a list of warzones, "Belfast. Beirut. Phnom Penh"	Duffy weaves Christian ideals of peace through references to conflict: she highlights the photographer's role as significant within society, and also presents the incongruous response of the public to war
	The plosive consonants create an aggressive tone which contrasts the softer "priest preparing to intone a Mass"	The aggressive tone conveys a sense of frustration and anger toward the response to conflict
Suffering as a result of conflict	Pain as a result of conflict is conveyed in the sibilance , "spools of suffering"	Duffy highlights the numerous examples of individual suffering by referencing "a hundred agonies" caught on film
	The narrator refers to the hands of the photographer trembling as develops the photographs	The sensory experience of the photographer remembering the suffering he has seen evokes sympathy in the reader; this helps convey the emotional impact of conflict
	Duffy describes the haunting image of a "half-formed ghost" twisting	Duffy comments on how the photographer has to revisit the painful experience, illustrating the

before the photographer's eyes

individual suffering of those involved in conflict



Your notes

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, it is not random biographical information about Carol Ann Duffy, or historical facts about war zones which are unrelated to the ideas in War Photographer. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Duffy in War Photographer which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Duffy explores:

- **The wide-reaching impact of conflict**
- **Suffering and powerlessness due to conflict**

The Wide-reaching impact of conflict

- The poem, published in 1985, refers to a famous photograph called "**The Terrors of War**", taken during the **Vietnam War**:
 - The powerful image shows a naked, terrified child running away from an exploding bomb
 - The line "children running in nightmare heat" connotes to this photograph
 - In the photo a photographer can be seen taking a picture of the child
 - This image had a powerful impact on the public at the time, and raised debates about the moral duty of those witnessing conflict
 - Referring to this photograph helps raise awareness of the wide-reaching impact war photography can have
 - The **emotive** reference to the children highlights how conflict affects even the innocent

Suffering and Powerlessness due to conflict

- Carol Ann Duffy, **Poet Laureate** in the United Kingdom between 2009 and 2019, was friends with two war photographers:
 - This may have influenced her to write from the perspective of a war photographer
 - In the poem, Duffy presents the photographer as haunted and **traumatised** by his work
 - This presents the suffering of all those involved in conflict
 - However, her poem encourages the public to pay closer attention to their work
- Duffy's poem depicts the suffering of a war photographer haunted by memories of the many horrors he has witnessed around the world:

- She names international conflict zones he has been involved in to represent his repeated suffering
 - She refers to the troubles in Belfast and the conflict in Beirut to remind readers of the reality behind her poem
- Duffy's message is that these are just examples of the many conflicts around the world, and the photographer feels powerless to change things



Your notes

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology.

Given that War Photographer explores ideas of **suffering and powerlessness due to conflict** and the **wide-reaching impact of conflict**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:

- [War Photographer and Poppies](#)
- [War Photographer and Kamikaze](#)
- [War Photographer and Remains](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

War Photographer and Poppies

Comparison in a nutshell:

This is an effective comparative choice to explore the impact of conflict on those other than soldiers themselves in order to present the wide-reaching impact of conflict. Both Duffy's War Photographer and Weir's Poppies present individual perspectives on powerlessness and suffering due to war.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show that conflict has wide-reaching influence by showing particular individuals affected by it
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	War Photographer	Poppies
	Duffy shows the experience of suffering from the perspective of a war photographer remembering images of war	Similarly, an unconventional experience of grief is presented through a narration of a parent visiting their son's grave and remembering his childhood
	Duffy's poem represents the photographer's personal grief through disjointed flashbacks as he remembers those who have suffered in conflict: "a half-formed ghost"	Weir's poem is structured to represent the parent's personal grief as they stand at the grave and remember their son. The poem uses adverbs of time such as "before" and "after" to depict the way the parent's life has been impacted by the loss of their son
	The poem ends with the line "they do not care" suggesting a lack of resolution for the speaker as he realises the futility of his work	The speaker is left remembering their son at the end of the poem, suggesting their continued suffering
	Both poets reflect on the impact of conflict by presenting the experience of grief by speakers who are traumatised by their memories and whose lives have been affected negatively	
	The poems consider the experience of grief as a solitary one; they convey the isolation of the parent and the photographer in their settings	
	Both poets wish to raise awareness of the effect of conflict on individual lives beyond the battlefields, at home or at work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Therefore, both poems could be considered a social commentary on the wide-reaching negative impact of conflict ▪ The memories of each character are not resolved at the end of the poems, suggesting continued suffering for all those involved in war 	

Differences:

Topic sentence	While Duffy's War Photographer uses a detached, third-person voice, Weir chooses a nostalgic and emotional first-person reflection in Poppies to portray the wide-reaching impact of conflict
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	War Photographer	Poppies
	Duffy distances the reader by telling the story of a photographer in a dark-room in third-person narration. The omniscient voice of the narrator allows the reader insight to the photographer's thoughts while emphasising his solitude	The first-person perspective of a parent addressing their son has an emotive effect, in order to build empathy for the parent's suffering
	However, the photographer's emotive memories in Duffy's poem are disjointed, caught between a detached and cynical tone of the omniscient narrator: "stares impassively at where/he earns his living and they do not care"	The parent speaks to their son, remembering intimate moments of his childhood: "I pinned one onto your lapel"
	Duffy's poem uses pronouns to convey the photographer's isolation from the public: "they"	As the reader listens in on the parent's thoughts, they are aware the son does not reply, creating a sense of solitude and an emotive commentary on personal grief
	Though the tone and perspective of each poem is different, they both present individual powerlessness and suffering due to conflict	

War Photographer and Kamikaze

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both War Photographer and Kamikaze present personal and individual suffering due to conflict. The poems explore ideas related to the wide-reaching impact of conflict by describing a sense of powerlessness experienced by those involved.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems present wide-reaching suffering due to conflict	
Evidence and analysis	War Photographer	Kamikaze
	Duffy distances the persona by showing the perspective of a war photographer	Similarly, in Kamikaze, a third-person narrative creates a distance between the reader and the



Your notes

through a third-person omniscient narrator	poet persona , a Kamikaze pilot, to represent the distance between him and his daughter
The poet shows the effect of conflict on the photographer as isolating: "in his dark room he is finally alone"	
Duffy uses enjambment to present the photographer's emotional reflections as he is reminded of the horrors he has witnessed	In Garland's poem, the perspective alternates between the father's evocative memories as he leaves for war, and the daughter's recounting of his dishonourable return
Although, at points, Duffy changes the tone with caesurae to break the flow, signifying a disrupted and cynical break in voice	The shift from personal and emotional pain of the father contrasts with the pragmatic retelling of the loss the family felt on his return
Duffy contrasts imagery to show the photographer's sense of detachment. The "ordinary pain" of "Rural England" contrasts with the "blood stained into foreign dust"	The speaker in Kamikaze also uses sensory imagery to describe the intimate moments the father remembers about his past as he flies to war <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ These images convey the difficult choice the father had to make as he chooses between his home and fighting for his country
Duffy illustrates the photographer's sense of displacement , caught between two worlds	
Suffering of individuals after war is presented through memories and displacement in order to build empathy in the reader and convey the wide-reaching impact of conflict	

Topic sentence	Both poets represent powerlessness of those involved in conflict	
Evidence and analysis	War Photographer	Kamikaze


Your notes

<p>The sense of powerlessness a war photographer feels in the face of an apathetic public is expressed through the cynical tone: “his editor will pick out five or six for Sunday’s supplement”</p>	<p>Kamikaze’s third-person narration shows the father as silent, only present through his daughter’s voice: “he must have wondered which had been the better way to die”</p>
<p>Duffy represents the photographer’s powerlessness to change the cycle of conflict as the poem ends with the photographer returning to another war zone</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The line “they do not care” highlights his isolation and ineffectiveness. 	<p>Garland presents the daughter’s powerlessness as she is told to alienate her father for his dishonourable behaviour: “we too learned to be silent”, suggesting the daughter’s broken relationship with her father was not autonomous and without clear resolution</p>

Differences:

Topic sentence	<p>While both poets suggest conflict leads to suffering and powerlessness for individuals, the poems present different relationships to home</p>	
Evidence and analysis	<p>War Photographer</p> <p>Duffy’s war photographer looks down upon his homeland from the aeroplane with an impassive stare. His attitude to his home has been affected by his involvement in war, as he feels unable to fit back into society</p>	<p>Kamikaze</p> <p>The poet persona in Kamikaze, looks down on his home from his aeroplane positively. He looks back on his childhood, describing it in sensory imagery connoting colourful treasure: “pearl-grey pebbles” and “shoals of fishes flashing silver”</p>
	<p>The “ordinary pain” of bad weather presents the photographer’s bitterness toward England’s trivial problems and superficial attitude to conflict</p>	<p>Here, the father is convinced by his memories to return home instead of dying for his country:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Nevertheless, upon his return, he too is unable to find a place to belong <p>While both poets suggest returning from conflict isolates individuals, Duffy shows a photographer’s bitterness towards his homeland and Garland shows how the pilot’s love for his home kept him from conflict</p>

War Photographer and Remains

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Duffy's War Photographer and Armitage's Remains highlight the unrelenting nature of suffering through haunting memories in the wake of war.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems highlight relentless trauma through the presentation of unrelieved memories related to conflict	
Evidence and analysis	War Photographer	Remains
	In Duffy's poem, the narrator describes a photographer reliving the horrors of "a hundred agonies" as he develops photographs from "spools of suffering"	In Remains, the speaker has a flashback to a moment during battle: "On another occasion, we get sent out to tackle looters raiding a bank"
	The photographer sees a "half-formed ghost" twisting before his eyes, suggesting he is haunted by the suffering he has witnessed	His description of vivid memories implies the speaker is unable to forget the images: "I see every round as it rips through his life" <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ He confirms this: "the drink and drugs won't flush him out"
	The speaker in War Photographer acknowledges the futility of his job as he returns to yet another warzone at the end of the poem, aware of the passive response the public will have	The speaker in Remains is left in the desert sands, in the "here and now" without resolution ("end of story. Except not really").
	Similarly, both poems show the speaker's powerful and detailed memories in order to express the haunting effects of conflict	
	The poems' personae are both caught between the present and past throughout the poem, suggesting the relentless nature of their trauma	

Differences:



Your notes



Your notes

Topic sentence	While both poets explore the suffering of individuals reliving memories of conflict, the poets choose to present varied perspectives	
Evidence and analysis	War Photographer	Remains
	The third-person perspective of the photographer is distant and detached.	On the other hand, in Remains the first-person speaker conveys intimate thoughts. His personal pain is raw as he constantly relives the violence of conflict: "he's here in my head when I close my eyes".
	Although the photographer is haunted by the memories, his tone is one of apathy and resignation .	The private monologue of the soldier evokes sympathy from the reader.
	However haunted he is by the images, he still returns to a war zone at the end of the poem	The speaker in this poem confirms that even "the drink and drugs won't flush him out" and at the end of the poem the soldier conveys his trauma: "his blood life in my bloody hands"
	Duffy also suggests that the public easily forget the images of war they see in the newspapers: "The reader's eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers"	
	Although both poets criticise the trauma associated with conflict, Duffy's persona conveys a tone of detachment and apathy which contrasts with the emotional and poignant tone of Armitage's speaker	
	Duffy shows the external world of conflict via a photographer and the public, while Armitage explores the experience of a soldier	

Tissue



Your notes

Tissue

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. You will not have access to the other poems in the exam, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to Tissue by Imtiaz Dharker, from the Power and Conflict anthology.

It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Dharker's intention and message

Tissue in a nutshell

Tissue is a poem about human power and **fragility**, written by Pakistan-born British poet Imtiaz Dharker and published in 2006. In the poem, the speaker uses tissue paper as an **extended metaphor** for life. It reveals the power of paper, and how it can be used to alter things or to record things. However, despite its power, it is still fragile, delicate and may not last, creating a sense of the fragility of human life.

Tissue breakdown

Lines 1–4



Your notes

**“Paper that lets the light
shine through, this
is what could alter things.
Paper thinned by age or touching.”**

Translation

- The speaker is holding a thin sheet of paper in their hand
- They are **contemplating** this simple material, and see a kind of power in it, as it “could alter things”
- But paper **deteriorates** further with age or constant handling

Dharker’s intention

- The **symbol** of light is established straight away
- It suggests knowledge, guidance and the **divine**
- However, the use of light also suggests the fragility of the power of paper, as it is thin enough for light to pass through
- Via the extended metaphor, the poet is suggesting that human life is also powerful but fragile
- The thin paper represents old age
- As we grow older, our skin also becomes thinner, but we also gain wisdom

Lines 5–12

**“the kind you find in well-used books,
the back of the Koran, where a hand
has written in the names and histories,
who was born to whom,”
“the height and weight, who
died where and how, on which sepia date,
pages smoothed and stroked and turned**



Your notes

transparent with attention.”

Translation

- Thinned and aged paper is the kind you find in a well-used book, such as the **Koran**, a religious text
- At the back, someone has written the names, histories and details of people
- The paper of the book has worn smooth, thin and **transparent** with years of handling

Dharker's intention

- The poet is saying that paper may grow older and thinner, but it does not lose its importance
- Paper is everywhere; it is history itself
- Religious books are an example of paper with power over the way people act
- **sepia** is the yellow-ish colour of old paper, and “sepia date” brings to mind birth and death certificates
- Again, the poet is using paper as a metaphor for human skin, that is “smoothed and stroked” by the touch of another

Lines 13–16

**“If buildings were paper, I might
feel their drift, see how easily
they fall away on a sigh, a shift
in the direction of the wind.”**

Translation

- The speaker invites us to imagine if buildings were made out of paper
- Then they would be able to feel the way they sway in the wind, and watch them easily get caught up in the air of a sigh or a change in the wind's direction

Dharker's intention

- The poet is suggesting that buildings should be able to move and change, as humanity should be able to move, change and adapt
- And just as easily, these things “fall away” as nothing that humanity builds is meant to outlast nature

Lines 17–20

“Maps too. The sun shines through



Your notes

**their borderlines, the marks
that rivers make, roads,
railtracks, mountainfolds,”**

Translation

- The speaker then gives the example of maps
- When the sun shines through them, all of the borders, rivers, roads, railways and mountains become clear

Dharker's intention

- The fact that the “sun shines through” these marks again highlights the overwhelming power of nature, which breaks through man's markings and divisions
- Even the most delicate of paper can record the most important things, such as national borders
- The “marks” may also refer to the blemishes, marks, scars and wrinkles all visible on human skin and obtained throughout a life

Lines 21–24

**“Fine slips from grocery shops
that say how much was sold
and what was paid by credit card
might fly our lives like paper kites.”**

Translation

- The speaker goes on to comment on receipts from shops
- These tell a story about what people have bought, what they paid and how they paid
- These bits of paper fly away from us like paper kites

Dharker's intention

- The poet uses the metaphor of paper kites to criticise the significance humanity places on money and how it can rule our lives, especially if it is given too much power
- Paper kites are flimsy and can easily break and tear

Lines 21–33

“An architect could use all this,



Your notes

place layer over layer, luminous
script over numbers over line,
and never wish to build again with brick
or block, but let the daylight break
through capitals and monoliths,
through the shapes that pride can make,
find a way to trace a grand design
with living tissue, raise a structure
never meant to last,
of paper smoothed and stroked
and thinned to be transparent,
turned into your skin.”

Translation

- An **architect** could make buildings out of layers of paper, which would shine with light and display their texts
- In fact, that architect would probably never want to use bricks or concrete ever again
- Better to use materials that allow the daylight to break through, such as living material
- These would break through “capitals and **monoliths**”
- Then the architect could build something not meant to last, but used and explored until it turns thin and transparent, like your skin

Dharker's intention

- The overwhelming power of daylight is something that people can't control
- The poet could be commenting that the significance of human life will outlast the records we make of it on paper or in a building
- Or she could be commenting on the pride of mankind to believe that these things are permanent when, in fact, human life is fragile and not everything can last
- The “grand design” could refer to the way a life is built, each being unique in its own way but never meant to last



Your notes

- It could also be referencing the religious belief of God's "grand design" and man being made in the image of God
- The perfect image of God is traced with "living tissue" in the form of humankind
- The poet is commenting on the different things in life that control us
- Our lives are mapped out by the paper of religion, wealth, pride and money
- Ultimately, life is a wonderful construction, but it is **fleeting**, like paper. We should not take it for granted

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes and ideas of the poem and then evaluating how Dharker's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these ideas. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Dharker's intentions behind her choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The poem is written in the form of an **ongoing monologue** as an **allegory** for the **impermanence** of life. Dharker's message is that **we should not try so hard to have power and control over life as, ultimately, we cannot control it.**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The fragility of human power	The extended metaphor of tissue paper is used to represent the fragility of human power and life itself	Paper can hold power, but ultimately it becomes old, translucent and fragile
	Paper can "alter things" but it is "thinned by age and touching"	The poet is suggesting that even power is not meant to last



Your notes

Dharker could also be implying that the world would be better if it was more like tissue

Structure

Dharker structures the poem into ten **stanzas**. The first nine are structured into unrhymed, irregular **quatrains**, but the final stanza consists of just one line. The lack of regular rhyme and rhythm reflect the **flimsy** and irregular nature of life, and the final line implies **the need to break free from the control of human power**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Breaking free from power and control	The poem uses a consistent structure of the first nine quatrains	This suggests how restrictive human power can be
	But the quatrains do not conform to a regular rhyme scheme - there is some internal rhyme but there is no regular pattern to it	This could demonstrate the irregularity of life and its flimsy nature
	The poet uses a final single line of "turned into your skin"	This isolates its meaning and shows it breaking free from the controlling structure
		It implies there is a need to break free from the control of human power
	Dharker uses enjambment , such as "where a hand has written in the names and histories..."	Punctuation can be seen as a way of imposing control on writing
		Therefore, freedom can be found even when restricted by control
		The enjambment also mirrors the flowing, delicate nature of paper and the human lives the poet compares tissue to



Your notes

The poet believes humans should become united

It also shows that humanity is not in control as much as it would like to think - **mocking** those who believe they have a lot of power

Language

Dharker uses language to **layer the extended metaphor of tissue as a representation of human life**. She uses examples of the different uses of **paper** to **demonstrate its power and importance, but also how it ultimately does not last**. She explores the theme of power within religion, society and humanity, as well as the power of nature.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Religion and power	The poet references the Koran, where "a hand has written the names and histories"	The poet is suggesting that the power of this type of paper comes from the influence it has on people's lives
	Dharker also uses the symbol of light in the lines, "Paper that lets the light shine through", "The sun shines through", " luminous script" and the "daylight break through"	Light is often a symbol of truth and enlightenment
		God is also often described as a light that guides the way, able to permeate through life and materialism
		The poet could also be referencing the ultimate power of nature, as the overwhelming power of daylight is something that people can't control
Society and power		Light can also symbolise hope; the hope of breaking free of things that control us
	The poet continuously references the power of paper, but not always in a positive way	This suggests that if money is given too much power, it can govern and control our lives (it can "fly" our lives)


Your notes

	For example, when speaking about the “fine slips” from grocery shops that “might fly our lives like paper kites”	
	Dharker uses the metaphor of buildings which are able to “fall away on a sigh”	<p>She is suggesting that anything built as a permanent structure should be abolished, as this is short-sighted</p> <p>Society should be able to adapt, change and become more transparent</p>
Humanity and power	The poem suggests that what humans think is truly important is written down on paper	The poet is questioning if these are the right things to record. Are they really important?
	For example, religious truths, architects’ drawings, borders and receipts for purchases	The poet could also be suggesting that all the symbols of human power can also cause division (such as borders)
	The poem suggests that something as simple as paper itself holds power, as it could “alter things”	This tells us that paper is significant but transient . It is not made to last, just like humans cannot live forever
	Dharker uses hypothetical conditionals , such as “could” and “might”	<p>This suggests that if paper is a metaphor for humanity, then the future is uncertain - things are not set in stone</p> <p>However, the repeated symbolism of light suggests that there is hope for the future</p>
	Paper allows us to keep hold of relationships that have gone – one thing that stays important	It is ironic how paper, something so fragile and easily destroyed, can be as good as stone at preserving the past
	We are reminded that life is fleeting, as it can “fall away on a sigh”	The poet is implying that we might stop trying to build permanent memorials or legacies (“a structure never meant to last”) and start focusing on what is important in life



Your notes

	This suggests that empire building is a pointless exercise. We should treasure the lives around us, focusing on them until they become "transparent with attention"
	However, there is also the implication that, despite the fragility of life, mankind is still strong
The poem also works as a metaphor about the battle between humanity and time	The poet is giving us advice for life here - to let the goodness in and to live in the moment

Context

Context is only worth 6 marks and should not be written about separately. It is therefore important that you do not include irrelevant biographical information about Imtiaz Dharker or the Koran. The best way to include context is to start with the key themes and ideas in the poem, and then include an exploration of why the writer may have chosen to address these themes and ideas. The key themes that Dharker explores in this poem are those of **conflict and power**, so this section on context is based upon these themes:

Conflict and power

- Dharker was born in Pakistan, but grew up in Glasgow
 - Her poetry often concentrates on identity, home and explores the abuse of power
- She presents the idea that humans do not have the right attitude to life
 - We see it as permanent and an opportunity to gain power
- There is **inherent** conflict in the poem
 - Like the material we call tissue, the poem seems light and **insubstantial**, but holds an important message
 - Humanity makes its own conflict by holding on too tight to power and control
 - We create division and conflict between ourselves by insisting on following the instructions handed down to us
- The poem written from the point of view of someone today looking at the conflict, troubles and politics in the world
 - The Koran, buildings, maps, grocery slips: these are all symbols of wider issues in the world



Your notes

- For example, religion, structures of power, divides in politics and culture, and the influence of money and wealth on society
- The poet wonders what the world would be like if these things were more like tissue
- We have ultimately built a world around these things, at odds with our own existence

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam should be an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents key ideas and themes, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that Tissue explores ideas of **the futility of human power**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [Tissue and Ozymandias](#)
- [Tissue and London](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Tissue and Ozymandias

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Tissue and Ozymandias use extended metaphors to show the power and importance of time and nature, and that these things will ultimately outlast human power and its symbols.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show how human power and its symbols are impermanent and pointless, especially compared to time and nature	
Evidence and analysis	Tissue	Ozymandias
	Dharker compares something we associate with solidity and power, such as buildings, to something fragile like tissue paper	In Ozymandias the poet shows a loss of power over time and in competition with nature, as the character is surrounded by desert which is a symbol of nature and time
	This reflects how even the strongest and sturdiest of human constructions	In Ozymandias, the stone statue intended to be a permanent memorial and legacy of the once-



Your notes

will erode and decay over time	great and proud ruler has been ruined by time and nature
In Tissue, Dhaker suggests that humanity has a desire to control, so uses paper, such as maps, to segregate and divide the world into humanity's design	Shelley describes Ozymandias's "sneer of cold command" as if to suggest that he is a cruel and heartless leader, only concerned with his own power and the immortality it will bring. He was a man who believed his power could prevail over time
But paper, and the marks on it, fade with time. The poet considers the role that paper plays in our lives, and why we use it to record information that will be useless as time moves forwards	Ramesses's rule was corroded by his pride, and his legacy largely forgotten by sand and time
Both poets suggest that humans' time (and impact) on earth is short, despite the marks we make upon the world, even if you are the ruler of a once great kingdom	
In both poems, mankind is presented as believing it has control over nature, but nature is an eternal force, whereas humanity will die and become forgotten	

Topic sentence	The temporary and unstable nature of human power is contrasted in both poems with the elevated power of knowledge and art	
Evidence and analysis	Tissue	Ozymandias
	This is shown in Tissue through the references to the Koran and the "architect"	This is shown in Ozymandias by referencing the unknown "sculptor"
	By referencing the Koran, Dharker suggests that the knowledge provided by such texts is not bound by time	Shelley's speaker praises the sculptor, as despite Ramesses seeking eternal power, it is his sculptor's skill that is ultimately remembered
	The immortal power of memories is a more important power to pursue	
	Both poems imply that humanity should choose wisely how it wishes to live and be remembered, as the poems end with the implication that these choices will determine	

how it will be remembered when power is extinguished



Your notes

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poems reflect on the nature of power and time, and the power of nature to outlast humanity, Dharker's poem offers suggestions of hope and for change, whereas Shelley issues a warning about individual arrogance and pride leading to eventual downfall	
Evidence and analysis	Tissue	Ozymandias
	At the end of the poem, the poet presents the reader with their own mortality via "turned into your skin", implying that, like paper, skin is tissue and will inevitably decay and end	At the end of Ozymandias, "Nothing beside remains" except the "lone and level sands" that "stretch far away"
	However, this poem offers hope of change in the form of the symbols of light	Here, Shelley is suggesting that human arrogance and pride corrupt, and that once corrupted, power will fall and be forgotten
	It suggests that we can choose to value things that are more important than material possessions or legacies	
	In this way, humanity has power, but it is important to recognise its fragility and the fact that it won't last forever, so we should make the most of it	This poem does not offer the possibility of redemption
	The irregular and fluctuating rhyme scheme reflects the fragility of life	This poem is written in the more structured form of a sonnet , as a love poem to himself (Ozymandias), reflecting the love he had for himself above all others

Tissue and London

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Tissue and London are critical of material wealth and the importance placed upon it, and explore the nature of power and its importance.

Similarities:



Your notes

Topic sentence	Both poems comment on humanity's desire to control nature	
Evidence and analysis	Tissue	London
	In Tissue, the poet references maps upon which are drawn "borderlines"	In London, Blake juxtaposes "chartered and "flow" in the line "Near where the charter'd Thames does flow", emphasising how impossible it is for humans to ultimately have power over nature
	This reflects mankind's attempts to order, divide and limit nature, and to impose order	Despite being mapped and owned ("chartered"), the Thames continues to "flow" naturally. It cannot be controlled
	However, the use of light imagery demonstrates the overwhelming power of nature over man	

Topic sentence	Both Tissue and London are critical of material wealth and its ability to control	
Evidence and analysis	Tissue	London
	Dharker references the "Fine slips from grocery shops" which have the power to "fly our lives like paper kites"	In London, symbols of wealth and power, such as the monarchy and the church, are criticised as valuing their wealth above the lives and welfare of the people
	This is criticising the importance placed on monetary transactions to "fly" or control our lives	The church is described as "black'ning", suggesting its corrupt nature and the fact that it is failing its moral duty to take care of the poor
	Dharker urges us in the poem to consider what is really important	

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	In London, the oppression and control seems relentless and unending, whereas in Tissue the reader is given the opportunity to make better choices	
Evidence and analysis	Tissue	London
	Dharker uses quatrains, but the rhyme scheme is irregular, reflecting the irregularity and flimsiness of life itself	Blake uses regular quatrains and a cyclical structure, with the poem written mainly in iambic pentameter
	The use of enjambment suggests that freedom can be found even in the most controlled of situations	This reflects the control imposed on the city and is symbolic of the relentless oppression and control its citizens experience
	The final single line breaks free and reminds us of our own mortality, and the choices we can make	In London, the imagery is negative and pessimistic throughout, suggesting that there is no end to the suffering
	Some of the imagery used is both hopeful and powerful, such as “Paper that lets the sun shine through”, suggesting that humanity should allow what is important to dominate our lives	The people are locked in their “mind-forg’d manacles ” so that they are either unable or unwilling to rise up and break free



Your notes

The Emigree

The Émigrée

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. You will not have access to the other poems in the exam, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to The Émigrée by Carol Rumens, from the Power and Conflict anthology.

It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Rumens's intention and message

The Émigrée in a nutshell

The Émigrée was written by the British poet Carol Rumens and was published in 1993. An **emigree** is a woman who has chosen or been forced to leave her home country and live somewhere else. The poem explores the experience of a female speaker who has had to leave her homeland due to war and **tyranny**. Even though the speaker can never return to her home, it is still important to her and she keeps it alive

through memory. The poet explores the themes of **the power of memory**, the **conflict between memory and time**, the **conflict between memory and reality** and the **conflict between childhood and adulthood**.



Your notes

The Émigrée breakdown

Lines 1–8

**“There once was a country... I left it as a child
but my memory of it is sunlight-clear
for it seems I never saw it in that November
which, I am told, comes to the mildest city.
The worst news I receive of it cannot break
my original view, the bright, filled paperweight.
It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,
but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.”**

Translation

- The poet opens with a mysterious first sentence about a non-specified country that the speaker had to leave as a child
- She looks at her home city through the **rose-tinted glasses** of a child
- This means she can only remember the good aspects of living there, and the “worst news” she hears about it can’t **diminish** the good memories, which hold her to it like a “filled paperweight”
- Her memories are described as clear as sunlight
- She doesn’t remember the city in **bleak** times, as represented by “November” when the city changed
- We also learn why she had to leave her city, due to war or **tyrannical** oppression

Rumens's intention

- The opening line establishes a fairy-tale quality, similar to “Once upon a time”, to highlight the fact that the speaker’s home is described as a memory rather than a reality
- The poet is showing how the home the speaker remembers is **romanticised** by the **idealism** of youth
- It probably was never as perfect as the speaker remembers, but the positive memory is “**branded**” or scarred on to her skin

- Here, the poet is commenting on the unreliability of memory, and the conflict between memory, **nostalgia** and reality

Lines 9–16



Your notes

**"The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes
glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks
and the frontiers rise between us, close like waves.
That child's vocabulary I carried here
like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar.
Soon I shall have every coloured molecule of it.
It may by now be a lie, banned by the state
but I can't get it off my tongue. It tastes of sunlight."**

Translation

- The speaker remembers the white streets of the city where she spent her childhood and the graceful slopes that become clearer in her memory over time
- She is separated further from the city by the "**frontiers**" that rise and "close like waves"
- This also implies that the city is **drastically** different from the one she left as a child
- The speaker reflects on the fact that, when she left, she had a "child's vocabulary" and limited knowledge of life
- It didn't contain anything, like a "hollow doll"
- But soon she will be able to recall every word of this language ("every coloured molecule of it"), which she reflects may well be banned or not exist anymore
- However, this doesn't erase the positive memories she carries

Rumens's intention

- The poet uses the theme of language to show how the speaker has not moved on from her childhood
- With her new home, the speaker will have needed to take on a new language and customs
- But she doesn't want to erase her relationship and memory of her original home, which is why she holds onto her first language and childhood memories so closely
- The poet is commenting on the complexity and internal conflict of the emigrant experience

- The poem also represents the conflict between childhood memories and the reality of being an adult
- Lines 17–25



Your notes

**"I have no passport, there's no way back at all
but my city comes to me in its own white plane.
It lies down in front of me, docile as paper;
I comb its hair and love its shining eyes.
My city takes me dancing through the city
of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.
They accuse me of being dark in their free city.
My city hides behind me. They mutter death,
and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight."**

Translation

- The speaker reveals that she has no way to return to her home city
- Instead, her city comes to her in the form of innocent memory and nostalgia (as represented by the colour white)
- The poem **personifies** the city as someone she loves and cares for
- It "lies down" in front of her, "docile as paper", suggesting the city submitted to what happened to it
- The narrator spends time improving and **adoring** its appearance, trying to return it to its former glory
- She again personifies her city by taking her dancing through her new "city of walls"
- This part of the stanza can be interpreted as a description of the narrator's new city, in which she feels trapped, different and persecuted
- But the stanza finishes again with a reference to the "sunlight", in which she will protect her memories and identity from her homeland
- Her "shadow" is proof that the sun still shines

Rumens's intention

- The poet's intentional reference to "passport" suggests the restrictions and control humanity places on borders and travel



Your notes

- The poet uses a more threatening tone in the final four lines. We are not sure who “they” are - only that they are different from the speaker
- The narrator experiences **discrimination** and **prejudice** in her new home, which suggests she is a **refugee** trapped in a country that is not her own
- There are no specific names of cities or countries mentioned
- This creates a sense of the **universality** of the conflict and difficulties **emigrants** can experience when being forced to leave their homes due to war or occupation

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes and ideas of the poem and then evaluating how Rumens's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these ideas. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Rumens's intentions behind her choices in terms of:

- [Form](#)
- [Structure](#)
- [Language](#)

Form

The poem is written mostly in the form of **free verse** in the first person with no rhyme or rhythm. By not using a set form, the poet explores the idea of **freedom** and the **relationship between people and their homes**, as she is not bound by convention. It could also imply the **free and unreliable nature of memory**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Freedom versus control	Free verse with no rhyme or rhythm	This could represent the chaos and lack of control in a country with no stable government
		But along with the positive imagery used in the poem, it is more likely to represent freedom
		It could also reflect the lack of control and order we have over our memories, which can be unreliable



Your notes

One other interpretation is that the lack of pattern reflects the speaker's state of mind, which although is positive in many ways, is also unsettled and divided

Structure

Rumens structures the poem into three separate **stanzas** which explore the **power of memory and the conflict between freedom of her memories with the confinement of her current situation**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The power of memory	The first two stanzas are eight lines each, but the final stanza has nine lines	This could indicate that the speaker can't let go of the memories and doesn't want the memories to end
	Each stanza is separate	Stanza 1 gives an overall positive experience of her life as a child in the country she had to leave. This is fixed and will not change
		Stanza 2 explores whether the speaker can trust her memory which may have become tainted by time and experience
		Stanza 3 explores concerns about her identity and current situation
	The poem uses enjambment . For example, "I left it as a child/but my memory of it is sunlight-clear..."	This may reflect the fluid nature of her memories and the freedom of memory over real experience
	The use of enjambment in the line "My city takes me dancing through the city/of walls.." separates the "walls" from the rest of the text	This separates "walls" as an isolated idea, suggesting that she is isolated and trapped
	The final stanza contains caesura and stops	This emphasises the prison of her experience now - she has no passport and she cannot return to her homeland


Your notes

	But it also adds a sense of chaos to the poem which could be interpreted as freedom
The poet uses the repetition of “they” in final stanza	This gives this section of the stanza an accusatory and aggressive tone to make the city seem threatening and hostile
	The speaker feels separate and divided from her new city’s culture and identity

Language

Rumens uses several literary devices to demonstrate the **clarity and positive nature of her memories, conflicting with reality**.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Conflict of memory versus reality	The title of “The Émigrée” is the feminine form of emigre	Rumens has chosen to specify the sex of her narrator
		This gives a feminine perspective of the emigrant’s experience
	The poet uses epistrophe , as every stanza ends with a reference to sunlight	This technique juxtaposes the positive connotations of sunlight with the negative connotations of “branded”
		This shows that her love for her country and the memory of it will always outweigh any feelings of pain caused by it
	Rumens further juxtaposes darkness with light in the line “my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight”	Her “shadow” is proof that the sun still shines, as do her memories and her positive view of her home city



Your notes

	Sunlight also serves as a metaphor for her memories of her home city as her memory of it is “sunlight-clear”	Again, this suggests the positivity, light and guidance the speaker associates with her home
	This is reinforced by further positive imagery, such as “graceful” and “glow”	The speaker looks back with affection, nostalgia and an idealised version of her home city
	The positive imagery used further juxtaposes with the imagery of war, such as “war”, “tyrants”, “tanks” and “frontiers”	This demonstrates the conflict of her perfect memories with the harsh reality of what she experienced
	The poet also personifies time in “as time rolls its tanks	This also suggests the conflict between time and memory, as time clouds memories
		The speaker is possibly at war with time in order to preserve the perfect memories of her childhood
	The poem also personifies the city as something that is real and needs protecting	Rumens uses the metaphor “I comb its hair and love its shining eyes” as well as “my city hides behind me” to show the speaker’s love for her former city is now maternal
		The speaker is protective of it and her memories of it

Context

Examiners are clear that you should not write about context separately. It is therefore important that you do not include irrelevant biographical information about Carol Rumens or specific examples of refugee crises from around the world. The best way to include context is to start with the key themes and ideas in the poem, and then include an exploration of why the writer may have chosen to address these themes and ideas. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Rumens explores:

- **The power of war and conflict**
- **The power of memory**

The power of war and conflict



Your notes

- Rumens's poetry often concentrates on the relationship between identity and culture
- The main context of The Émigrée is **displacement**; the forced **upheaval** of local people and the need to flee a home country
- She wrote the poem in 1993, at a time of great upheaval for thousands of people
 - However, there is always conflict happening somewhere in the world, forcing people to leave their homes
- The poet suggests that the city the speaker leaves may be war-torn or under the control of a **dictatorial government**
 - Neither the specific city or country are named
 - This lack of specific detail is intentional, as Rumens wants her poem to be relevant to as many people as possible
- The speaker may have claimed **asylum** in the new city and doesn't feel at home there
 - This reflects the hostility and discrimination refugees can experience in a new country
- In this poem, Rumens is highlighting the long-term effects of war and conflict on people and their identity
- It shows how so much of our identity is tied to a place

The power of memory

- The poem focuses on the memories the speaker has of their former home city
 - The city represents hope, happiness and clarity
- Childhood memories are often the strongest, but they can be unreliable
 - The speaker confesses that whatever she learns of her home city now, she will always have a positive, fairy-tale and child-like memory of it
- The poem suggests that any human conflict and aggression, which forces people out of their homes and country, can never erase human memories
 - So despite whatever circumstances forced the poem's speaker to leave their home city, nothing can diminish the perfect, light-filled impression the speaker's childhood memories have left
- In this way, identity is also tied strongly to memory

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam should be an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is



Your notes

therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents key ideas and themes, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that The Émigrée explores ideas of **the power of memory, identity and conflict**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [The Émigrée and Checking Out Me History](#)
- [The Émigrée and Poppies](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

The Émigrée and Checking Out Me History

Comparison in a nutshell:

This would be an interesting comparison because the speaker's reflections in The Émigrée are on her own sense of identity, in a similar way as Agard does in Checking Out Me History. Both speakers suffer a loss of identity as a result of circumstances, or what they have or have not been told.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both Rumens and Agard attach a great deal of emotional significance to their cultural identity	
Evidence and analysis	The Émigrée	Checking Out Me History
	Conflict is shown by Rumens with the aggressive undertones of her choice of language, such as "I am branded by" and "They accuse me"	The violent language connotations used by Agard, such as "Blind me" and "Bandage up me eye" imply the conflict between the speaker's culture and the one being imposed on him by colonial rule
	In Rumens's poem, the speaker carried "That child's vocabulary", suggesting the strong connection to the language of their childhood and their sense of identity	The importance of language to identity is evident through Agard's use of Creole to represent the different cultures which have influenced him


Your notes

Rumens also uses light imagery to represent a dreamlike, idealised childhood, representing all that was good	Agard uses light imagery to represent hope, freedom and inspiration
For example, “an impression of sunlight”, “the graceful slopes glow” and “It tastes of sunlight”	For example, “Toussaint de beacon”, “A shining star” and “A yellow sunrise”
The speaker in The Émigrée is also longing for a return, but she has “no passport, there’s no way back at all” suggesting that even though she feels a sense of cultural belonging and a desire to return to her childhood home, there is a barrier there	The speaker in this poem is longing for a better sense of his history and identity
In this way, the speakers in both poems have barriers to their own identity	

Differences:

Topic sentence	Both poets explore conflict and identity in different ways. Rumens's poem is reflective and suggests one's identity and strength comes from the past and memory, whereas Agard places emphasis on the relevance of facts and history on the person in order to form a sense of identity	
Evidence and analysis	The Émigrée	Checking Out Me History
	The speaker reminisces fondly about her childhood - uses light imagery in “an impression of sunlight” “the white streets” and “it tastes of sunlight”	The speaker in Agard's poem is angry and frustrated about the education imposed on him in his childhood, and what was left out
	The speaker in Rumens's poem is reflecting on somewhere she has left, but knows her own personal history	He is discussing the historic omittance of a large chunk of history that was never taught to him
	The speaker reflects with fondness and nostalgia on the relationship between where she is now and where she wants to be	The speaker in Agard's poem does not remember the past he was taught fondly
	Her memory of the past is stronger than where she is now	He wants to forge ahead with “carving out” his own history and identity

These differences demonstrate that identity is a very individual thing



Your notes

The Émigrée and Poppies

Comparison in a nutshell:

Poppies by Jane Weir and The Émigrée are both poems that explore the impact of conflict on ordinary civilians, the power and importance their memories have to them and the sense of longing they have for things to be different.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	The speakers of both poems are civilians who are deeply affected by conflict, and who long for things to be different	
Evidence and analysis	The Émigrée	Poppies
	In The Émigrée, the speaker has lost her original home to war or occupation	In Poppies, the mother has lost a son to war
	In The Émigrée, the speaker immediately introduces us to her home city via her memory of it, which is “sunlight-clear”	In Poppies, the mother introduces the memory she has of saying goodbye to her son before he went to war via the line “Before you left”
	The reader experiences the love the speaker has for her homeland via her childhood memories of it	The reader experiences the love the mother has for her son via her memory
	The speaker remembers her childhood memories of home with nothing but positivity, despite the circumstances	The mother speaks of the desire to return to a childhood memory “like we did when/you were little”
	There is a conflict between the speaker’s current reality and the joy and love she carries for her home	There is conflict in this poem between the effects of war and the mother’s joy and love for her son
	The speaker demonstrates maternal instincts in the personification of the city, which she wishes to protect	The mother’s maternal instincts are evident towards her lost son as she “smoothed down your shirt’s/upturned collar”

In both poems, the loss is experienced via memory, and both poems evoke feelings of sentimentality



Your notes

Differences:

Topic sentence	The Émigrée reflects on the loss of a place and home, whereas Poppies reflects on the grief of losing a person	
Evidence and analysis	The Émigrée	Poppies
	In The Émigrée, the loss is presented through the personification of a city, and the speaker reflects on losing a place	In Poppies, the mother has lost a son to war, who she longs to hear just one more time
	In this poem, the loss is not an actual death, but a metaphorical one - of the speaker's home of her childhood	In Poppies, the mother introduces the memory she has of saying goodbye to her son before he went to war via the line "Before you left"
	The poet uses more positive language based on her memories of her homeland	The poet here uses more negative imagery to describe the grief and loss of the war
	The Émigrée is written in free verse with no regular rhythm or rhyme scheme	The structure of Poppies is strong and regular
	This reflects the lack of power the speaker has to return home	This mirrors how the speaker is holding in her emotions
	In both poems, the loss experienced is different but equally important	



Your notes

Kamikaze

Each poetry anthology at GCSE contains 15 poems, and in your exam question you will be given one poem - printed in full - and asked to compare this printed poem to another. As this is a closed-book exam, you will not have access to the second poem, so you will have to know it from memory. Fifteen poems are a lot to revise. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-grade response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages of the poet
- How the poet conveys these ideas through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas of other poets in the anthology

Below is a guide to Beatrice Garland's poem 'Kamikaze', from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem it is vital that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Garland's intention and message

Kamikaze in a nutshell

Kamikaze was written by the poet Beatrice Garland in a bid to explore the reasons why soldiers choose to, or are asked to, die for their country. Garland's poem Kamikaze presents the perspectives of both the **kamikaze pilot** and his daughter to show their different ideas about conflict.

Kamikaze breakdown

Lines 1–3

"Her father embarked at sunrise

with a flask of water, a samurai sword

in the cockpit, a shaven head”



Your notes

Translation

- The poem begins by reporting an event from a daughter's perspective: a father leaves on a journey
- The speaker mentions a list which details the pilot's belongings and the **ritualistic** shaved head of a **kamikaze pilot**

Garland's intention

- Garland begins her poem with a description of the pilot boarding his aeroplane to show the personal perspective of his experience
 - The reference to the ritual a kamikaze pilot undertakes before boarding tells readers the pilot is on a suicide mission for his country

Lines 4–6

“full of powerful incantations
and enough fuel for a one-way
journey into history”

Translation

- Garland refers again to the **ritual**: the pilot is repeating **patriotic** chants (“incantations”)
- The speaker tells the reader that this is a suicide mission which will lead to glory for the pilot, that he will be respected always for his sacrifice

Garland's intention

- Here, Garland refers to the power behind the chants of honour and glory which the pilot repeats to complete his military duty
- Garland's speaker lets readers know that this suicide mission is one of **patriotism**, that he has been called to carry out an important duty

Lines 7–8

“but half way there, she thought,
recounting it later to her children,”

Translation

- The speaker is the pilot's daughter who is telling the story to her children
- She continues the story of the father, suggesting that something changes “half way there”

Garland's intention

- Garland alerts readers that this is a story being told by a mother to her children about her own father, showing the perspective of family members during and after conflict
- The break in **stanza** pauses the story and, with the **conjunction** “but”, the speaker highlights something changed on the pilot’s journey, that he had doubts about his duties



Lines 9–12

**“he must have looked far down
at the little fishing boats
strung out like bunting
on a green-blue translucent sea”**

Translation

- Here, the speaker of the story recounts to her children what she imagines about the pilot’s journey: she guesses he looked down on the ocean from his aeroplane

Garland's intention

- The lines convey a tone of **nostalgia** as the pilot leaves his home behind
- Garland explores the pilot’s thoughts and feelings in a bid to understand his experience
 - The speaker suggests the father may have felt emotional, homesick perhaps, as he sees the beautiful ocean

Lines 13–16

**“and beneath them, arcing in swathes
like a huge flag waved first one way
then the other in a figure of eight,
the dark shoals of fishes”**

Translation

- The speaker describes the scene below: the pilot can see the shadows of fish swimming under the water
 - Now the pilot can see a darker shadow of fish beneath the water



Your notes

- Garland describes the size and magnitude of the shoals of fish with the word “swathes” which means ‘a broad area’

Garland’s intention

- These lines contrast the earlier positive description of the scene
 - This description could convey darker thoughts in the pilot’s mind, suggesting he doubts his part in the conflict
 - The fish shoals are described as a flag, like a warning to him

Lines 17–20

**“flashing silver as their bellies
swivelled towards the sun
and remembered how he
and his brothers waiting on the shore”**

Translation

- The speaker describes the fish turning, now silver and bright in the sun
- This reminds him of his childhood, fishing with his brothers

Garland’s intention

- These lines depict the darker thoughts being replaced with brighter memories of the pilot’s childhood
- The fish seem to signal to the pilot as they turn and flash in the sun, suggesting nature reminds him of what is important

Lines 21 – 24

**“built cairns of pearl-grey pebbles
to see whose withstood longest
the turbulent inrush of breakers
bringing their father’s boat safe”**

Translation

- The speaker tells us the pilot remembers how he built small graves of stone with his brother
- He describes how he and his brother competed to see whose grave withstood the crash of waves as they brought the boat in

Garland's intention

- The pilot's memories remind him of family, and of death
- Here, Garland shows how the pilot remembers small intimate details of his past which help him realise the power of nature and the importance of family



Lines 25–30

“– yes, grandfather’s boat – safe
to the shore, salt-sodden, awash
with cloud-marked mackerel,
black crabs, feathery prawns,
the loose silver of whitebait and once
a tuna, the dark prince, muscular, dangerous.”

Translation

- The speaker begins to list all the fish they would catch fishing together as a family
- The pilot remembers catching a tuna, a strong and powerful fish

Garland's intention

- The disrupted rhythm here begins a **stream of consciousness**:
 - The descriptions convey the vivid memory the pilot has as he looks down on the water where he fished with his family
 - The speaker refers to the dark and powerful tuna, alluding to ideas of strength and power with a metaphor of "dark prince"
 - However, Garland gives this power to nature, not the pilot: this **subverts** ideas relating to military strength and power

Lines 31–33

“And though he came back
my mother never spoke again
in his presence, nor did she meet his eyes”

Translation

- The speaker explains that the pilot did return home; he did not complete his mission



Your notes

- However, his return was not welcomed by the speaker's mother, the pilot's wife

Garland's intention

- Garland shows the power of the pilot's childhood memories and love for his home: he returns, choosing not to die in conflict
- The perspective of the speaker's mother is unexpected perhaps: she is disgraced by his return and his disobedience towards his duty to his country:
 - Garland comments on the culture of honour and **patriotism**
 - She conveys the extreme response of individuals when soldiers defy cultural values

Lines 34–36

**"and the neighbours too, they treated him
as though he no longer existed,
only we children still chattered and laughed"**

Translation

- The speaker explains that other people responded similarly: the neighbours alienated the pilot
- The children did not understand these ideas, and continued as before

Garland's intention

- Garland shows how powerful the values of honour and glory are for the pilot's neighbours, so strong that they ignore and **ostracise** him
- Garland explores how children respond differently, suggesting **patriotism** is learned behaviour

Lines 37–40

**"till gradually we too learned
to be silent, to live as though
he had never returned, that this
was no longer the father we loved."**

Translation

- The speaker explains that the children were told to ignore their father too
- The lines here depict the way the children were taught to deny him as a father

Garland's intention



Your notes

- Garland shows an example of children being taught to mimic the ideas of their elders
- Her poem explores family conflicts as a result of cultural ideals regarding **patriotism**

Lines 41–42

**“And sometimes, she said, he must have wondered
which had been the better way to die.”**

Translation

- The speaker ends the poem with her own reflections
- She considers the huge price her father paid for returning home instead of sacrificing his life for his country:
 - She considers his life afterwards to be a metaphorical death too

Garland’s intention

- Garland comments on the sacrifice the father had to make whether or not he completed his suicide mission to explore the impact of **patriotic** values on family
- She ends the poem with a **poignant** comment which shifts the narration from the external to the internal: the ending suggests **unresolved** emotions

Writer’s Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections – form, structure and language – it is always best to move from **what** the poet is presenting (the techniques they use; the overall form of the poem; what comes at the beginning, middle and end of a poem) to **how** and **why** they have made the choices they have.

Focusing on the poet’s overarching ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. Crucially, in the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Garland’s intentions behind her choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The poem is a seven **stanza** narration told from a **third-person** perspective. The daughter recounts the journey of her father, a kamikaze pilot, and the family’s perspective on his ‘dishonourable’ return.



Your notes

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
The wide-reaching impact of conflict	The story of the pilot's journey is told from his daughter's perspective in third person to convey the impact on family members	The poem shows the detached perspective of those left behind: this creates a distance between the daughter and her father to depict the barriers in their relationship and the resulting isolation
	The narration shifts briefly to first person at the end when the daughter describes the response to the father's decision to come home: "no longer the father we loved"	Garland's narrative shifts offer different versions of events: the father as he remembers his childhood and the daughter's - both as a child and as an adult
	The perspective returns to third person to complete the poem: "And sometimes, she said, he must have wondered which had been the better way to die"	The ending conveys the isolation created within the family due to conflict and suggests the daughter's loss as well as the father's

Structure

The poem follows a **rigid** and ordered structure which represents both the rigidity of the family towards the father and the strict discipline of military duty.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Suffering due to conflict	The poem has a rigid structure of six lines per stanza	The structure reflects the idea of order and discipline, linking to the cultural and military values Garland explores in her poem
	However, at times, the poem shifts to free-flowing verse shown via enjambment , to represent the pilot's thoughts and memories	Garland juxtaposes the controlled voice of the speaker with the reflective tone of the father reminiscing about his childhood



Your notes

		Garland shows the father as less controlled by ideas of patriotism , disobeying the strict rules of his culture
	The poem ends with the word 'die', emphasising the daughter's powerful reflection: "He must have wondered which was the better way to die"	This highlights his isolation and suffering as a result of his decision to return home instead of sacrificing his life
		The daughter, too, is left without resolution
		Garland alludes to the sacrifice and suffering of the entire family as result of conflict

Language

Garland weaves **imagery** alluding to the beauty and power of nature alongside images related to conflict, in particular, that of the Japanese kamikaze pilot. This conveys the emotions of the pilot as he battles with his decision to fight for his country or return to it.

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Conflict and identity	The poem begins with a list referring to the ritual undertaken by kamikaze pilots: "with a flask of water, a samurai sword in the cockpit, a shaven head"	Garland alludes to the powerful nationalistic messages the pilot received, and perhaps relies upon, to complete his mission, as he chants his "powerful incantations"
	The speaker compares the boats in the ocean to bunting in a "blue-green translucent sea", to describe the scene below as a positive one	The simile Garland uses connotes to the pilot's love for his beautiful homeland and perhaps to the idea of victory and celebration



Your notes

	<p>Garland contrasts the positive imagery with a description of a dark shoal of fish who seem to alert the pilot to something: the dark "swathes" of fish wave like a flag and flash at the pilot</p>	<p>Garland's simile here contrasts the positive imagery of before</p>
		<p>Here, her comparison of the fish to a flag suggests the pilot's thoughts turn darker, and that nature is signalling to him</p>
		<p>Garland illustrates the power of nature and family to reverse the nationalistic ideals the pilot has been taught</p>
Sacrifice	<p>The speaker, indirectly speaking on behalf of the pilot, lists the fish he used to catch with his family when he was young: "cloud-marked mackerel, black crabs, feathery prawns, the loose silver of whitebait"</p>	<p>The sensory nature of the father's vivid memories evokes sympathy from the reader</p>
		<p>Garland shows that the speaker thinks about her father despite their alienated relationship: this implies a sacrifice made on both their parts</p>

Context

Examiners repeatedly state that context should not be considered as additional factual information: in this case, it is not random biographical information about Beatrice Garland, or historical facts about kamikaze pilots that are unrelated to the ideas in Kamikaze. The best way to understand context is as the ideas and perspectives explored by Garland in Kamikaze which relate to power or conflict. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Garland explores:

- [Loss due to conflict](#)
- [Powerlessness due to conflict](#)

Loss due to conflict

- Garland's Kamikaze is one of a collection of poems in an anthology which considers, among other themes, family loss due to cultural divides
 - In Kamikaze, Garland chose to explore the **nationalistic** values of Japanese **kamikaze pilots** and their families, and how this may lead to family conflict
 - During **World War II**, Japan adopted a strategy of attacking enemy targets with suicide bombers known as **kamikaze pilots**
 - Japanese culture is closely connected to honour and bravery above all



Your notes

- An individual's dishonourable actions will reflect poorly on their friends and family
- This poem considers the experience of a kamikaze pilot: a father chooses to return home instead of completing his mission, thus defying social and cultural expectations
- This leads to his isolation as his family turns their back on him
- The poem explores the loss the family suffers through the perspective of his daughter
 - Neither the daughter nor her own children have the father in their lives
 - Garland explores how the cultural values her family support, that of honour and duty to country above all else, lead to divisions

Powerlessness due to conflict

- Garland's poem considers the social pressure placed upon soldiers via the perspective of a father leaving home and contemplating his death:
 - By showing the father's doubts about his military duty, readers see a human side of war, regardless of which side a soldier is on
 - Garland's father is alienated and ignored due to his choice to return: the father is powerless to be with his family again regardless of his decision
- Garland challenges cultural values regarding **patriotism** by presenting a daughter and her siblings as powerless to defy their mother's wishes
 - They are told to turn their back on their father and they obey
 - Garland questions this by presenting the daughter's **unresolved** reflections
 - She tells her own children about their grandfather in his absence
 - She acknowledges that her father was powerless in his situation: "He must have wondered which was the better way to die"

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam is a comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems. It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents ideas about power, or conflict, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that Kamikaze explores the ideas of **loss due to conflict** and **powerlessness due to conflict**, the following comparisons are the most appropriate:

- [Kamikaze and Poppies](#)
- [Kamikaze and War Photographer](#)
- [Kamikaze and Remains](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:



Your notes

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Kamikaze and Poppies

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Kamikaze and Poppies convey personal and individual loss due to conflict by presenting the perspectives of family members. The poems explore ideas related to bravery and honour, and how these values can lead to a sense of powerlessness for all involved in the conflict.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show the effects of loss on family members due to conflict	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze	Poppies
	Kamikaze shows the perspective of a family member after the war, in this case, a daughter, narrating a story about their father, a Kamikaze pilot	Similarly, in Poppies the poet shows the effect of loss on those left behind by presenting the perspective of a parent grieving their son's death in war
	In Garland's poem, the perspective alternates between the father's evocative memories as he leaves for war, and the daughter's recounting of responses to his return	Weir uses enjambment (run on lines) to present a parent's emotional and evocative stream of consciousness : a free-flowing memory about their son's childhood
	The shift from the personal and emotional pain of the father as he chooses to live rather than die contrasts with the pragmatic retelling of the division of the family on his return	Although, at points, Weir changes the tone with caesurae to break the flow, signifying the parent's disrupted and emotional break in the voice



Your notes

The speaker in Kamikaze uses sensory imagery to describe intimate moments the father remembers about his past as he flies to war	The speaker in Poppies also uses sensory imagery to describe intimate moments of the son's childhood which the parent misses: "Graze my nose across the tip of your nose"
The pain of loss is presented in both poems by showing personal memories and perspectives of loved ones involved in a war	

Topic sentence	Both poets represent powerlessness of those involved in conflict	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze	Poppies
	Powerlessness is shown via Kamikaze's reflective tone which shifts perspectives from third-person ("he must have wondered which had been the better way to die") to a first-person plural ("the father we loved") <p>The reflections shift perspective to convey the different ways the family members respond</p>	Powerlessness of a family member is expressed in Poppies through the reflective tone of a dramatic monologue <p>It is delivered by a parent in a direct address to their dead son: "hoping to hear your playground voice"</p>
It could be argued that both speakers convey the individual's sense of powerlessness after conflict as they reflect on their experience of loss		
	Garland presents the daughter's powerlessness through sensory imagery related to sound: "we too learned to be silent", suggesting the daughter's broken relationship with her father was not autonomous and without clear resolution	Weir represents the parent's powerlessness to be with their son again using sensory imagery to end the poem without any resolution : the parent is left listening for their son's voice on the wind

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	While both poets suggest that conflict leads to powerlessness, the poems present different attitudes to war	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze	Poppies
	In Kamikaze, the father doubts his role in war	In Poppies, however, the parent suggests the son was innocent to the realities of war
		The metaphor , "the world overflowing like a treasure chest", connotes to ideas of war bringing glory and adventure
	The father is convinced by his memories to return home instead of dying for his country	Here, the parent describes their son as "intoxicated" with war, implying he was poisoned with the patriotic ideas associated with it
	The parent experiences loss because he is alienated by his family for refusing to sacrifice himself for his country	Here, however, the parent experiences grief as a result of the son's enthusiasm for conflict

Kamikaze and War Photographer

Comparison in a nutshell:

This is an effective comparative choice to explore the impact of conflict on those other than soldiers themselves. Both Garland's Kamikaze and Duffy's War Photographer present unconventional perspectives and descriptions of the experience of conflict.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems show that conflict has wide-reaching influence by showing particular individuals affected by it	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze	War Photographer
	An unconventional experience of conflict is presented through a narration of a daughter telling her children a story about her father, a kamikaze pilot	Similarly, Duffy shows the experience of grief from the perspective of a war photographer developing photographs and remembering what he has seen


Your notes

Garland's poem is structured to represent the father's personal reflections as he flies over his homeland on his way to a suicide mission	Duffy's poem represents the photographer's personal grief through disjointed flashbacks as he remembers those who have suffered in conflict: "running children in a nightmare heat"
However, Garland shifts perspective: the story is told from the daughter's perspective as she reflects on her father's choices and the impact of them	Duffy's persona feels displaced back at home in "Rural England". He describes their experience of pain as ordinary in comparison to what he has seen
The poems both present the effects of conflict on individuals involved with conflict around the world, as well its continuing impact afterwards	
The daughter's unresolved feelings about her father's decision are shown at the end of the poem as she acknowledges, "he must have wondered which was the better way to die"	The poem ends with the line "they do not care" suggesting a lack of resolution for the speaker, and continuing suffering due to conflict
The poems consider the experience of grief as a solitary one; they convey the isolation of the parent and the photographer in their settings	
Both poets wish to raise awareness of the effect of conflict on individual lives beyond the battlefields, at home or at work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Therefore, both poems could be considered a social commentary on the wide-reaching negative impact of conflict ▪ The memories of each character are not resolved at the end of the poems, suggesting continued suffering for all those involved in the war 	

Differences:

Topic sentence	While Garland chooses to show a strong patriotic response to the conflict in her poem <i>Kamikaze</i> , Duffy's War Photographer presents an impassive and apathetic public	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze	War Photographer
Evidence and analysis	Garland shows us a different perspective on patriotism by conveying the father's	Duffy's omniscient speaker allows the reader insight into the photographer's thoughts


Your notes

love for country and heritage: seeing it below makes him turn away from his military duty	about the futility of his work and frustration with his peers at home
	He adopts a bitter tone towards his homeland, suggesting they are apathetic and disinterested in conflict: "The reader's eyeballs prick with tears between the bath and pre-lunch beers."
Garland's persona has strong positive emotions for his homeland and past. However, Duffy's persona conveys feelings of resignation and detachment from his homeland	
The speaker describes how his family and neighbours strongly oppose his decision, and alienate him for disobeying his patriotic military duties	In contrast, Garland's speaker takes on a cynical tone, suggesting the photographs of conflict do not evoke emotion at home: "his editor will pick out five or six for Sunday's supplement"
She emphasises, with repetition , their extreme response: "as though he no longer existed" and "this was no longer the father we loved"	A detached speaker comments on the lack of interest at home: "stares impassively at where/he earns his living and they do not care"
Though the reactions of those at home are different, each poem presents lasting isolation for individuals involved in the conflict	

Kamikaze and Remains

Comparison in a nutshell:

Both Garland's Kamikaze and Armitage's Remains highlight the unrelenting nature of isolation and personal loss. The poems present speakers who feel powerless within conflict and in the wake of it.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both poems highlight isolation and loss after conflict as a result of decisions during war	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze	Remains
	In Kamikaze, Garland uses the third-person to describe how the family	On the other hand, in Remains, Armitage uses a first-person voice to present the isolation of



Your notes

alienates him after he returns home: "They treated him as though he no longer existed"	the soldier himself
The speaker adopts a reflective tone to indicate her father's thoughts as he flies over his homeland	The speaker's tone is disjointed with caesurae and varied sentence lengths to reflect his brutal and haunting memories: "pain itself, the image of agony"
The enjambment weaves emotion into an otherwise detached third-person perspective , suggesting unresolved feelings between the daughter and her father	
Garland's speaker, the pilot's daughter, uses first-person plural pronouns at the end to allude to the personal loss the children felt losing their father: "We too learned to be silent, to live as though he had never returned"	While the start of the poem uses first-person plural pronouns ("all three of us open fire"), this changes to his individual perspective when he returns home ("I see every round as it rips through his life –"): this suggests the isolation he feels after conflict
The speaker in Remains is left in the "here and now" without resolution ("end of the story. Except not really"), while the speaker in Kamikaze is left wondering if her father has any regrets	
	The poem's speakers are both caught between the present and past, suggesting the relentless nature of their isolation and the far-reaching impact of conflict

Differences:

Topic sentence	While both poets explore the negative impact of conflict on individuals, the poets choose to present different experiences of war and regret	
Evidence and analysis	Kamikaze In Kamikaze, the pilot chooses not to engage in conflict, reminded of his love for family and homeland as he flies to a suicide mission	Remains However, in Remains, the first-person speaker has a flashback to a moment during battle which haunts him, suggesting he regrets his actions in conflict



Your notes

His decision leads to dishonour and isolation from his family and neighbours for what they believe are cowardly actions	His doubts are presented in the repetition of the line, “probably armed, possibly not”, implying he has considered he may have killed an innocent man
Kamikaze presents the perspective of an alienated kamikaze pilot choosing family and home over his military duty, whereas Remains shows a soldier’s trauma after war for engaging in his military duty	
Garland’s speaker considers his decision at the end of the poem: suggesting her father may have regretted his decision: “He must have wondered which had been the better way to die”	Armitage’s poet persona is haunted by this moment: “I see every round as it rips through his life” He expresses the powerlessness he feels: “the drink and drugs won’t flush him out”
Both poems comment on the powerlessness experienced by those involved	



Your notes

Checking Out Me History

Each poetry anthology in the GCSE contains 15 poems, and in the poetry question in the exam you will be given one poem on the paper - printed in full - and asked to compare this given poem to one other from the anthology. You will not have access to the other poems in the exam, so you will have to know them very well from memory. Fifteen poems is a lot to learn. However, understanding four things will enable you to produce a top-mark response:

- The meaning of the poem
- The ideas and messages the poet wanted to convey
- How the poet conveys these ideas and messages through their methods
- How do these ideas compare and contrast with the ideas and themes of other poems in the anthology

Below is a guide to 'Checking Out Me History' by John Agard, from the Power and Conflict anthology. It includes:

- **Overview:** a breakdown of the poem, including its possible meanings and interpretations
- **Writer's methods:** an exploration of the poet's techniques and methods
- **Context:** an exploration of the context of the poem, relevant to its themes
- **What to compare it to:** ideas about which poems to compare it to in the exam

Overview

In order to answer an essay question on any poem, it is essential that you understand what it is about. This section includes:

- The poem in a nutshell
- A 'translation' of the poem, section-by-section
- A commentary of each of these sections, outlining Agard's intention and message

Checking Out Me History in a nutshell

Checking Out Me History is a modern poem published in 2007 by the poet John Agard, who was born in British Guiana, now called Guyana, in the Caribbean. The poem uses non-standard **phonetic** spelling and mixes **Guyanese Creole** with standard English to represent the voice of a black man who recounts all of the white historical figures he was taught as a child at school and is frustrated that important figures from black history were not mentioned. He, therefore, resolves to discover more about the history and **heritage** relevant to him. The title of the poem is thus **ironic**, as it is not "his" history he is "checking out".

Checking Out Me History breakdown

Lines 1–5

"Dem tell me

Dem tell me

Wha dem want to tell me

Bandage up me eye with me own history

Blind me to me own identity"



Your notes

Translation

- The speaker repeats "Dem" meaning "them" or "they"
- "Them" or "they" refers to his white teachers
- He says that they teach him what they want to teach him, controlling what people learn
- They cover up **colonised** people's history from them, blinding people like the speaker to their true history and identity

Agard's intention

- The narrator of this poem is introduced through their voice and the deliberate use of the Guyanese Creole dialect
- The poet is referring to the English curriculum taught by British educators, which was written by white people and **biased** towards white history
- The use of **non-standard English** is used to show his own culture and background, which he feels is not acknowledged by the English curriculum
- It also reflects his pride in his own culture and background

Lines 6–9

"Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat

dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat

But Toussaint L'Ouverture

no dem never tell me bout dat"

Translation

- The narrator then references the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and the childhood story of Dick Whittington and his cat

- But he was never taught about black historical figures, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture

Agard's intention

- The poet references white historical figures or events in each **quatrain** and contrasts this with a black historical figure who isn't included in the curriculum
- This is to show that these white historical references were irrelevant to him
- Toussaint L'Ouverture was a slave and the leader of the **Haitian Revolution**
- He beat back the (white) French emperor **Napoleon**, which is how Haiti gained independence from the French and became the first black **democracy** in the Americas
- He transformed the lives of many slaves



Lines 10–21

"Toussaint

a slave

with vision

lick back

Napoleon

battalion

and first Black

Republic born

Toussaint de thorn

to de French

Toussaint de beacon

of de Haitian Revolution"

Translation

- The speaker then "teaches" us about Toussaint L'Ouverture
- He was a slave who rose up to beat back Napoleon's **battalions** leading to Haiti's independence
- He was a thorn in the French's side, meaning a constant pain, and a figure-head of the Haitian revolution

Agard's intention

- The poet deliberately changes to **italics** here to contrast the difference between white and black history
- Toussaint as a beacon implies he is **illuminating** the poet's true historical identity
- His history is important to him, as demonstrated by his knowledge of this historical figure more relevant to the speaker and the poet



Lines 22–25

"Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon
and de cow who jump over de moon

Dem tell me bout de dish run away with de spoon
but dem never tell me bout Nanny de maroon"

Translation

- They are taught about trivial things such as the man who discovered the balloon and the nursery rhyme "Hey Diddle Diddle"
- But they didn't teach him about Nanny de Maroon, a Jamaican slave born to the **Asante** people in the late 17th century

Agard's intention

- Even nursery rhymes and English inventors are prioritised over such important black historical figures

Lines 26–31

"Nanny
see-far woman
of mountain dream
fire-woman struggle
hopeful stream
to freedom river"

Translation

- Nanny was a "see-far" woman, meaning a **visionary**
- She founded her own town for other escaped slaves in the mountains of Jamaica
- Today, she is a Jamaican national hero

Agard's intention

- Again, Agard changes into italics to highlight the difference in historical **narratives**
- Nanny de Maroon's actions were a source of hope for other enslaved people, like a stream that flows into a deeper river of freedom
- The reference to "fire" again suggests illuminating the speaker's true history
- The reference to struggle highlights that her journey and fight were not easy



Lines 32–39

"Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo

but dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu

Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492

but what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too

Dem tell be bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp

and how Robin Hood used to camp

Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul

but dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole"

Translation

- The narrator then goes on to list other important figures and events in white history
- Admiral Lord Nelson defeated Napoleon in The Battle of Waterloo
- Shaka was a **Zulu** king from Southern Africa, famous for bringing together different nations in order to grow the Zulu kingdom:
 - The speaker is not taught about him
- He is also taught about Christopher Columbus, who came to America in 1492:
 - However, the **indigenous** peoples of the Caribbean, the "Caribs" and the "Arawaks", were mostly killed and **displaced** after Columbus's arrival
- The British taught the speaker about Florence Nightingale, who famously nursed injured soldiers by the light of her lamp during the **Crimean War**
- They were even taught about **mythological figures** like Robin Hood, and another nursery rhyme, "Old King Cole"
- But the British never taught the speaker about Mary Seacole

Agard's intention

- Shaka is a historical figure who never made any contact with European people
- He is a historic figure who **revolutionised** African communities alone, and not someone one would expect to learn about in an English school
- Agard is indicating that the narrator is very knowledgeable about the type of history that matters to him



Lines 40–49

"From Jamaica
she travel far
to the Crimean War
she volunteer to go
and even when de British said no
she still brave the Russian snow
a healing star
among the wounded
a yellow sunrise
to the dying"

Translation

- Mary Seacole was from Jamaica and had to travel far to get to the Crimean War
- She volunteered to help but initially was denied by the British War Office
- She then travelled independently to Russia to help heal the wounded
- She gave hope, like a healing star and a bright sunrise, to sick and dying men

Agard's intention

- Again, Agard deliberately changes the font to teach us about the history that matters more to him
- He once again uses the image of illumination to highlight this aspect of history

Lines 50–53

"Dem tell me
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me

But now I checking out me own history

I carving out me identity"



Your notes

Translation

- The speaker repeats the opening line of the poem, that the British only taught colonised students their version of history
- However, the speaker is learning the history of his own people
- By doing so, the speaker is creating his own identity

Agard's intention

- This marks a turning point in the poem, from "dem" to "I"
- This shows the speaker taking ownership of his own identity
- The poem is now about him, rather than them

Writer's Methods

Although this section is organised into three separate sections - form, structure and language - it is important to take an **integrated** approach to AO2, focusing on the main themes and ideas of the poem and then evaluating how Agard's choices of language, structure and form contribute to these ideas. In essence, how and why the poet has made the choices they have, in relation to their intentions and message.

Focusing on the poet's main ideas, rather than individual poetic techniques, will gain you far more marks. In the below sections, all analysis is arranged by theme, and includes Agard's intentions behind his choices in terms of:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The poem is written as a form of **dramatic monologue**, in which the speaker uses **oral poetry to teach the reader his history, as opposed to the history imposed upon him**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Identity and control	Dramatic monologue from the point of view of the speaker, presumably someone who was educated in the British system	The speaker is able to take back "control" over the history that matters most to him

Structure

Agard deliberately structures the poem into **two distinct styles** through the use of italics. This shows the **separation between the history he was taught and black history**, which is more important to his own identity



Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Identity and control	Poem alternates between two structures, marked by two different fonts	Agard juxtaposes sometimes frivolous British and white history taught in colonial schools with powerful black history
		This implies that these people have been ignored or purposefully omitted from British education, as the British chose to glorify their own historical figures
	Stanzas dealing with the history the speaker was forced to learn use simple rhyming couplets	The simple, almost child-like rhymes emphasise the superficial nature and lack of relevance of this history to the speaker
	Each of these stanzas starts with "Dem tell me"	The repetition suggests frustration at the colonial control which has dominated the speaker's life, and which now dominates these stanzas of the poem
		Agard seems to believe that if you control what people learn about the past, then you control how people think and what they think about themselves
	Each stanza ends with reference to a black historical figure	This suggests the lack of prominence given to these figures
	These stanzas also repeatedly use the connective "but"	This is used to tie together black and white history. They cannot be separated and one should not be ignored over the other



Your notes

	Final stanza links back to the first, and contrasts "Blind me to me own identity" with "I carving out me own identity"	This shows the speaker's journey to find his own identity
	The longer verses concentrate on someone important in black history	Agard is using an unconventional form to write about unconventional ideas
	The lines are shorter and written in free verse , sounding more like a speech	The tone is not mocking, contrasting with the poet's mocking tone in the stanzas referencing nursery rhymes, as if these were important
	Agard uses non-standard phonetic spelling	Creole is the native language of an area which has arisen from attempting to speak two different languages
		This shows how the speaker is resisting the traditions of the English language and the restrictions imposed by colonial rule
Control and oppression	The poem deliberately does not use punctuation	Punctuation can be interpreted as a set of rules used to shape and restrict communication
		By not using it, Agard allows the listener or reader to interpret the poem in their own way and attach their own set of rules, and identity, to it, therefore resisting oppression

Language

Agard uses his choice of techniques and language to **contrast the importance and relevance of the British or white history taught in colonised schools with less prominent black history**

Theme	Evidence	Poet's intention
Identity and control	Agard uses violent metaphors , such as "blind me" and "bandage up me eye" to depict the impact of not learning about history relevant to the speaker's identity	This emphasises the deliberate nature of the abuse inflicted by colonial control



Your notes

Conflict between different histories	Verses about black history are full of positive and nature imagery , such as “mountain dream” and “yellow sunrise”	This suggests the longevity and power of these historical figures, just like the longevity and power of nature
		The rich imagery used in these verses juxtaposes with the childish lexis in the other stanzas
		This reflects the beautiful and complex nature of black history
	Agard repeatedly uses the motif of light in the black history verses. For example, “Toussaint de beacon ”, “fire-woman”, “a healing star” and “a yellow sunrise”	This implies that these figures are a source of guidance and inspiration
		They illuminate the history that has been hidden or deliberately omitted from the curriculum
	At the end of the poem, the poet uses the present continuous tense “I carving”	This suggests that the search for his own identity is an on-going process
		The deliberate choice of the verb “carving” also suggests that it is a difficult and sometimes painful journey

Context

Examiners are clear that context should not be written about separately. It is therefore important that you do not write about context separately, or include irrelevant biographical information about John Agard or the historical figures mentioned in the poem. The best way to include context is to start with the key themes and ideas in the poem, and then include an exploration of why the writer may have chosen to address these themes and ideas. This section has therefore been divided into two relevant themes that Agard explores:

- **Cultural identity**
- **Oppression and control**

Cultural identity



Your notes

- Guyana was a Dutch colony until 1966:
 - Agard was born there and received a British education
 - When Guyana became independent, he realised how much of his identity he had been **deprived** of
- The title of the poem reflects the subject matter
- The poem written from the perspective of someone from a Caribbean culture, as the title is written in a Creole **dialect**
- The use of the words "Checking Out" implies a less formal way of learning about history, rather than studying it at school
- The poem is filled with historic context:
 - On both "sides" of the British-colonial story are figures whose contributions to their home, culture or people are significant
 - Agard examines both sides to shed light on some of the most influential historical figures whose names are overshadowed over and over again
- Much of colonial society was about being told what one's place in the world was by someone else:
 - The poet is suggesting that colonial education cannot be trusted because it does not have the interests of colonised people in mind
- The use of historical figures important to black and colonised peoples' history shows the poet's passion and pride towards his own history and identity:
 - These are people the poet can relate to and wants to learn about
 - They represent freedom from the oppression of the colonised education system
 - The poet may also be questioning why people don't know about minority groups from the Caribbean, such as the Caribs and Arawaks
 - This suggests that people may be ignorant to his cultural identity

Oppression and control

- The poem implies that denying people access to their history is a form of oppression:
 - It stops people from being inspired by history that is relevant to them and establishing a separate identity (to that of their colonisers)
- It is possible that British and other colonised powers deliberately omitted Toussaint L'Ouverture from their teachings:
 - They might have feared that other oppressed peoples might learn from this example and rise up



Your notes

- In order to reclaim that identity, the speaker argues, colonised peoples must reclaim their history
- The key to fighting back is for colonised people to investigate and learn about their own history:
 - If you control what people learn about the past, then you can control how people think and what they think about themselves
 - Whoever controls the past controls the present
 - The poet is therefore arguing that, without a history and a voice, we have no identity
- The poem is therefore intended to apply to all people living under oppression and being denied their cultural identity

What to Compare it to

The essay you are required to write in your exam should be an integrated comparison of the ideas and themes explored in two of your anthology poems (the one given on the exam paper and one other). It is therefore essential that you revise the poems together, in pairs, to understand how each poet presents key ideas and themes, in comparison to other poets in the anthology. Given that *Checking Out Me History* explores ideas of **identity, oppression and control**, the following comparisons would be a good place to start:

- [Checking Out Me History and London](#)
- [Checking Out Me History and The Émigrée](#)

For each pair of poems, you will find:

- The comparison in a nutshell
- Similarities between the ideas presented in each poem
- Differences between the ideas presented in each poem
- Evidence and analysis of these similarities and differences

Checking Out Me History and London

Comparison in a nutshell:

This comparison provides the opportunity to compare the poets' attitudes towards the misuse of power by those in authority. However, while Agard gives a solution, Blake does not, demonstrating their differing viewpoints on the potential for cultural and social change.

Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both Agard and Blake challenge the power of humans to control and oppress
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Your notes

Evidence and analysis	Checking Out Me History	London
	Agard challenges the authority of the English curriculum, and British and other colonial powers, through the deliberate use of phonetic spelling, lack of punctuation and free verse	Blake challenges the “blackening church” for not fulfilling their obligations and helping the poor
	The repetition of “Dem tell me” suggests the speaker’s frustration and anger at the restrictions imposed on what he is able to learn by the British education system	The monarchy is also criticised as being responsible for the misery and suffering of war
	Agard uses nature imagery to imply the powerful force of his history and its ability to outlive the history and identity colonised education tried to impose upon him	Blake’s London criticises attempts by authorities to control and own nature, which are ultimately futile
	He describes Nanny de Maroon as “a healing star” and “a yellow sunrise” to symbolise her power and inspiration	Blake juxtaposes “chartered” and “flow” in the line “Near where the charter’d Thames does flow”, emphasising how impossible it is for humans to ultimately have power over nature
	The authority he is criticising cannot ultimately control forces of nature such as a star and the sunrise	Despite being mapped and owned (“ chartered ”), the Thames continues to “flow” naturally. It cannot be controlled

topic sentence	Both Agard and Blake use simple language to convey their criticisms of social and cultural inequality	
Evidence and analysis	Checking Out Me History	London
	Agard uses simple stanzas and references to folk tales and nursery rhymes	Poem takes a simple, four stanza form using standard English


Your notes

<p>These contrast with the free verse and rich imagery employed in the stanzas dealing with black history</p>	<p>Blake wanted his poetry to feel accessible to all members of society</p>	
<p>The poem is also a form of oral poetry, designed to teach by being performed, in order to convey a message</p>	<p>The language is almost conversational in tone</p>	
<p>Both poets' message is one of social change, so both poems have tones of frustration and anger</p>		

Differences:

Topic sentence	<p>While both poems focus on how the disenfranchised within society have very little power, Agard offers a solution to reclaim control and ownership of one's own identity. Blake suggests the control and oppression is imposed not only by authority, but also by people themselves not rising up against oppression, and therefore he implies that nothing will change</p>	
Evidence and analysis	<p>Checking Out Me History</p>	<p>London</p>
	<p>Agard focuses on prominent people in black history, using a change of font to italics and a change of style to emphasise them</p>	<p>London has a cyclical structure, as suffering is the focus at the start and at the end of the poem</p>
	<p>This also suggests he is breaking the confining and controlling structure of the colonised education system</p>	<p>The quatrains and regular ABAB rhyme scheme imply that the suffering is repetitive and never-ending - he does not offer a solution</p>
	<p>Agard uses imagery of light to show a contrast and hope, emphasising the "them" and "us" and the fact that people can overthrow oppression</p>	<p>Blake uses bleak imagery, such as "mind-forg'd manacles" to illustrate the hopelessness of the situation, and that people are trapped</p>

Checking Out Me History and The Émigrée
Comparison in a nutshell:

This would be an interesting comparison because the speaker's reflections in *The Émigrée* are on her own sense of identity, in a similar way as Agard does in *Checking Out Me History*. Both speakers suffer a loss of identity as a result of circumstances, or what they have or have not been told.



Similarities:

Topic sentence	Both Agard and Rumens attach a great deal of emotional significance to their cultural identity	
Evidence and analysis	Checking Out Me History	The Émigrée
	The violent language connotations used by Agard, such as "Blind me" and "Bandage up me eye" imply the conflict between the speaker's culture and the one being imposed on him by colonial rule	Conflict is shown by Rumens with the aggressive undertones of her choice of language, such as "I am branded by" and "They accuse me"
	The importance of language to identity is evidence through Agard's use of Creole to represent the different cultures which have influenced him	In Rumens's poem, the speaker carried "That child's vocabulary", suggesting the strong connection to the language of their childhood and their sense of identity
	Agard uses light imagery to represent hope, freedom and inspiration	Rumens also uses light imagery to represent a dreamlike, idealised childhood, representing all that was good
	For example, "Toussaint de beacon", "A shining star" and "A yellow sunrise"	For example, "an impression of sunlight", "the graceful slopes glow" and "It tastes of sunlight"
	The speaker in this poem is longing for a better sense of his history and identity	The speaker in <i>The Émigrée</i> is also longing for a return, but she has "no passport, there's no way back at all" suggesting that even though she feels a sense of cultural belonging and a desire to return to her childhood home, there is a barrier there
	In this way, both poems have barriers to identity	

Differences:



Your notes

Topic sentence	Both poets explore conflict and identity in different ways. Rumens's poem is reflective and suggests one's identity and strength comes from the past and memory, whereas Agard places emphasis on the relevance of facts and history on the person in order to form a sense of identity	
Evidence and analysis	Checking Out Me History	The Émigrée
	The speaker in Agard's poem is angry and frustrated about the education imposed on him in his childhood, and what was left out	The speaker reminisces fondly about her childhood - uses light imagery in "an impression of sunlight" "the white streets" and "it tastes of sunlight"
	He is discussing the historic omittance of a large chunk of history that was never taught to him	The speaker in Rumens's poem is reflecting on somewhere she has left, but knows her own personal history
	The speaker in Agard's poem does not remember the past he was taught fondly	The speaker reflects with fondness and nostalgia on the relationship between where she is now and where she wants to be
	He wants to forge ahead with "carving out" his own history and identity	Her memory of the past is stronger than where she is now
	These differences demonstrate that identity is very individual	