Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Songs of Ourselves Volume 1: the 2027 poems

Contents

1. Start here: the 15 poems and the exam
2. Love and marriage
3. Nature, the environment and war
4. Place, culture and identity
5. Childhood, family and being human
6. Key terms
7. Quick questions
8. What to do next

Start here: the 15 poems and the exam

- For Cambridge IGCSE Literature in English in 2027, Paper 1 Section A (Poetry), one option is 15 poems from Songs of Ourselves Volume 1. You answer one question on your poetry text, worth 25 marks, and the poem is printed on the question paper. There is a choice of two questions.
- The 15 poems: Aphra Behn, 'Song: Love Armed'; Sujata Bhatt, 'A Different History'; William Blake, 'The Chimney-Sweeper'; Elizabeth Brewster, 'Where I Come From'; Boey Kim Cheng, 'Report to Wordsworth'; Gillian Clarke, 'Lament'; Kevin Halligan, 'The Cockroach'; Seamus Heaney, 'Follower'; Liz Lochhead, 'Storyteller'; Charles Mungoshi, 'Before the Sun'; Katherine Philips, 'A Married State'; Alexander Pope, from 'An Essay on Man'; Carol Rumens, 'Carpet-weavers, Morocco'; William Shakespeare, '**Sonnet** 18'; Judith Wright, 'Hunting Snake'.
- Questions ask how the poet "vividly" or "powerfully" conveys something, or to "explore the ways" a poem works. Always write about the poet's methods (words, images, sounds, form) and your own response.

Love and marriage

- Behn, 'Song: Love Armed' (1670s): Love is pictured as a cruel god sitting in triumph. The lover gave it fire from his eyes, and the speaker gave it her sighs and tears, so both of them armed it, yet only her heart is harmed while he stays the free victor. Two eight-line stanzas with a song-like alternating rhyme.

- Philips, 'A Married State' (17th century): a warning that marriage brings little ease, and that even the best husband is hard to please. It lists the troubles a single woman avoids, such as a demanding husband, the pain of childbirth and crying children, and ends by advising "madam" to stay single, despite the old saying that unmarried women would "lead apes in hell". Sixteen lines of rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter, which make the argument sound controlled and sure.
- Shakespeare, '**Sonnet** 18': the speaker asks whether to compare the beloved to a summer's day, then shows that summer is flawed: rough winds, too short, sometimes too hot, and it fades. From line 9 ("But") the beloved's "eternal summer" will not fade, because the poem itself keeps them alive. A Shakespearean **sonnet** ending in a confident rhyming couplet.

Nature, the environment and war

- Boey Kim Cheng, 'Report to Wordsworth': the speaker tells the Romantic poet Wordsworth, who loved nature, "You should be here": nature has been laid waste. Smog smothers the flowers, birds are few, and the sea-god Proteus (who appears in a Wordsworth **sonnet**) is buried in waste. Fourteen lines with a Shakespearean **sonnet**'s rhyme scheme, used for a bleak warning rather than love.
- Clarke, 'Lament': an **elegy** for the people, animals and places harmed by the 1991 Gulf War, such as the green turtle, the cormorant in "funeral silk" (oil), the ocean's "mortal stain", Ahmed at the closed border and the soldier in a "uniform of fire". Nearly every line begins or continues with "For", like a dedication, and it ends with the "ashes of language". The long list gives no comfort: the damage keeps spreading.
- Wright, 'Hunting Snake': a group out walking in autumn freeze as a great black snake passes them, hunting. They hold their breath and watch it in awe, then breathe again once it has gone. Four quatrains with a regular rhyme and rhythm that drive the tense moment forward; the "we" voice shares the experience.
- Mungoshi, 'Before the Sun': a 14-year-old boy in rural Zimbabwe chops a big log before sunrise, lights a fire and roasts two cobs of maize. When the sun finally appears "like some latecomer to a feast", he invites it to share, and it "winks like a grown-up". So he eats both, one bite for the sun and one for himself. Free verse, **personification** and gentle humour celebrate youth, work and nature.

Place, culture and identity

- Bhatt, 'A Different History': the Greek god Pan has "emigrated to India", where gods roam freely and every tree is sacred, and it is a sin to treat a book roughly. The second part asks which language has not been "the oppressor's tongue", and how the grandchildren of people who suffered under colonial rule grow to love that language. **Rhetorical questions** make the reader think about language, colonialism and culture.

Your notes

- Brewster, 'Where I Come From': it opens by saying people are made of places. City people carry the smells of smog, work, factories and crowded subways; in the second stanza the speaker's own home in rural Canada is pine woods, blueberries and wild flowers, kept in the mind. A sudden ending brings home the speaker's nostalgia. Free verse, built on contrasting sensory images.
- Rumens, 'Carpet-weavers, Morocco': children work at a loom, making a beautiful carpet. They have oiled black braids and bright dresses, and watch their flickering knots like television. The beauty of the carpet is set against the fact that it is made by children's labour, and it will later be walked on far away.
- Lochhead, 'Storyteller': a woman tells stories through the night at a kitchen table while others around her prepare food and make cloth. She is valued for telling stories, not for keeping house, and holds her listeners in suspense even though they already know the endings. At dawn the household gets up, and the stories stay in the children's heads. Free verse in four stanzas that grow longer, celebrating the oral tradition.

Childhood, family and being human

- Heaney, 'Follower': the speaker remembers his father ploughing with a horse team: an expert, his shoulders like a full sail. As a child he stumbled behind in his father's wake, wanting to grow up and plough, and was a nuisance. In the last lines the roles are reversed: now it is the old father who keeps stumbling behind him. Six quatrains with a steady rhythm, like the plough.
- Blake, 'The Chimney-Sweeper' (Songs of Experience, 1794): "a little black thing among the snow" cries "weep! weep!" while his parents are at church. Because he was happy, they dressed him in the "clothes of death" (the sweep's black clothes) and taught him to sing "notes of woe"; because he still dances and sings, they think they've done him no harm, and they praise God, the priest and the king, who make a heaven out of the children's misery. Three short stanzas with a child's voice attacking the church, state and parents who let children suffer.
- Halligan, 'The Cockroach': the speaker watches a cockroach go about its routine, then sees it grow restless. It climbs up to a shelf, but when it gets there it doesn't know what to do and freezes. The speaker sees their own life in it. A loose **sonnet** whose uneven rhythm reflects the restlessness.
- Pope, from 'An Essay on Man' (1733 to 1734): the extract begins "Know then thyself" and says the proper study of mankind is man. People are placed on "this isthmus of a middle state", between god and beast, full of contradictions: "Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all". It ends calling man "the glory, jest, and riddle of the world". **Heroic couplets** packed with **antithesis** (balanced opposites).

Key terms

Elegy	A poem of mourning for someone or something that has died or been lost.
Anaphora	Repeating the same word or phrase at the start of lines, such as "For" in 'Lament'.

Your notes

Sonnet	A 14-line poem; a Shakespearean sonnet ends with a rhyming couplet.
Volta	The turn in a sonnet, where the argument changes direction.
Heroic couplet	A pair of rhyming lines in iambic pentameter, as Pope uses.
Antithesis	Opposite ideas placed side by side for effect.
Personification	Giving human qualities to something that isn't human, like the sun that winks.
Rhetorical question	A question asked for effect, not for an answer.

Your notes

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. Which poet tells Wordsworth that nature has been laid waste?
2. What does the boy offer the sun in 'Before the Sun'?
3. In 'Follower', who stumbles behind whom at the end?
4. Which war is 'Lament' about?
5. Which word begins almost every line of 'Lament'?
6. What does the cockroach do when it reaches the shelf?
7. Which collection does Blake's 'The Chimney-Sweeper' in this selection come from?
8. What form is 'A Married State' written in?

Answers

1. Boey Kim Cheng
2. Roasted maize
3. The father stumbles behind the son
4. The 1991 Gulf War
5. For
6. Freezes, not knowing what to do
7. Songs of Experience
8. Rhyming couplets in iambic pentameter

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

Free revision for GCSE and KS3 at lycolearn.co.uk. Some notes are for one exam board only, and say so in brackets.