Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Songs of Ourselves Volume 2: the 2027 poems

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Start here: the 15 poems and the exam

- For Cambridge IGCSE Literature in English in 2027, Paper 1 Section A (Poetry), another option is 15 poems from Songs of Ourselves Volume 2, Part 3. You answer one question (25 marks) from a choice of two, and the poem is printed on the paper.
- The 15 poems: Nancy Fotheringham Cato, 'The Road'; Sarah Jackson, 'The Instant of My Death'; Arun Kolatkar, 'The Bus'; Julius Chingono, 'At the Bus Station'; Imtiaz Dharker, 'These are the Times We Live in'; Elizabeth Jennings, 'The Enemies'; Sampurna Chattarji, 'Boxes'; W H Auden, 'The Capital'; Arthur Yap, 'an afternoon nap'; Elizabeth Smither, 'Plaits'; Elizabeth Daryush, 'Children of Wealth'; Thomas Love Peacock, 'Rich and Poor or, Saint and Sinner'; Musaemura Zimunya, 'A Long Journey'; Stevie Smith, 'Touch and Go'; George Szirtes, 'Song'.
- Many of these poems are about journeys, cities, power and how society treats people.

Journeys

- Cato, 'The Road': the speaker drives fast through the night towards the sunrise. The speed makes them feel they can master the moon and control time, but it's an illusion. Darkness lies behind and light ahead, and the sun stays always out of reach.
- Jackson, 'The Instant of My Death': on a crammed bus through a Himalayan valley in India, separated from a friend, the speaker's eyes glaze over. In a village a child points a toy gun at them. The title echoes a short work by Maurice Blanchot about facing a firing squad, and the moment becomes strangely powerful.

- Kolatkar, 'The Bus' (from the collection Jejuri): a traveller rides a night bus to Jejuri, a temple town, with the tarpaulin flaps buttoned down against the cold. The traveller sees their own divided face reflected in the glasses of an old man with a caste mark, and the journey's movement is felt only through that reflection. It contrasts the modern, doubting traveller with the old man's faith.
- Chingono, 'At the Bus Station': a comic list of instructions on surviving the scramble to board a bus in Zimbabwe: loosen your tie, undo your buttons, tie your shoes tight, fasten your belt and take off your glasses. One long free-verse stanza in the **second person**; humour hides real hardship.
- Zimunya, 'A Long Journey': a Zimbabwean village's "journey" through colonial change, as the motor car, the bicycle and the boss bring the city into the village. The speaker sees both what has been gained and what has been lost.

Cities, money and power

- Auden, 'The Capital' (1930s): the speaker addresses a capital city, the "quarter of pleasures" where the rich wait for miracles, where lovers dine and exiles gossip. It tempts people with music and glamour, but hides factories and suffering in its unlit streets. The title also suggests "capital" as money.
- Chattarji, 'Boxes': a woman lives in one tiny room in Mumbai, nine steps from door to balcony, where an orchid's roots "cling to air". She feels like an insect in a jar. The city grows taller and the "boxes" (homes) grow smaller, and the sky is shut out. Four stanzas on overcrowding and lost space.
- Daryush, 'Children of Wealth': a **sonnet** addressed to rich children watching the snow from a warm nursery behind a "clear double pane". They can't understand winter's cruel truths, so the speaker urges them to go out into the world. It ends with a warning that their safe home could wake to "horror's wrecking fire".
- Peacock, 'Rich and Poor or, Saint and Sinner' (19th century): a **satire** on religious hypocrites. The poor man's "sins", like buying greens on a Sunday or fetching beer, are seen and condemned, while the rich man does the same in private, with his own kitchen, cellar and servants. Short stanzas with a sharp, mocking tone.
- Yap, 'an afternoon nap': a neighbour watches "the ambitious mother across the road" beat and shout at her son over his grades, piano lessons and language tuition, as tutors take money three times a week. The last stanza reverses it: the embittered boy shouts back at her. No capital letters, and musical words, mock the pressure of a results-driven education system (Singapore).

Society, fear and hope

- Dharker, 'These are the Times We Live in': at an airport immigration desk an officer reads "your" passport backwards and looks at you with suspicion because of your name. You "shrink to the size of the book" and no longer match your photograph. **Second person**, and a repeated phrase about "the times we live in", show prejudice becoming normal.

Your notes

- Jennings, 'The Enemies': one night strangers cross the river into a city, and the women welcome them with lights and food. Nothing is destroyed, yet by morning the city is "a haunted place": old friends grow wary and draw their blinds, afraid the strangers are living in their minds. Regular rhyme and rhythm on fear and suspicion destroying a community.
- Smither, 'Plaits': a childhood memory of two plaits that were never equal, one thick and one thin, compared through images such as a big snake and a small one, or a waterfall and a trickle. The **extended metaphor** is often read as being about inequality and fairness.
- Stevie Smith, 'Touch and Go': "Man is coming out of the mountains / But his tail is caught in the pass": humanity is trying to rise above its animal past. His enemies won't help him, and a voice asks whether anyone will. Whether he makes it is "touch and go". Short, simple quatrains on a big question.
- Szirtes, 'Song' (2007, for Helen Suzman, who fought apartheid in South Africa): "Nothing happens until something does." Small hands can make a huge hall shake, a voice can break glass, and one feather can tip the balance. With a lever and a place to stand, even the Earth can be moved: one person can change history. The opening lines return at the end, changed.

Your notes

Key terms

Second person	Writing that addresses "you", putting the reader in the situation.
Satire	Writing that mocks people or society to criticise them.
Extended metaphor	A comparison that continues through a poem, like the plaits.
Refrain	A line or phrase repeated through a poem.
Juxtaposition	Placing two things side by side to compare them.
Free verse	Poetry without regular rhyme or rhythm.
Sonnet	A 14-line poem, like 'Children of Wealth'.

Quick questions

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

1. Which poem gives instructions for getting onto a bus?
2. Who is 'Song' by George Szirtes dedicated to?
3. In 'These are the Times We Live in', where does the poem take place?
4. What happens to the city in 'The Enemies' after the strangers arrive?
5. What does the ambitious mother do in 'an afternoon nap'?
6. Where does the woman in 'Boxes' live?
7. In 'Children of Wealth', what separates the children from the snow?
8. What does Peacock's poem satirise?

Answers

1. At the Bus Station
2. Helen Suzman, who fought apartheid
3. At an airport immigration desk
4. People become suspicious and wary of each other
5. Beats and shouts at her son over his studies
6. In one tiny room in Mumbai
7. A clear double pane of glass
8. Religious people who condemn the poor but excuse the rich

What to do next

Practise 11 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.

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