Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Edexcel IGCSE poetry anthology

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Start here: the 16 anthology poems

- For Paper 1 Section B of the Pearson Edexcel International GCSE in English Literature, you study the 16 poems in Part 3 of the anthology and write a comparison of two of them. One poem is named in the question and you choose the second.
- The poems: If– (Rudyard Kipling), Prayer Before Birth (Louis MacNeice), Blessing (Imtiaz Dharker), Search For My Tongue (Sujata Bhatt), Half-past Two (U A Fanthorpe), Piano (D H Lawrence), Hide and Seek (Vernon Scannell), **Sonnet** 116 (William Shakespeare), La Belle Dame sans Merci (John Keats), Poem at Thirty-Nine (Alice Walker), War Photographer (Carol Ann Duffy), The Tyger (William Blake), My Last Duchess (Robert Browning), Half-caste (John Agard), Do not go gentle into that good night (Dylan Thomas) and Remember (Christina Rossetti).

Childhood, family and memory

- Half-past Two: a child kept in after school is told to wait until half-past two but can't tell the time, so time stops having meaning. Invented compound words show a child's way of thinking.
- Piano: a man hears a woman singing and is carried back to sitting under the piano as his mother played. Nostalgia overwhelms him.
- Hide and Seek: a child hides in a shed and waits, but the others have given up and gone. The second-person voice puts the reader in his place.
- Poem at Thirty-Nine: the speaker misses her dead father and remembers what he taught her, such as telling the truth and cooking. **Free verse** makes it sound like natural thought.
- Do not go gentle into that good night: the speaker urges his dying father to fight against death. A **villanelle**, with two repeated **refrains**.

Identity, culture and society

- Search For My Tongue: the speaker fears losing her mother tongue while living abroad, but it grows back in her dreams, like a plant. Lines in Gujarati show the two languages side by side.
- Half-caste: John Agard mocks the word "half-caste" with humour and examples of mixing in art, music and the weather, and challenges the listener to think again. Caribbean dialect and no punctuation make it sound spoken.
- Blessing: water bursts from a municipal pipe in a poor, dry town, and people rush out with pots. Religious language presents water as a gift from a god.
- Prayer Before Birth: an unborn child begs to be protected from the cruelty of the world. Repetition of its opening phrase and lengthening stanzas build desperation.
- War Photographer: a photographer develops his pictures of war in his darkroom in England, angry that readers will glance at them and move on. A regular form contrasts with the chaos he remembers.

Love, power and the natural world

- **Sonnet** 116: true love never changes, whatever happens. A Shakespearean **sonnet**, ending in a confident couplet.
- La Belle Dame sans Merci: a knight is enchanted and then abandoned by a mysterious woman, and is left alone on a cold hillside. A **ballad**, with images of a dying landscape.
- My Last Duchess: a **dramatic monologue** in which the Duke of Ferrara shows a visitor a portrait of his late wife, and reveals his jealousy and that he had her silenced.
- Remember: a Petrarchan **sonnet** in which the speaker asks her lover to remember her when she has died, then says it is better for him to forget and smile than to remember and be sad.
- The Tyger: the speaker asks what kind of creator could make such a fearsome animal, and whether it was the same one who made the lamb. Rhetorical questions and a strong rhythm.
- If–: a father's advice to his son on how to become a man, through self-control and courage. One long sentence built from repeated conditional clauses.

How to compare two poems

- Choose a second poem that clearly links to the question's theme, such as loss, conflict or identity.
- Compare throughout, in every paragraph, rather than writing about one poem and then the other.
- Compare ideas, language, form and structure, using connectives such as "similarly", "whereas" and "in contrast".
- Use short quotations from both poems and explain their effects.

Your notes

Key terms

Dramatic monologue	A poem in which one character speaks to a silent listener and reveals their personality.
Villanelle	A 19-line poem with two refrains and only two rhymes.
Sonnet	A 14-line poem, often about love.
Ballad	A poem that tells a story in short, regular stanzas.
Refrain	A line repeated through a poem.
Free verse	Poetry without regular rhyme or rhythm.

Quick questions

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

1. Which poem is a dramatic monologue spoken by a duke?
2. Who wrote Half-caste?
3. In Blessing, what bursts from the pipe?
4. What does the speaker fear losing in Search For My Tongue?
5. Which poem is a villanelle urging a father to fight death?
6. Who speaks in Prayer Before Birth?
7. Where does the photographer develop his pictures in War Photographer?
8. What can't the child in Half-past Two do?

Answers

1. My Last Duchess
2. John Agard
3. Water
4. Her mother tongue
5. Do not go gentle into that good night
6. An unborn child
7. In his darkroom in England
8. Tell the time

What to do next

Practise 10 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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