

AQA Poetry Anthology – Power and Conflict Collection (Part 1)

Many of our students who are studying for the AQA English Literature GCSE exams (for first sitting from summer 2017) are covering the *Power and Conflict* collection in the AQA Poetry Anthology. There are some challenging, but really interesting poems in this selection, so to help you we've added our notes and analysis of the poems in this guide. Let us know if you've found this helpful – tweet us [@tutorinleeds](#) or find us on Facebook by searching for **Tutor in Leeds**.

Ozymandias (Percy Shelley)

Context

Percy Shelley (1792-1822) is one of the most famous poets of all time. He was part of an influential group of poets known as The Romantics. Shelley had a pretty wild early life. He came from a very wealthy family and was in line to inherit a fortune. However, he was expelled from Oxford University for writing about atheism and as a result his father later disinherited him. At around the same time he married and eloped to the Lake District. A few years later he set off around Europe with a different woman, Mary Shelley (who would go on to write *Frankenstein*). Percy Shelley later drowned while on a sailing trip to Italy.

Shelley was known to have quite radical views. One interpretation of *Ozymandias* is that the poem is a criticism of people or organisations that become too big and powerful and think they can't be challenged.

Commentary

The speaker tells us that they met a traveller from an ancient land and that they told him the story contained in the poem. The traveller had come across the remains of a big statue in the desert. The statue had been shattered and was partly covered by the sand. On the foot of the statue were the words: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: look on my works, ye Mighty and despair!" – showing the huge pride and arrogance of Ozymandias. The words and the arrogance of the king seem meaningless now to the speaker and the reader as the statue is destroyed and nothing of Ozymandias' power remains.

Form

Ozymandias is a sonnet, but it is slightly unusual as it doesn't have the same rhyme scheme or punctuation that most sonnets use. In *Ozymandias* the rhyme is often irregular and some of the lines are split by punctuation. The poem is written in iambic pentameter.

Structure

You only hear the speaker's own words for the first line and a half up to the colon. After that the words are those of the traveller. The poem is one 14-line stanza, split up with plenty of punctuation.

Rhyme

Although the rhyme scheme isn't completely regular it is quite powerful in places. For example the final words of line one and three (land / sand) rhyme and so do the first and last words of line three (stand / sand). This use of rhyme adds emphasis and creates a powerful image of the shattered statue. Similarly the rhyme in lines 12 and 14 (decay / away) end the poem with a sense of emptiness and destruction.

Imagery

The core image in this poem is that of the huge statue which now lies in ruins. Shelley creates a really effective image for the reader, with the remains surrounded by desert. This emphasises the fact that the once great power of Ozymandias has completely gone.

Themes

Shelley is most likely using the image and example of Ozymandias and his statue to give a general interpretation of political power and public opinion. The key ideas here are that:

- even those who seem to be the most powerful will eventually fall;
- time eventually overcomes even the most powerful; and
- art and literature are where the true, lasting power lies – the statue itself and the words inscribed on it have long outlasted Ozymandias.

London (William Blake)

Context

London was published in 1794. Blake was appalled by the terrible conditions and poverty he saw in London. The French Revolution is important context for this poem. In 1789 the French people overthrew their monarchy and aristocracy. Many people in England saw the French Revolution as a good example to follow, a way for ordinary people to take power and make society more equal. In this poem Blake implies that the awful conditions for ordinary people in London could trigger a revolution. Blake also didn't like established religion in Europe because it had failed to help poor people, especially children who were forced to work in bad conditions. Blake refers to this directly in London, "every black'ning church appals".

Content

Blake describes a journey through London and describes the awful living conditions that the speaker sees across the city. At the start, the poem criticises the laws around ownership referring to the "charter'd Thames' and the 'charter'd street" – Blake is referring to how everything in London is owned by the rich and powerful. Blake goes on to criticise the church for not doing enough to help the poor. The final stanza discusses the horrors of prostitution and sexually transmitted disease.

Form and Structure

London is written in a very regular way and resembles a song. Each of the four stanzas offers a snapshot of an aspect of life in the city.

Rhyme

There is a strict, regular rhyme scheme – ABAB in each of the four stanzas.

Language

Blake uses repetition to emphasise important points. “Charter’d” is repeated in the first stanza to show how everything in the city is owned by the rich and powerful. “Marks” is repeated in stanza two to show the physical marks and scars on people due to their living conditions; it also has a double meaning as it could suggest the speaker recording (or ‘marking’) what is seen on the journey through London.

The tone of the poem is sombre and in some ways almost biblical (reflecting Blake’s interest in religion and how annoyed he is that the church isn’t addressing the conditions).

Blake uses lots of negative language throughout the poem. See if you can pick out some examples.

Imagery

There is some powerful imagery in this poem. In stanza two Blake introduces the idea of “mind-forg’d manacles” (or handcuffs); with this Blake is suggesting that people’s minds are kept imprisoned by the structure of society they live in. They can’t think freely and escape the terrible poverty they’re in.

The poem ends with the strong image of a ‘marriage hearse’. This is an oxymoron as marriage is a celebration of love and new life, where as a hearse is associated with funerals. Blake shows how the poverty, prostitution and STDs he has described will bring nothing but death and decay.

Themes

Blake wrote London as a pessimistic poem reflecting his horror at the living conditions of ordinary people in the capital. He reflects on how the powerful institutions – the monarchy, aristocracy and church – have done nothing to alleviate the poverty and poor conditions.

Extract from, **The Prelude (William Wordsworth)**

Context

This is an extract from a long, autobiographical poem in 14 sections. Wordsworth worked on this poem throughout his life and his wife published it shortly after his death. Wordsworth was born in the Lake District and the geography of the area played a big role in his writing. It can be seen in the vivid images of this poem. As a young adult Wordsworth travelled around Europe at the time of the French

Revolution, again this major event informed his writing. Wordsworth was on the “Romantic” poets.

Content

The poem covers some big themes about “man, nature and society”. Wordsworth is exploring his own spiritual growth as he comes to terms with who he is and what his place is in the world, particularly in relation to the natural world and its power. At face value the poem describes how Wordsworth went out in a boat on a lake, late at night, alone, and how the awesome sights of natural power (e.g. the mountain peak) affected him. The experience then troubles him and causes him to reflect over the coming days.

Form and Structure

The Prelude is an epic poem in terms of its length. Epic poems are very long and usually cover heroic events like war, great explorations or slaying mythical beasts. Most of the events in the prelude don’t fall into this category. They are quite ordinary, but they become ‘epic’ because of the effects they have on the speaker’s life and how he views the world.

The writing is continuous, with no stanzas. Wordsworth uses lots of punctuation to help the reader ‘break up the poem’. Although only an extract from the main poem, this section is a full story in itself.

The poem is written in blank verse (non-rhyming lines, usually in iambic pentameter).

Language

The poem is written in conversational language and tone – you can imagine Wordsworth actually saying this to you. Look at how Wordsworth repeatedly uses the word “and” to suggest that this story is being spoken directly to the reader.

Imagery

Wordsworth uses impressive imagery to describe the night. The gentle light of the moon and stars turns to darkness as the narrator becomes more troubled, “there hung a darkness, call it solitude”. The imagery becomes increasingly dark and disturbing. This is like a gothic tale or even a horror story in places.

Wordsworth also personifies the boat he is in (calling it “her”) and the mountain peak, which comes to life and chases him across the lake.

Themes

Nature – the power of nature is important. Wordsworth shows how humans can feel insignificant in comparison.

Loneliness – Wordsworth is alone. He encounters, and is affected, not by other characters, but by nature (the mountain, the lake and the night).

My Last Duchess (Robert Browning)

Context

Robert Browning was a Victorian writer who is famous for dramatic monologues in his poetry. He was very interested in European history and culture, which were the basis of much of his writing. My Last Duchess is based on a sixteenth century Italian Duke – Duke Alfonso II of Ferrara and his wife, the Duchess Lucrezia de Medici (who died at the age of 17).

Content

The poem is set a few years after the death of the Duchess. We only hear the words of the Duke, but it is clear that this is one side of a conversation. In fact this conversation was with an emissary from the Count of Tyrol, who was the father of the Duke's next wife. In the poem the Duke suggests the Duchess had been unfaithful to him and he implies that he had her killed as a result. The Duke is made to look arrogant, insensitive and selfish. Through the comments he makes about his late wife the reader actually learns more about the nasty character of the Duke.

Form and Structure

My Last Duchess is in the form of a dramatic monologue (the extended speech of an individual character). Although a dramatic monologue, it is clear that this is one side of a conversation with an emissary from the family of the Duke's next wife. The poem is written in iambic pentameter, with rhyming couplets. Rhyming couplets would usually make the lines seem memorable, but the use of punctuation throughout the poem breaks this up and shows us that this is unrehearsed speech. Browning also uses plenty of enjambment (where lines run on), which adds to the use of punctuation in emphasising the narrator's arrogance.

Language and imagery

The poem is littered with personal pronouns, which we would expect in this sort of speech. However, they are important because they help to highlight the Duke's arrogance and selfishness. They also often relate to his love of possessions, including how he treated his late wife (who he saw as a possession).

The poem lacks any really impressive, or poetic imagery. The Duke himself admits he does not have the "skill in speech". This helps to show how the Duke only thinks of himself.

Themes

Power – This poem is all about power. The Duke is powerful in society and has a big ego because of that. It is implied that he demonstrated his own personal power and control in his family life by killing his wife.

Pride and arrogance – these are shown to be bad and dangerous qualities in someone with power.

Jealousy and madness – the Duke was clearly jealous of his wife simply smiling at other people. This, combined with his exaggerated sense of power meant he felt he could kill the Duchess.